The kind old sun will know

by redjacket

Summary

He was dead.

He had to be dead.

For a moment, Steve thought he must be in hell.

He would have laughed, if he could. He thought he was in Heaven, for a moment, when he met Diana.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Paris, France - Present day

Diana left work early, the day Bruce Wayne’s package arrived. She could not concentrate. It was unlike her but there were no pressing matters that required her attention. Her assistant was willing and capable of continuing cataloguing on her own.

That could wait, she thought, as she lowered the lid of the suitcase and snapped it shut, but she had waited long enough for this.

She walked home, avoiding the crowds on the metro and the streets more likely to be full of tourists. She usually enjoyed them, the busyness of the crowds, but not today. Today she longed for home.

The apartment was quiet when Diana got there, empty. She stood in the hallway for a moment, still. She took a breath, removed her cloak, her boots. She put her purse down by the door.

The case...the case she brought with her. She placed it on the coffee table, sat on the couch. She looked at it for a long time before sighing and standing up. She went to the balcony and refilled the little dish for the stray cat who kept wandering up to visit but had not yet decided whether he wanted to come inside. She left the door open a crack, in case he decided today was the day.

She nearly went back to the couch to peer at the photograph again but she paused, passing the leather chair by the bookshelf. A blanket dangled over the back, a lumpy, soft cardigan had been left strewn over the seat.

Diana sat there instead.

Sunlight poured through the windows and pooled on the floor, spilled softly over the coffee table, the couch. The apartment seemed very quiet.

The door clicked as it unlocked and she heard him come in, humming. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the sense of him fill the apartment. The shuffle of his steps, the squeak of his shopping trolley and the rustle of paper grocery bags. Suddenly, there was more warmth in the room, with the presence of him.

“Hey,” he said and she heard the surprised pleasure in his voice. “You’re home early.”

Diana opened her eyes. Steve Trevor stood before her, smiling, a brown bag from the market in one arm. His eyes were sharp and bright and very blue. He looked so pleased to see her home, sitting in his favourite chair, unexpected on a weekday afternoon.

“They let everyone out early?” he asked and there was a teasing grin in his voice as he put the groceries down on the table in the hallway. “Or are you playing truant?”

“I could not concentrate,” Diana told him simply, rising out of the chair. “So I came home.”

“Oh? Nothing world ending, I hope, or you wouldn’t be here,” Steve said. His eyes sparkled as she closed the distance between them and his arms opened automatically for her. She hugged him tightly, pressing her face against his neck and inhaling the smell of him, warm and alive in her arms. He
kissed her hair, and did the same.

“Hello, love,” Steve said more quietly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” Diana said and then, after a moment. “I’ve had something returned to me.”

“Oh? Oh!” Steve pulled back enough to look at her. He smiled. “You found it?”

“No,” she told him. “Bruce Wayne sent it.”

Steve looked at her, incredulous for a moment. Then he laughed. He tucked her hair behind her ear and kissed her briefly, still grinning. “Of course he did. Next time, I get to meet Mr. Wayne. I think I would like him.”

“I think you would like teasing him,” Diana said. The thought made her smile and kiss him. “I am not so sure he would like you.”

“I don’t know. I’m told I can be very charming, when I want to be,” Steve said, his eyes on her mouth, quickly as distracted as she was.

“Not as much as you think,” she said and kissed him again.

“That’s hurtful, really, it is,” Steve said, but followed her mouth, kissed her again and again. His hand slid under her shirt, up her back, his palm warm against her skin. She backed him into the wall, carefully, and went for his belt and zipper. He tugged at her shirt but she did not relinquish his mouth, not yet, one hand on his chest. He gave up and pulled her closer instead, a hand in her hair and on her back, his pants around his ankles.

She felt the hitch in his chest and backed off, kissing along his jawline instead, divesting them both of their shirts as he caught his breath.

“M always naked first,” Steve grumbled, even as his underwear joined his pants on the floor and she helped him step out of them and kick them both away. He undid her bra one handed.

“I have more practice,” Diana told him.

“You have more buttons,” he countered and kissed her and kissed her and kissed her.

They made it to the couch, to the spill of sunshine. His hands on her back and in her hair as they rocked together. Their faces stayed close, his lips on her neck, on her lips, as close as they could get, closer, for as long as they could stand it.

She held fast to him for a long time after. They shifted, eventually, to be more comfortable. She got them a towel to clean off, grabbed the blanket from the chair, but they curled together again, skin to skin. She relaxed more than she ever did otherwise, his fingers tracing patterns back and forth on her arm, above her bracelets.

“The photo upset you that much?” Steve asked, eventually, as the light had begun to dim.

“Not upset,” Diana said. “Not exactly.”

She turned her head and kissed him, brushed her thumb over his cheek. “I am glad we have it back. I did not like thinking of it in that man’s hands.”

“Yeah, I’m not thrilled about the surveillance on you,” Steve sighed. He had been trying, for a very long time, to help keep her secrets.
“At least he did not know to find you,” Diana said. She held onto him a little tighter, for a moment, and then leaned around to get the case. Steve had not even seen it yet.

“I’m not as recognizable,” Steve said, with a small smile, as she opened the case. “Huh, will you look at that.”

Steve’s fingers found her face first, a brief touch, before he looked at her and smiled fondly. She smiled back. They did not need to speak.

She watched as his eyes moved over Chief and Charlie and Sameer, lingering. “I feel like Etta should be there.”

“Yes,” Diana agreed. “But I am glad she was not.”

“No,” Steve said, the thought momentarily troubling him, though Etta had been gone for years. “No, she had to go through enough as it was.”

His eyes finally found his own face. There were only two photographs of him before and Diana kept the other one. Steve had not looked at it himself for decades.

He did not look at this one long, either.

“Handsome bastard, wasn’t I?” Steve said. He was not smiling but after many years of glancing away, he looked to Diana.

Steve was not exactly the same as in the photograph. His sacrifice had not come without cost. There was a twist to his smile, where a scar traced the corner of his lips. The lower right side of his face was discoloured, the long legacy of the burn scars that seamed the right side of his body, over his shoulder and bicep and down his torso. His voice was hoarser than it once was and when he walked, he carried a cane in his left hand.

But he had not aged, as she had not. And he was so beautiful to her.

Diana took the photograph from him and put it to the side. She rested her hand on Steve’s face, over the scars. Her thumb stroked his cheek. “You know my thoughts on this, beloved.”

Steve closed his eyes for a moment and exhaled. He turned into her touch, and pressed a kiss to her palm. Then he opened his eyes again and smiled for her, rueful but not unhappy.

“I love you,” Steve said.

“And I you,” Diana said. She kissed him, her hands going to his hair. He kissed her, pulling her closer. She kissed him and shifted, her hand on his thigh.

He broke away, laughing.

“I am a hundred and thirty-five years old,” Steve demanded cheerfully. “Take me to bed first.”

Diana laughed and kissed his smile. “We can do that.”

They left the groceries to spoil.
Title is from the Wilfrid Owen poem *Futility*. "Maybe not the best example of his work but fitting.

I will only post a cliffhanger if the next part is ready to go and just needs editing. I’m writing this in segments so that wherever it ends it can stand alone.

I have so many feels, particularly history feels, about Wonder Woman, guys. So many.

I know in the comics Steve calls Diana angel but I can't. I just can't.

Come say hi on [tumblr](http://tumblr.com)! Warning: I am absolutely terrible at tagging.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_The sky above German occupied Belgium - 1918_

This was how Steve Trevor died.

He flew as high and as fast as he could. The altitude made him giddy, made him feel sick. But this was the right thing to do. It was the only thing he could do.

He closed his eyes and saw Diana. All he saw was Diana. He could almost mistake the sweat beading from his upper lip for the taste of her.

It made him smile, even as he opened his eyes and tears leaked out. He closed his eyes again. He breathed.

He pointed the gun back and he fired.

He never saw the flames that raced up to consume him but he felt them, a moment of utter agony, before there was…nothing.

But then, he was aware, he was awake. He felt like he was still on fire and he could not breath.

He was dead.

He had to be dead.

For a moment, Steve thought he must be in hell.

He would have laughed, if he could. He thought he was in Heaven, for a moment, when he met Diana.

“Arrêt! Arrêt! Vous devez arrêter. Reste!”

“I...Di...” he could not breathe. “Whe...”

He could not breathe. He was drowning and on fire and it hurt. It hurt so much.

He blacked out again, quickly.

He woke again and again. He could not breathe and it hurt. It hurt.

He did not understand.

And then.

“Steve,” she said and her voice sounded so sad. He felt his face crease, even though the movement was so painful he nearly fainted. “Steve, I am here.”

“Dia…”

Diana made a choking noise, like she was crying. Or maybe that was him. She lay her hand flat on his chest and he exhaled. Somehow, it was easier. “Steve?”
He opened his eyes and saw her face. She smiled at him and laughed. It was watery but she laughed.

He tried to say her name, again, properly, this time. He could not. His chest burned and burned.

He didn’t understand how he could be on fire and still be drowning.


Steve remembered why he needed to survive.

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It took three days for the rumour to reach them, of the American pilot who had been found with plane debris all around him. It took another two to find him.

It was terrible when they found him.

Charlie tried keep Diana from the room. They were convinced, all of them, that he would still die, that he had survived the explosion, the crash, just to die on the ground.

Diane forced her way to his side, despite the protests of the doctors and the gentle entreaties of her friends. As she knelt by his beside, Diana could see why they would think such a thing.

Steve gasped for breath, a wet, sucking sound and each one seemed to sap his strength a little more. There was blood on his lips when he coughed, each one so wracking he seemed to hardly have the strength for it. There was a hard material – a cast, she would learn – over his right leg and hip, up to his waist. His chest was bare because of the burns, still oozing, on his torso, and shoulder, his neck and the right side of his face, veering off from his nose to take part of his right ear but spare his eye.

They seemed so awful, then, because they caused him such pain. It would not be until she visited the other beds, the other wards, and saw men with half their faces blown off or limbs amputated, blistered by mustard gas or shell shocked, suffering and ill-treated, that she realized how lucky Steve had been.

That did not make his pain any less. It did not make it any easier for him to breath.

Diana stayed with him. When he was awake, when he was aware, through the pain and the haze of morphine, Steve looked for her. He calmed at her touch and seemed stronger for her presence.

She would not be moved from his side.

The first night was the most terrible. Steve lapsed out of awareness and they did nothing. There was nothing they could do. Too many broken bones, too many burns, too much exposure to gas. He was drowning in the blood of his own ruined lungs. They doubted he would wake again.

But Steve could not die. He would not die. Not now. Not like this.

Diana got into bed with him. It was easier for him to breathe when his body was propped up and the bed was obviously not doing its job. She would hold him up with her knees, and her body, with the pillows to help keep him comfortable. His head lolled against her shoulder, the burns turned up toward her.

That was good. He would be more comfortable that way. They would take time and care to heal.

She braced him with her arm around him, her hand on his chest, away from the burns.
Each breath was a gurgle and a soft sound as he exhaled, a high, thin, whine, like a dying animal.

His body felt so limp and still in her arms.


There was no sign that he had heard her, no change, and the doctors would be so very cross with her in the morning, when they discovered her in his bed.

But Steve kept breathing. He stayed.

The next morning, he opened his eyes again, found her face and weakly squeezed her hand.

The next morning, he took food, only week gruel, between panting, gasping breaths.

The next morning, he spoke, a word or two at a time, only, but he spoke.

When he would not die, they transferred Steve back to England, to a hospital by the sea. Diana followed, Charlie and Sameer and Chief at her back, Etta at her side.

There was talk of sending him back to America. They debated whether or not the journey would kill him, above his bed, as if none of them could understand what they were saying.

Steve’s fingers brushed her hand. Diana looked at him. He just barely shook his head no.

Diana took his hand in both of hers and looked at the doctors.

“No,” she said. “He will not be going.”

The doctor looked shocked. He nearly sputtered. Finally, he managed: “I do not think that is for you to decide.”

Steve tapped one of her fingers but Diana did not understand.

“She’s his wife,” Etta said suddenly. “I think she’s got some say and she’s got...property and family here. Affairs to managed, you know.” She lifted her chin. “So I think he’ll be staying.”

Steve smiled at them later, eyes hazy from the morphine that they gave him for the pain. “Knew I...couldn’t convince...them like...this...knew you...would catch...on.”

“Yes, well, I suppose I have to go and secure you some property now,” Etta told him. She had not stopped patting his hand since Diana relinquished one to her. Her eyes were red rimmed but resolute. “My Ed’s due back any day now and we’ll be taking over his parents’ house, I think. Last I was there, I saw a place that might suit. Yes, it should do fine.”

Etta arranged for a house for them with the money from Steve’s accounts, his inheritance from his parents, the sale of their house and land, left mostly untouched in his accounts through the war. The Chief and Sameer set about forging a record of marriage, surprisingly aided by Steve’s Colonel Darnell, who produced a backdated grant of leave for it, and said, to the doctor’s face, that he had attended the ceremony. Charlie found Steve a nurse, his sister, Elsie, trustworthy, solid and kind.

There were many years when pain clung to him like a second skin and even when it lessened its grip, there were days when it would surge back, because of a fall, or the cold, or the damp, or for no reason at all. It was a fickle, frightening thing and there was no way to vanquish it.
Steve had to learn to breathe again, and for so many months, each breath was a fight, a war onto itself. Once that was half won, he had to relearn how to speak, with the new shortness of breath and the new twist to his mouth. The way he sat had to change, to be less painful, to walk, with a cane and a limp. To feed himself. To go to the bathroom. To wash himself.

To stand unaided. To accept aid when he needed it to stand.

It was a struggle and he was not always kind. He did not have the breath to yell, but when he snapped – at Elsie, at Etta, at Charlie and Sameer and even Chief – it was mean and meant to draw blood. A wounded man was not so different than a wounded animal, biting at even those who would aid it in fear and pain.

Steve did not snap at her so much. Instead, Diana took his tears, weathered his pain with him when it reached its greatest crescendo. She was the only one who saw him break.

It was terrible. This was not a battle she could fight, there was so little she could do, except to hold him, however he could stand to be touched.

Each time, Steve shook himself apart in her arms, Diana feared he would not be able mend himself again. She could not do it for him, she would have, she would have moved the very earth to take these battles from him, his pain from him.

But she could not. She could only offer aid as he stitched himself back together and regained ground, inch by painful inch.

Life continued. Steve kept breathing. Diana stayed.

Then Steve’s Colonel came, one day, late in the Fall, years after the war had ended, and reminded them of the notebook.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Wilfrid Owen’s "Duce et Decorum Est." My favourite poem.

In the years post-WWI, so many veterans died horribly due to war related injuries, particularly gas exposure. It is literally part of my field of study. We treated WWI veterans really poorly. As always, I am trying not to let all the details I want to shove in interfere with actual story.

Tumblr!
Diana helped Lois Lane carry Clark Kent’s body out of the rubble, into the arms of the soldiers who were already arriving on scene. Lois went with them, standing guard over her fallen love.

Diana’s heart ached for her but she did not feel it was her place to follow.

Batman had disappeared as the soldiers and the firefighters and then the paramedics and police arrived, concerned, she imagined, with hiding his identity.

Diana stayed.

One of first fire companies to arrive was kind enough to give her an extra helmet and suit, to signal her when they needed a wall or a car or ship cleared away and keep watch while she did to ensure no photographs were taken. Superman had just been taken from their world, they did not know her but she stayed, she came to their aid, and so they let her keep her secrets.

There was so much work to do. Bruce had said the port was abandoned but nothing with structures that kept the rain out and blocked the wind was totally deserted. There were always those who would take shelter where they could. The death toll was smaller than it could have been but there was death toll.

It was evening before the scene became too crowded and she had to slip away. Bruce Wayne had returned, in an expensive suit as himself, and she could see the way his eyes scanned the crowd for her but she was tired. It was a conversation that could wait.

She retrieved her bags from where she had hidden them and exchanged the protective gear for her coat, simply thrown over her armour. She could feel her cellphone in the pocket, the weight of it tempting her. She wanted, badly, to pull it out, if only she could see his last texts, but she knew if she did, if she took it out of her pocket, she would call Steve.

She longed, ached, to hear his voice, wanted more than anything in that moment to hold him. He had not joined her on this trip, had stayed in Paris to ensure a lead they were pursuing would not go cold. She knew that he was waiting to hear from her. It would not be so strange, on such a day, to see a woman walking the streets, covered in dirt and grime and ash, crying into a cell phone but Diana...Diana was selfish in this. She hoarded the comfort his voice would bring. It was private. She would not share it, not today, not yet, not even a glance.

She pulled her coat tighter around her and returned to Metropolis and the hotel she had checked out of yesterday. The lone exhausted clerk took one look at her and found her a new room, apologized that the kitchen was closed, they were only open to help those stranded, but that their water supply had not been disrupted.

Her hand was shaking, when she handed Diana her key card.

Diana put her bag down, walked around the counter and offered her a hug.

Her face – Stacey, the name tag read – crumpled. She only accepted a brief hug before pulling
herself together, grabbing at the tissues on her desk and wiping her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Prince,” Stacey said. “Someone had to come in, they’re sending some of the people who lost their homes here, and I live close and don’t have kids so it made sense it’s me but...but Superman saved my little brother once and my mom had to tell him his hero was dead and he’s been crying all day and we don’t know what to tell him.”

Diana’s heart had been broken so many times since she had come to the world of men. It broke again. “What is your brother’s name?”

“Tyrese.”

“I only know what I wanted to be told when I lost my...” Diana cleared her throat, surprised at the way she ached remembering those terrible first days after the battle on the airfield, before the rumours reached them. Her phone felt so heavy in her pocket. “When I thought I lost my love. What I wanted most was to know I was not alone. So tell him...tell him that Superman died to save him again, to save us all. That it’s okay to be sad because he’s gone. We are all sad. And it is up to us, now, to honour what he stood for, together, to save each other as much as we can.”

“He may not be able to hear it at first, but if you are there for him he will understand, with time,” Diana said. Stacey had taken her hand again; Diana squeezed it. “And tell him you love him. It is so important to hear...but I am sure you already know that.”

Stacey smiled at her, watery, and wiped her eyes again. The hotel door opened and Diana could hear the clatter of people coming in behind her. “Thank you, Ms. -”

“Diana,” she smiled a little. “Please.”

Stacey smiled and Diana squeezed her hand once more before letting go. “Diana. You tell me if there’s anything you need.”

“Thank you,” Diana told her and stepped out of the way to let her do her job.

Stacey smiled and tried to look reassuring for the shaken family that had just walked in as Diana picked up her bag and headed for the elevator. “Do you folks need a room?”

The room was smaller than the one Diana had checked out of but all she wanted was a shower and a bed. Some privacy. She dropped her bags, trying to shake the tension out of her shoulders as she took off her coat, fishing the phone out of her pocket.

She needed to hear Steve’s voice.

There was a knock at the door. “Room service.”

Diana stared, sure, in that heartbeat, that she had imaged it. Then she strode forward and flung open the door.

There was no mistaking that voice, his voice.

“Steve,” she breathed.

Steve stood there before her. He smiled at her despite everything because he always smiled the first time he saw her after they had been apart. He looked tired, like he had been on an overnight flight into a war zone and she had no idea how he had made it. He looked like he had not slept, like he had been worrying about her all night, like he had rushed to the airport and not had time to shave, like his
hip was bothering him because of the long flight.

He looked so beautiful she thought her heart would burst from the joy of it.

She pulled him and his bags into the room. He did not hesitate, he dropped them automatically, even as she was pulling him into her arms and holding on as tight as she could.

“Ah, love,” Steve said quietly. She felt him exhale and he kissed her hair before he began to stroke it. “I’m sorry, Diana. I'm sorry about Superman. That it ended that way.”

“His name was Clark,” Diana told him, her heart as full of sorrow as it was of love. “His love was there. She saw him die.”

Steve sighed. His head pressed against hers. “I'm sorry. Whatever you need.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and pressed their foreheads together. They breathed the same air.

“You're here,” she said. “You're here.”

He held her tighter. “I couldn’t stand being anywhere else.”

They stood there together for a very long time. She could not seem to let go.

Eventually, Steve coaxed her to.

“I brought you pain au chocolate and bichon au citron and gougeres from home. Smuggled them in my suitcase,” he told her, smiling for her. “Ice cream from the convenience store across the road. Never seen a man so unfazed by a disaster. I don't think he realized there was a battle on.”

Diana laughed and choked on her tears all at once. Steve cupped her face on his hands and wiped away her tears.

“Want to clean up first?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” she said.

He helped her remove her armour. There were only three beings left on Earth whom she trusted with it and two remained on Themyscira. Steve was the only man among them. His fingers were deft and steady as he loosened the fastenings – he had done this many times before. He treated her gauntlets with the reverence they deserved as he unfastened them and laid them aside, kissing the skin of her wrists once it was laid bare.

They made their way to the bathroom and she thought with fleeting longing of their bathtub at home as he tested the water. It made her smile slightly. He had long since realized the cold did not bother her as much as it bothered humans and still he made sure it was warm for her.

That was good. She did not intend to let go of him, not for a moment. He understood soon enough, shucked his shirts and pants, and followed her into the shower.

Diana stood for a long time with her face tilted toward the spray just letting the water run over her, soothed by the warmth of Steve’s body next to hers, skin to skin. Sometimes it seemed to her that their bodies were not meant to be apart for long. They tilted together now, searching for each other, until there was nothing between them.

She sighed and turned to rest her forehead against his shoulder. His fingers stroked the nape of her
I love you,” Diana told him, mindful of her own advice. She pressed a kiss to the skin beneath her lips. “I am glad every day that you are here with me.”

Steve exhaled and kissed her temple once, twice. “I love you too. More than anything. I can't believe my luck, every day I get to spend with you.”

Diana raised her head to look at him. Steve’s face was close, his eyes soft, and he smiled a little for her. She framed his face with her hands and kissed him lightly.

It would have been very easy to spend a very long time standing there with him but Diana was conscious of the damage that had been done to the infrastructure of the city, whether it directly affected their hotel or not, her own tiredness and the way Steve stood to take more of his weight on his left side. She reluctantly pulled away enough to begin to clean herself.

“We did a great deal of damage to the city, I fear. We should not waste too much water,” Diana said.

“What’s the saying? Save water shower together?” Steve’s lips curled into a smirk even as he followed her lead and bent to get the washcloth and soap.

Diana paused in lathering up the shampoo in her hair to raise an eyebrow at him. “That has never been the case when it comes to you and me.”

“No, that’s fair,” Steve said. He began rubbing carefully at the blood on the back of her shoulder. The gash had healed sometime in the day. “The last time we tried to have sex in the shower, I dislocated my hip.”

“Well, you are a very old man,” Diana told him.

Steve threw the washcloth at her and suddenly wobbled dangerously, foot skidding on the slick tub. Diana grabbed him for balance. The expression on his face made her laugh.

Steve stuck his tongue out at her but swiped his hand over her forehead. “You’re going to get soap in your eyes.”

Diana tilted her head back under the water. Steve took the washcloth back and bent to clean away the dirt and grime from her outer thighs. For a moment, she saw him pause, saw the consideration of getting on his knees and the delightful activities that were sure to follow; then saw him consider the logistics of getting himself down and then up again, the remembrance of the last time they had overbalanced in the shower.

“Fucking dammit,” he muttered, clearly deciding against it. “I am an old man.”

Diana laughed and kissed him and - “Shit, ow, dammit.” - got soap in his eyes instead.

She finished washing. Steve rinsed himself off quickly when she was finished. He glanced at the mirror as they were toweling dry and waved a dismissive hand at his reflection. “I’ll shave tomorrow.”

Diana stroked a hand over his stubbled cheek. “You should keep it.”

He wrinkled his nose and held out a robe for her. “Grows in funny.”

“It’s dashing,” she told him. He did not bother with a robe or a towel, finding his pajama bottoms in
his suitcase instead.

“I’m always dashing,” Steve replied. He brought out a brown paper bag, darkened in spots from butter and oil, and handed it to her. It had taken up most of his carry on.

They ate, though neither of them had an appetite, to keep the other from fussing. Diana finished the little tub of ice cream – half melted – because it was a comfort. They did not turn on the television, they blocked out the destruction and the mourning that littered the streets of Metropolis and Gotham. Diana curled around Steve’s back, instead, as if she could protect the world by protecting him. When neither of them could sleep, even with exhaustion clinging to them, he fumbled for his phone and began reading the book they had begun the last time Etta’s great-grandchildren had visited.

Steve fell asleep first. Diana put her hand over his heart, closed her eyes and listened to his breathing. It was easier for her to sleep then.

They stayed for the funeral. Steve had not had to ask why, when she told him, simply kissed her hand and cleared her schedule for her, arranged everything while she surreptitiously returned to the site of the battle and helped where she could.

When they arrived at the graveyard, Diana remained with Steve in car. She would not intrude on the grief of Clark’s family, his friends. It was not hers, not truly; nor would she lurk in the background so ostensibly as Bruce. She watched him closely as the mourners left, until Lois was alone at the grave of her beloved.

Diana had seen such terrible things in her life. There had always been people they could not save, no matter how they tried. The world was full of suffering. It was not the first time she had seen lovers parted by death nor children lost to their mothers.

Diana remembered that sense of loss so sharply. Steve had been dead, they had all known he was dead, and it had been a wound Diana thought would never heal. And then the rumours of his survival came and the hope had been so strong and terrible she had nearly felt sick with it until it she was standing at the foot of Steve’s bed and it was not rumour but truth.

Diana squeezed his hand and Steve turned his head, focused on her instead of watching the mourners. She nodded at Bruce, standing in the background, trying to fulfill whatever penance he had set for himself.

“I am going to speak to him,” she said.

Steve studied Bruce Wayne from afar for a long moment before looking back at her. “Want backup?”

Diana shook her head. “He has no right to all of me, whatever he may think. I don’t want him to know about you. Not yet. Perhaps never.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Besides, it would not due to reveal my secret weapon so early in our acquaintance.”

“No more Bond movies,” Steve said but his face was lighter as she opened the car door. “Flatterer.”

It was not easy to walk by Lois’ oblivious grief and go instead to Bruce Wayne’s side. Diana had not revealed herself to a near-stranger in years, she would only do so in reluctant stages. He did not deserve this part of her life, not yet, and for all his honestly and all his lofty talk, she was not charitable enough to grant it to him.
So they spoke of what Bruce Wayne was sure to come, what he feared would come, and Diana confirmed what he thought he knew of her.

When she walked back to the car, Steve was there, as he always was, waiting to take her hand.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently I'll be flipping between present and past for this. Okay, good to know, did not know that when I set out to write it.

The poem title is from Strange Meeting by Wilfrid Owen. Can you guess who my favourite poet is?

I would really, really love comments if you're enjoying this.
England - early 1930s

Colonel Darnell visited them on a cold wet day in late November. It was not an unexpected visit but it was poorly timed. Steve was in pain, even more than usual, and had spent most of the morning in bed, shivering, despite the blankets.

Diana helped him dress in the afternoon, after she persuaded him to eat. He wore a full suit, a formality that he had long since abandoned for most visitors on the bad days. Diana had learned, though, about how fashion could be a type of armour. Steve had stopped to change before reporting when he returned from Themyscira too, and donned a suit, not the uniform that had been then and was still now, hanging in their closet.

It was not, as Diana had once thought, deference. No, deference would have been to wear the uniform; Darnell arrived in his. Steve was of lower rank. Nor was it about defiance, they were cordial to each other, when they met at the front door; Darnell asked about Steve’s health with genuine concern and maneuvered so that Steve, stubborn man that he was, did not have to stand long to meet him.

There was a respect between them but mostly it was about maintaining the lies they told each other. They were not friends. Fictions were required to maintain their relationship. And so Steve wore a suit and stood to greet Darnell, no matter what it cost him; Darnell wore his uniform and did not inquire very far into the state of Steve’s affairs.

None of them had stayed with SIS after the war. Chief and Charlie were never officially employed by them, Sameer only marginally so. British Intelligence had written Steve off as an asset. He was discharged, given benefits and generally forgotten. Steve had tried to reestablish a few contacts, with varying degrees of success, once he was well enough. Colonel Darnell, who had overseen much of Steve’s career, had been one of the most consistent, to everyone’s surprise except Steve’s.

Darnell was not a kind man, Diana suspected he was not even a good one, but he was, Steve insisted, not a stupid man.

Diana was not so sure, she remembered their first introduction, the way he had refused to listen when Steve completed his mission and wanted to do more, to stop the war, to save the world.

So when Darnell came to them and told them that Dr. Maru’s notebook was in the hands of SIS cryptographers, she said as much, to Darnell’s face.

Darnell did not even flinch. Steve smiled faintly at her.

“That was about punishing me,” Steve told her. He nodded at Darnell, who nodded back, as if such a thing were acceptable. Darnell did not even look ashamed of it. If anything, he looked oddly proud. “Putting me in my place. When he realized you could read Maru’s notebook, he contradicted Haig. That’s not nothing.”

“If Brass had any sense, they would have just promoted you,” Darnell sniffed. “You always were a better analyst than half the payroll.”
“You remember what happened the last time I was acting as an analyst,” Steve said. “I wouldn't have given up field work.”

Darnell looked sour at the thought. “It's just as well. Someone would have remembered your connection to that damn book and you could never leave well enough alone.”

Steve's face went very still and hard. Even Darnell did not pretend to ignore it.

“They have made no progress with it. No one in the department can read it,” Darnell told them. “No one wrote the languages down when you told them and the fools have forgotten the second is Sumerian. They poked at it for a few months and then locked it in a filing cabinet.”

“Why haven't they destroyed it?” Diana asked. Steve was holding her hand very tightly. “This is an evil thing.”

“That's what I have argued. It should be destroyed,” Darnell said. “But I am an old warhorse and they pay me less mind than they once did. They think their might be something useful in it.”

“Sir...” Steve began and his voice was not as strong as Diana thought he would have liked.

Darnell held his hand up. “Trevor, whatever you are going to say, I have already said it. I am told that it is not my department and,” he sneered, “a waste of valuable knowledge.”

Steve's fingers twitched in Diana’s grasp. He did not flinch otherwise.

“I would not be here if I had not exhausted my options,” Darnell continued.

“Yes, you would, sir,” Steve said, evenly. “I'm hardly in the condition for a caper. I wouldn't even make a fair analyst, most days.”

Darnell’s jaw ticked. He did not look at Diana but his head tilted briefly in her direction. “No, you're not.”

“You have other protégés,” Steve said.

“They're new. They are not like you,” Darnell said.

Steve chuckled. Diana frowned. “That is not a compliment.”

Darnell looked at her and returned the frown before looking back to Steve. “Captain, perhaps we should speak privately.”

“No, sir,” Steve said firmly. “You won't go through me to get to her. Diana is a part of this or she's not. She stays. Saves me from having to tell her later. Little extra breath never hurts, after all.”

Darnell looked furious but he nodded, short and sharp and turned to her. “Very well. I shall endeavor to explain. Spy work has never been honourable, Miss Price. It is not thought gentlemanly. The last war convinced the Cabinet and Generals that it is necessary but they had to be brought to it kicking and screaming. Now, things are changing. The new men are not like Captain Trevor or his associates.”

“Sameer's the wrong colour. Charlie’s Scottish and a drunk and was discharged from the regular army because he was medically unsound. Chief, the Colonel technically can't know anything about Chief,” Steve smiled that awful, little smile again. “And I'm American. I was only transferred to the AEF in 1917 because it was useful. They weren't pleased with the any of us who joined up with
foreign armies. We were all expendable. Spy work suits us better than proper English boys.”

“It will be different in the next war and there will be a next war,” Darnell said, inclining his head to Steve and the truth of his words but looking at her. “I’ll be dead for it, more than likely. But there will be another war. They’ve cocked up the armistice with that blasted Treaty and the Americans abandoned the League they forced us all to join.”

“I hope to hell I’m wrong. It will be my grandsons fighting the next one. But MI6 is already changing. It will not be so haphazard this time. They’ll get their best and brightest on it and someone will figure out that damn book,” Darnell shook his head in disgust. “The only thing we have done right is to ban those bloody gasses. If she’s got anything in there that could get us around that ban on a technicality...”

“They might use it,” Steve said. His eyes were fixed on Darnell.

“It needs to be destroyed before they can figure out what they have and be tempted,” Darnell agreed.

“Why do you work for them if you do not trust them with this?” Diana asked. “To do the right thing?”

_Why should we?_ Diana did not say, though she knew Steve heard it. His thumb rubbed over the back of her fingers, once, then twice.

Darnell huffed a laugh, then his face fell as he realized she was serious. He looked at Steve. Steve’s face stayed blank, completely neutral. Darnell looked back at her and straightened, just slightly.

“Better me than someone else,” Darnell said. “Better us than the damn fascists in Italy and Germany or the communists in Russia. Someone has got to make sure we hold the line so the whole world doesn’t come apart again.”

For a moment, he looked very bleak but looked directly at her with all the dignity he could muster. “There’s nothing else for it.”

Steve sighed but his eyes were resolute in a way Diana recognized. “I can’t make any promises, Colonel.”

Darnell seemed to recognize it as well. He nodded. “Well. Thank you for your time, Captain Trevor, Mrs. Trevor.”

He stood and waited silently as Steve got to his feet. Darnell stepped forward before Steve could and shook his hand. He nodded to Diana and said, “I will show myself out.”

Diana watched him go. Steve would only sit back down when he heard the front door close behind the Colonel. “He has left an envelope on the chair.”

“That's the information we’ll need,” Steve said. He sighed. Diana did not like how pale and lined his face was.

“Why did he call me that?” Diana asked. Steve looked at her blankly. “Mrs. Trevor.”

“Oh. Reminding me of the fictions we share,” Steve laughed, a little, unhappily. “He vouched for us, when Etta said we were married, remember?”

“So he is reminding you that you owe him a debt,” Diana said, her anger building.
“No,” Steve said. “If anything vouching for us was...repayment of a debt.”

“I do not understand.”

Steve rubbed a hand over his forehead and closed his eyes briefly. He looked resigned but sure when he opened them.

“Sometimes, neither do I,” Steve said. He sighed. “He knows I won’t say no, not to this. He’s reminding me it’s my duty, it’s what I believe, and that no one is ever to know he or I had any involvement in seeing it destroyed.”

He laughed, suddenly, harshly, and rubbed at his forehead again. “Hell, he’ll probably have to question me about it, when they realize the notebook is missing. I...have to believe he’ll protect me from that too, if it goes that far.”


“I don't, entirely, but with this?” Steve shook his head. “I faced a firing squad once, did I ever tell you that? I had to deviate from the plans on a mission because I couldn't...” Steve stopped talking. His jaw clenched. “I couldn't accept the...collateral damage that it would have required. I completed it but not to specs. My supervisor at the time wrote an order for my execution, for desertion, he said because I was late getting back to my post. Darnell intervened. He had to come in person to stop it. They were already waiting in the courtyard for me.”

“Steve...” Diana said. She turned his face to look at her.

Over the years they had been together, the war he had fought had come to her in sharp bursts, like gunfire, small stories often only told in the dead of night when he could not sleep. The first year, in his plane, was the only time he spoke of in daytime and with fondness, tales about chasing the sky told with a longing she did not quite understand. Then, when British Intelligence first took him, in the trenches, not so bad as the men who went over the top, but with them in the mud, living amongst the bullets and rats and lice and gas and the dead, who were built into the parapets when there was nowhere to bury them. That was where he had met Charlie and Chief. Sameer and Etta came later, when Darnell had intervened and made him an undercover man.

Steve looked very tired. His mouth was tight in a way Diana knew pulled at his scars and hurt him. His eyes were shadowed with memory and pain but they were resolute.

“We can’t leave it for someone else to find,” Steve said. “I can’t.”

Making sure none of the tendrils left behind by Dr. Maru ever did any damage was a duty he had taken for himself, as much as destroying Ares had been hers. It was what he believed was right.

Steve would go himself, if he had to.

Diana brushed his hair back from his face. It had grown longer than before. His face softened at her touch.

“She will call for the others,” Diana told him.

Steve relaxed slightly. He raised their joined hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers. “Thank you.”

“We will rid the world of this thing, as they should have done,” Diana said. “It is our duty.”
The relief on his face was almost painful to see. Steve exhaled slowly. Their bodies tilted together, resting against each other now that the Colonel was gone and Steve did not have to sit so upright. The pain leaked through again. Diana kissed his temple, kissed his lips, gently.

Steve sighed softly and began to speak. “He lost his sons to the war. Henry, James and Daniel. Shell, in the first offences, chlorine gas, mustard gas. Danny lied and enlisted at 16, followed his brothers. It took him months to die. Darnell never said a word but I...took it upon myself to find out.”

Steve looked straight ahead and his eyes were very far away from her. “I can't describe what it feels like. You say drowning but that's not the taste and the smell, the feeling, the blood and the...these little soft pieces in your mouth and you don’t know what they are and then you realize it’s your lungs. You’re choking on...I can't...describe it. There aren't words. I've tried but...”

“Steve,” Diana said. She did not care that there were tears on her face. She cared that he had started shaking.

His eyes refocused on her face. He blinked. He smiled, sad but heartbreakingly grateful. He touched her hair, so gently. “So glad it can't get you. It's an awful way to die.”

Diana cupped his face in her hands, touched their foreheads together so she could feel Steve's breaths against her lips. For a moment, they closed their eyes and breathed together.

“We will see this done,” Diana assured him. She thought: This is why he could come to you.

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Steve paced slowly back and forth in their small sitting room and watched the clock tick. He kept lifting his wrist to check a watch that wasn’t there. He had never gotten around to buying a new one. He still rarely went out alone. If Diana wasn’t with him, it was Etta or Ed, or Elsie until recently.

That was changing, he was managing, and fighting for each tiny improvement inch by inch but...it was maddening, still. Diana was with his team, cleaning up a mess of his making because he could no longer take care of it himself. He ached, bone deep and draining, sapping every bit of his strength.

But he could not sleep yet, not until they were back.

"You're going to hurt your leg if you keep that up,” Etta said, bustling into the room. “Diana would scold you for it if she were here. You should go to bed.”

"No, she wouldn't," Steve said. His hip was the main problem tonight and he was not a child to be told when to go to bed.

He didn’t say that though, instead, he tried to smile for Etta. "She would never dare to step on your toes like that."

"Cheeky, you," Etta said. She sat down and, after another moment’s pacing, he joined her, forcing himself not to wince as he tried to settle.

It did not work. Etta knew him too well. “I can get you something, if it's the pain keeping you up.”

"No, well," Steve considered. He was trying not to lie about that anymore. "No more than usual. I wouldn’t be sleeping tonight anyway. You're not sleeping, either. You know where the guest bedroom is or...I would be okay, if you want to go home to Ed.”
“No, no. I could never sleep well when it was you out there, I don't know why I would have expected this was any different,” Etta did not look entirely convinced but she tried to be cheerful. “Well. I could get you a cup of tea, if you won’t take morphine and be sensible. I could use a cup of tea.”

Etta had already made two pots of tea and drank most of both of them herself.

“Tea would be nice,” Steve said, more than willing to give her the excuse if she needed it. He forgot himself for a moment, shifted badly in his seat and had to bite down hard on his lip to keep himself from making a noise.

He should not have sat down. It was always harder to get back up, once he was sitting and he knew he was going to want to pace again, even if he shouldn't.

It was maddening to have to wait.


“Oh! No,” Etta told him. She laughed. “No, it’s always dreadful. And then they tell you your boss has been killed a couple times and it gets worse.”

“Sorry about that.”

“You came back and proved them wrong, so I forgive you,” she patted his hand again. “Ah, that tea. Best thing is to keep busy. Idle hands, and all that.”

It was good advice. Steve thought about levering himself up, resuming his slow limping back and forth across the room. It was just that even the thought was exhausting. He was exhausted and in pain.

He was always exhausted and in pain. Today, the worst of it was in his hip and his leg. That was to be expected. He had pushed himself today, trying to burn off nervous energy. He had walked unaided to the post office earlier, Diana’s arm looped through his as if they were just on a stroll, instead of her increasingly supporting his weight.

It had been stupid of him not to take his cane. He knew he did not have anything to prove and yet...

He would pay for it, and for staying up, for pacing, tomorrow.

It was the cost of surviving.

His left leg and hip had fractured in the crash - they didn’t know how he survived the plane going down - maybe the foliage where he had crashed had slowed his descent? His lungs were damaged, they were not sure how extensively, from the gas - maybe the explosion pushed the cockpit away, maybe the winds took enough of it that it did not kill him quickly?

And he had been burned, badly, where he had turned to make the shot. His arm and shoulder, his torso, where his jacket had caught fire, and his face.

He was lucky, the doctors said. He had not lost an eye. The skin grafts had been relatively successfully, done by the expert of the very new field. His hair had grown back. His mouth, though a little twisted on one side by the scarring, was still fully functioning.

Steve avoided mirrors now. He knew it was not...He knew he had always been a little vain, he would admit that. He knew he was - had been - above average, as he had told Diana once. It was
hard to see himself, even now that the burns had healed and hardened to scars. He preferred it when he did not have to.

Diana did not seem to care. She hardly seemed to notice, which was comforting and grating in turns.

Still, Steve agreed with them. He was lucky. His lungs should be mush. His body should be ash. The fall should have killed him. He was alive and they could not explain why or how. Etta proclaimed it rare, wonderful luck. Diana thought Zeus had intervened.

Steve wasn’t so sure. Gas did not just kill in the moment. There were hundreds of men dying quietly, years after the war, as their lungs rotted away inside them and they coughed themselves to death, drowned by their own bodies.

The doctors said his lungs were improving. He could make it to the post office, breathing heavily and tired by the time they got back but not suffocating, more annoyed by the ache in his hip. He had not been able to speak Diana’s name the first time she had put her hand on his chest and commanded him to breath.

Steve thought maybe...maybe Diana had saved him, though she didn’t know it. He did not understand how either, but it was more than that moment in the plane, when he had closed his eyes and ached at the thought of leaving her, yearned so much for a moment, a day, a lifetime more. It was in all the days and years after, her hand over his heart, asking him to keep breathing.

He could do that, when he could not stay at her side on a mission, when he could not make it to the post office and back without leaning heavily on her arm. He could keep breathing.

It was as exhausting and painful and terrible as anything he had ever done, some days. He was bad at it some days, snappish and angry and sullen. But it was worth it.

Diana was worth it.

Being alive was worth it.

“Here we are!” Etta announced, bringing in the refilled pot. She poured him a generous cup and handed it to him.

“Thanks, Etta,” Steve said. He smiled at her, even as he set it on the side table so he would not have to drink it.

“You’re very welcome,” she said, pouring her own cup. She looked much more satisfied. “Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do for you?”

“Pass me a book?” Steve asked. He had absolutely no desire to read. “Maybe it will keep me from pacing.”

Etta smiled and Steve tried, he did, but he was on his feet again in half an hour. Etta sighed but fell asleep trying to read herself, her head tipped back on the couch, snoring softly.

Steve waited. He had to stop pacing, his hip burning and out of breath, leaning heavily on his cane. Sitting would hurt as much as standing, now, and sitting down would hurt more.

He stood. He caught his breath. He waited.

They came in quietly, like spies, but that seemed to melt away as they stepped over the threshold. Sameer and Charlie immediately started whispering to each other so loudly that Etta woke with a
start. If he had not been so worried and exhausted, he would have laughed at them, the way Chief was, though he tried to hide it.

Diana looked over, spotted him still awake and smiled. He smiled back. It was impossible not to.

“We have it,” Diana said and Sameer and Charlie stopped to look at him too. “It is here. It is done.”

Chief pulled the little green book from his pocket and for a moment it was all Steve could focus on, Dr. Maru’s notebook, left all this time with British Intelligence, who had planned the war under Ares direct influence, as much as the German’s had.

Steve did not doubt he had fought on the right side during the war, but he had been a spy, and he had seen what the war, and fear, and desperation, inspired men to do.

He did not trust them with it. He did not trust anyone with it. He was damned if he was going to leave it in the world, waiting for someone else to take over Dr. Maru’s work.

Dr. Poison herself, had committed suicide awaiting trial in Germany for the murder of von Hindenburg and German High Command. They had run the photo of her hanging from the cell bars in the newspapers. Sameer had told him returned men had cheered about it in London.

Her book was all that was left.

“Easy job. We took all the notes,” Chief added. “And the copies…”

“They could not read it,” Diana said. “Their translations are….” She made a face.

“I know that’s what Darnell said but they had nearly ten years with it,” Steve said, incredulous.

“I don’t think this has been a priority for years,” Chief said. “Darnell has more influence than he thought or told you he did.”

Steve shook his head. That would hardly surprise him. He knew his voice was too tight and harsh in the face of their triumph. “It’s not done until it’s destroyed.”

“You are in pain,” Diana said, frowning as the excitement faded and she really looked at him. “How long have you been standing?”

“Too long,” Etta said. “I did tell him to go to bed.”

Diana shook her head and smiled at him. “He would not. Not until he sees this finished.”

“No,” Steve said. It eased some of the tension in his chest. It always did, when he was given such bald proof of how they understood each other, at the core of things.

“Etta, we should have some tea. You make it best. Would you mind? Charlie can help you carry it,” Diana asked.

Steve grimaced but did not protest. Worry and stubbornness were the only things keeping him on his feet and the worry had just been removed. That did not mean that it wasn’t going to hurt like a son of a bitch getting him settled.

“Right, of course,” Etta said. “Charlie?”

Charlie looked mutinous but followed her out of the room. Sameer and Chief did him the decency of looking away, pretending to study the papers.
Steve looped his right around around Diana’s shoulders without being asked, able to shuffle awkwardly to the couch, between her support and the cane. She helped lower him to the couch, took most of his weight for the descent and helped him stretch his leg out on the footstool.

It was nothing. Hardly any movement at all.

When she was easing him onto the couch, trying to keep his hip from flexing too much, it had been so painful he thought he might vomit. He knew from the look on Sameer’s face that he had not been as silent and stoic as he might have wanted. His cheeks were wet and he must have made some sort of sound during the worst of it.

“You did too much today,” Diana told him. She stroked his cheek with her hand, as if it was not wet and there were no scars.

“Well, I won’t tomorrow,” Steve said, trying for a smile. He leaned forward, just a little, intent on resting his head on her shoulder, just for a moment, just to regain a little equilibrium.

Diana met him halfway, as if she had read his mind, and pressed their foreheads together. Steve exhaled slowly, his face hidden by her hair as she finished wiping away his tears. He could not help but relax a little at their closeness. He could feel her doing the same.

She kissed him, lightly, pulled back enough to look him in the eyes. Her eyes were wonderful and fierce.

“We will finish this now,” Diana declared. “And then we will go to bed.”

Steve laughed, he could not help it.

“I will finish reading it,” Diana said. Chief handed her the book. She sat exactly where she saw, perched beside Steve, still touching.

Chief pulled a folder out of his jacket - the copies, they had made copies, they had notes, at some point, they had tried - and Diana nodded. “Those, we burn now.”

They all looked at him.

“I’m not switching chairs now,” Steve said. He should have gone with the wheelchair when he sat down. He probably should have gone with it all day, knowing the night he had ahead of him. He looked at his friends instead. “Chief, you want to do the honours?”

“My pleasure,” Chief said.

“One by one,” Steve said before he could stop himself. “If you burn them all together, something could survive. We don’t want any fragments.”

“I know,” Chief said. He paused on his way to the fire, long enough to squeeze Steve’s shoulder firmly. Chief knew his business, of course he did. He also understood. Steve could not settle until it was gone.

“Thank you,” Steve said, instead.

“It really was an easy job,” Charlie told him, coming back into the room with what looked like their full tea set. He placed it on the table, left it for Etta to fuss with and pulled up a chair next to the couch as Chief took a seat in front of the fire. His eyes were red rimmed. Charlie did not deal well with seeing them in pain.
“In and out,” Sameer agreed. “We should have Etta plan all our jobs.”

“You will not. I have a job, thank you,” Etta said. “Tea, anyone?”

“Yessum.”

“Please.”

“Aye.”

“Good, good.” Etta said. Steve grabbed her hand as she passed and squeezed it in thanks. She nodded at him, then busied herself with the tea.

Diana accepted a cup, absently, and set it aside, absorbed in the book, her brow furrowed.

Steve resisted the urge to try and smooth it. He tipped his head back and tried to relax. Chief was feeding papers into the fire at a steady pace, consigning Dr. Maru’s legacy to ash. Sameer and Charlie were teasing Etta and drinking all her tea before she could even offer him a cup. Diana was beside him and, thank God, she was a fast reader.

“There is nothing good in here,” Diana said, and Steve blinked his eyes open, realized he must have dozed off. “Just more poisons. Even when she thinks she is creating something good it is...not. Only fuel for soldiers that will make them mad and unable to control themselves.”

“Nothing that will neutralize it?” Steve asked, groggy.

“No,” Diana said. “Only death.”

“Burn it and be done with it then,” Steve said. He watched at Charlie cut the pages off at the binding and Chief began feeding individual pages to the fire again. He watched, for a long time. “Good riddance.”

“You can go to bed, boss,” Sameer said. “We can finish this.”

“The sooner you get off the couch, the sooner I can go to sleep on it,” Charlie told him.

“No, you are taking the floor. I am taking the couch!”

Part of Steve could not stand the thought of not seeing it done himself. He wanted to watch the last page burn, if he could not burn it himself.

A larger part trusted his friends and knew their hands were as good as his own.

“You’ll see it done, Chief?” Steve asked, looking to him.

Chief nodded. “Rest easy, friend.”

“Okay, that sounds okay,” Steve said. He hide a grimace at the thought of getting up and looked at Diana, trying to keep the embarrassment off his face. He had to remind himself that he did not need to be embarrassed asking Diana for help. “Can you...?”

Diana did not let him finish before she was lifting him up, into her arms. He winced slightly at the motion but this was easier and less painful than trying to get to his wheelchair, which had, actually, been what he was going to ask.

“Thanks,” Steve said, as she took him, smiling, to bed.
I'm playing super fast an loose with Steve's backstory here because, yeah, American Expeditionary Force working for British SIS doesn't make a SUPER amount of sense so I figure I'm allowed. And the AEF didn't get there until 1917 so I've had him join up with the Royal Flying Corps early because otherwise he actually wouldn't have seen a lot of the war, or a lot of the worst of it. So, he starts in the Flying Corps, gets transferred to be someone's 2IC because he's smart (kind of modeled this idea from the portrayal of Intelligence/2ICs in Passchendaele, which is a terrible movie, don't watch it, even if the trench/artillery scenes are great) and I felt like it and then to the SIS. As far as I know, this never happened but the Germans didn't really have tanks in WWI either, so I'm taking the liberty.

Chapter title is from Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfrid Owen. Because if you want to read a poem about a gas attack, I think it's the best.

I really, really LOVE every comment I get so please let me know if you're enjoying this!
Steve was fairly pleased with himself. Resolving a tip on stolen artifacts he had received from one of his contacts in London had, for once, involved nothing more than a two-hour stakeout, a minor break in, and a call to the prefecture. He had not had to bribe anyone, smuggle anything or call in any favours and no one had gotten shot.

He would have to follow up, and perhaps get Diana to make arrangements, to ensure the artifacts were returned to their home countries, instead of disappearing into a French museum, but that required a less hands on approach.

It was almost annoying how easy it had been. The timing had been crucial, another day, two at most, and he would have had to track down a dozen buyers instead of one smuggler, but, still, Diana was gone for another week and he had nothing to do.

*Finished up.* He texted her as he watched one of her colleagues arrive and greet the bored looking police officers.

Steve smiled at the waiter and made sure his French was accented, British, this time, when he told him: “Merci. Un autre cafe s’vous plais.”

*Already? Bravo.*

Steve grinned at his phone and ignored the waiter rolling his eyes as he refilled Steve's water glass.

*Easy job. Want me to book a flight?*

To his surprise, his phone rang.

“That bad, huh?”

Diana scoffed. “Do you want to be bored and annoyed in Paris or in Metropolis?”

Steve blinked. Diana usually reserved that amount of disdain for new marketing directors until they realized she did not work for them; they worked for her.

“I take it it’s not going well, then,” Steve said.

“The files we need are military grade encryption with...additional security,” Diana told him. “Alex could not break it without additional resources.”

“Well shit.”

“Yes,” Diana sighed. “I am coming home early. There is a fight brewing here. I have no desire involve myself in it.”

“Between?”

“There are many dynamics at play,” she said. “The heroes of Gotham and Metropolis. I am sure this Luthor is involved but I do not know how yet. They are all acting like selfish little boys, though.”
“Hmm,” Steve frowned. He looked up flight times to both cities and memorised them but did not buy a ticket yet.

“I have Bruce Wayne’s attention, though,” Diana told him. “We shall see how that pans out.”

“If nothing else, I assume the Louvre will thank you for the donations in its future,” Steve said. He took a breath, closed his eyes for a moment. He did not like not being there. “Diana, you’re sure?”

She was quiet for a long moment. She exhaled and chuckled a little. It sounded tired. Steve hated that anything made her sound like that.

“No matter what we preferred, I am glad you are not here, in the end,” Diana said. “Luthor does not seem to know about you. He is only surveilling me. I am not sure we would have been able to maintain that if you were here. There is value in that that we may have overlooked. I don’t know why his facial recognition program did not find you as well.”

“We don’t know how the photo has aged,” Steve said. He rubbed a hand over his face. “And even if it’s in perfect shape, the skin grafts and reconstructive surgery probably stymied it. Not a tactic I would recommend but it may have helped us here.”

“He is a fool if his discounts you and we have leverage that he will never expect.” There was a great deal of satisfaction in her voice.

“That is a nice thought,” Steve said and smiled.

“Alex will be in touch,” Diana said. She sounded annoyed again. “I could not extract the data without corrupting it.”

“You gave it back to Wayne?” Steve asked.

“I will. Tonight,” Diana said.

“Well, that’s a bridge to maintain, not burn,” Steve said. “At least for now.”

Diana snorted. “Unfortunately.”

Steve was not sure if the evening would go very well or very poorly. Diana never had had time for men like Bruce Wayne. Movement across the street caught his attention and he smiled a little. “Fair warning, Marcel might kill you when you get back.”

“They called him?” Diana sounded horrified. “Poor man.”

“Are you talking about Marcel or the officers?”

Diana considered it. “Both but mostly I am sorry for Claudette when he returns to his office.”

Steve laughed. “You want me to send her flowers?”

“No, too many contaminants.”

“To her apartment.”

“Then yes. Her girlfriend is allergic to daisies, though.” Diana sounded happier even as she said: “I need to get ready for the museum gala. Remind me to thank Jean-Luc for suggesting I attend.”

“It provides a good opportunity. And you’re the one who suggested the bet to him,” Steve said.
“Yes, and I will win it.”

Steve laughed. “My money is always on you. Knock ‘em dead.”

“Try not to get too bored without me,” Diana said. “I love you.”

“Text me from the gala, that’ll be entertaining, I’m sure,” Steve said. “Love you too.”

He heard her scoff again as she hung up the phone but she was smiling again, he could tell.

The waiter brought his coffee. Steve sat and watched until Marcel came out, clutching his briefcase a little too tightly and looking flustered, before selecting the size of bouquet to have sent to Claudette.

He took his time getting home. The apartment wasn’t that far but since Diana wasn’t home he was slightly more cautious and took the Metro instead of walking. His hip had been more stable since the last surgery but Steve had long since learned to save pushing his luck for when he really needed to.

Steve was usually home first so it did not feel strange returning to an empty apartment but he missed Diana when he made dinner and tried coaxing Max – as he had dubbed the stray black cat who lived on their balcony – into the apartment. He missed her when Maryam called to reschedule his next appointment because she was staying in London a little longer and he could not pass the phone to Diana like Maryam passed it to Yasmine and Leila and Karim and Salima – Sameer’s children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He missed her when Alex called, talking a mile a minute, about how fucked up this Luthor guy was and did the intel he gave them on Wayne help and okay, okay, okay, here's what he was going to do next.

It was hardly the first time they had been apart. There were places he couldn’t go with her, even as backup. There were always battles that they had to fight alone, where they could only support each other.

So he texted her a photo of Max sitting just outside the balcony door at sunset and sent her screen caps from facetimeing with Maryam and the family.

Diana responded with a string of hearts and a scathing commentary about the Metropolis Museum donor who had been hassling the wait staff and how she had scared him off.

Then, later, when Steve was reading in bed, Diana texted BRUCE WAYNE, a frowny face, and a gif of Xena knocking someone out.

Steve was still laughing when Diana called him to recap the evening.

“Oh love,” he said, when he picked up the phone. “Tell me everything.”

Diana was not impressed by Metropolis or Gotham. Gotham, particularly, bothered her. He got a running commentary about it, over the next few days, with pictures. Steve spent probably too much time reading about the crime there, the city’s perpetual underfunding and the vigilant that patrolled their streets. He was only half surprised when Diana told him it was Bruce Wayne himself, though he did have to re-evaluate his personal profile of the man, after that. It wasn’t hard – it was too easy, really – to find half a dozen projects or charities that needed funding, that could maybe help, a little. Steve knew Diana would want to, would worry about it, when she got home.

Steve could research the worst of it so that Diana didn’t have to, so she could help without having to hurt. He tried to spare her that, whenever he could.

She texted him increasingly curt commentary from Metropolis and called him, without fail, while he
was reading in bed at night. He called her around lunch, Metropolis time, because if nothing else it reminded her that she needed to stop and eat at some point, and texted her gossip from the neighbourhood. Marie was trying to convert them to some new photo app and he was resisting – Adi had not had her baby yet – Ellie got a new job and Omar had invited half the building over to celebrate – Marc and Adrien bought a new puppy, a mutt with paws and ears that were too big for his body. Steve had already volunteered them for babysitting.

And Steve waited. He was almost certain he would receive a text from Diana saying she was extending her stay, that she had tied Superman and Batman up with the lasso of Hestia and was leaving them there until they learned to get along like grownups.

It was unfortunate, he thought later, that it hadn’t happened that way. The first text he received the night Diana was set to return home was innocuous enough, even if it startled him awake. He blinked and fumbled for his phone.

_I will be late returning home._

Steve yawned, ran his hand through his hair and started typing out a reply. Diana’s next text came through first.

_There is a monster I must help vanquish._

Steve had a brief sense of longing for the time when a text like that might have made him pause. Now, it just made him frown and reach for his cane. He walked out into the living room and turned on the news.

Diana always called, if she could. Things must be particularly dire.

_I love you._ He texted back. _Call when you can._

It distantly surprised him, just a little, to see an actual monster on the screen. They hadn’t dealt with one of those in over ten years. Diana wasn’t there yet. Superman appeared to be trying to punch the thing into space.

His phone buzzed. _I love you too._

A hundred years and it still made him smile. He made his way to the couch and settled in, holding his phone tightly. The reports were slim for a long time, shaky, distant footage and the same information repeated over and over again because they had nothing new to say. The news cameras couldn’t get close enough. Steve waited, unable to look away, particularly after there were reports of a new hero, one neither Gotham nor Metropolis had ever seen before, joining the fray.

Steve knew he didn’t need to worry, not really, that if anything could kill Diana, they hadn’t found it yet. He had complete faith in her.

That did not make it easier to sit and wait for the newsfeeds to come back and do nothing.

When a local station finally got a live feed going again, Steve inhaled sharply. There were soldiers carrying Superman’s body away from the epicentre of the attack, a red haired women following close behind. He caught a glimpse of Diana in the background, near the monster they had killed, before she disappeared.

Steve looked at his phone. He doubted he would hear from her tonight, not while there were still people who needed her help.
He texted her anyway, the one thing he could never say enough: *I love you.*

All flights going in and out of Metropolis and Gotham had been cancelled but there were flights into neighbouring cities. There was always a way in, once you got on the ground. Steve booked the earliest one he could find and punched in a number on his phone.

“Mike? It's Steve, sorry, did I wake you?” Steve said, watching the screen, taking in the destruction. He started a list of all the things he would need in his head. “I need to call in a favour.”

Chapter End Notes

Basically this is an entire chapter based on me liking the idea of Steve and Diana texting each other.

I'm weirdly proud that I wrote a line in French without google translate. It's literally just Steve ordering another coffee.

The next chapter is, uh, much longer and heavier.

Chapter title is from *Strange Meeting* by Wilfred Owen.

I love comments so please comment if you're enjoying this!
England - 1940

“They are late,” Diana said. “The train is late.”

“This train is always late,” Steve said, he shuffled his paper and tried to act nonchalant. “It’s part of its charm.”

“I do not find it charming,” Diana told him. He hid his smile as she tossed her hair back. She was doing an admirable job of not pacing. “They will get hungry.”

“It’s a good thing we brought cookies, then,” Steve said. “I’m more worried about being able to carry their things on the walk back.”

“I will carry them,” Diana declared. She folded her arms. She was pouting. It was a rare sight, Steve could not help but be delighted by it. “I could have gone to London and gotten them myself.”

“Health Ministry might have objected,” Steve said. He folded his paper up. “Look, everyone else is just starting to arrive. They factored in the delay. We got here early. They should be here soon.”

Diana scowled but sat down on the bench beside him. Even scowling and annoyed and anxious she was more beautiful and graceful than anyone he had ever seen.

“Want the paper?” Steve offered.

“No.”

“A cookie?”

Diana huffed at him but smiled. He smiled back. She took his right hand in both of hers. It was a temptation too great to resist, he pulled them both to his lips and kissed her hand before letting them rest on the arm of his wheelchair.

“They’ll be here soon,” Steve said. He noticed two little girls from the village edging away from their mother, closer to them. Before rationing, Diana had been known to buy ice cream for whoever happened to be nearby whenever she purchased it for herself, which was often, and Steve had developed a reputation in the past couples years for his stories. “Did I ever tell you about the first time I flew a plane?”

“Yes,” Diana said but she was still smiling at him. She inclined her head in the direction of the girls. “But you can tell me again.”

They quickly drew small crowd of the village children. Diana kept giving out the cookies – Steve
managed to save a few for their guests. He had only squirrelled away enough of their sugar ration for one batch.

“They’ve arrived!” the mayor called, trying, in vain, to impose some order. “Let’s form an orderly queue everyone. No need to startle them with a crowd. Come, come now. That’s it.”

Diana delivered their audience back to their various parents, leaving one more cookie with Dottie Henderson, who was eight months pregnant and whose husband had been wounded at Dunkirk. She joined the queue.

Steve stayed where he was. He tried not to be frustrated. He thought he should have used his cane, bummed a ride from Ed and Etta, who had a car, and dismissed it. He had been ill recently – not badly, just a flu, but any type of congestion made breathing harder and he had compounded it all by trying to get to the bathroom on his own one night and fainting in the hallway, aggravating his hip when he fell.

It was smart, safer, to use his wheelchair. It was also annoying. It had been over a year since he last had to use it instead of his cane and no matter what he knew, it felt like such a setback.

They did not have time for him to have setbacks now.

Steve had kept what few contacts he could when Darnell died at the beginning of 1939. He had watched, as tensions rose again, as proxy wars started up in Manchuria and Abyssinia and Spain. If he had been another type of man, he would have sworn that Ares had not been defeated on that airfield in Belgium, only subdued to rise again, with the red, black and white flags that covered Germany, with appeasement, with the new tanks and submarines and bombers.

Steve knew better. Maybe it was his years as a soldier, then a spy. Maybe it was the obstinence of the Generals, or Sir Patrick’s betrayal, or Dr. Maru’s willingness to destroy, or Ludendorff’s inability to seek peace when it was being handed to him.

Maybe it was the plane, the horror that filled him when he saw it, huge and filled with gas, and the unshakable, terrible knowledge that he was staring at the future.

Maybe it was all the things he had done himself for the sake of winning the last war.

Chamberlain climbed out of a plane and proclaimed, “Peace for our time.”

They had listened on the radio and Steve knew. He just knew.

It would not be enough. War was coming. It would be terrible.

And then it was there.

Diana left, for days at a time, deflecting bombs, digging civilians out of the rubble, or the mud, safeguarding soldiers as they tried to retreat from the battlefield. She came home exhilarated or exhausted but it never became routine. She always cared, so much that Steve felt an echo of her sorrow and joy in his own heart.

She did not wear her armour anymore. It was better, they decided, to let it become a myth, one of the many legends of the Great War.

Diana did not want to take Ares place in the world, did not want to be seen as a goddess, or influence men’s hearts, except towards peace. She would not carry anyone’s banner. She would not force them to love. They had to choose it.
Steve made arrangements for her when he could, kept up the contacts Darnell had...left him, he supposed, when he died, so that he could make sure she had the best information he could get her. But he had been out of the game for a long time and his sources weren't what they once were. He was aware much of the information he received was filtered through the careful sieve of the SIS. It chafed at him, not being able to do more, but he had to keep helping where he could.

And now they were evacuating more children from the cities.

“There's your Mr. Trevor,” Ed’s voice boomed over the din of the crowd. Steve spotted him and Diana, both of them taller than most. The crowd shuffled to make room for them. Steve pushed himself forward to meet them. Ed appeared to be helping Diana with the suitcases so she could hold the hands of both children.

“No, no, it won't do,” Ed was saying. “Etta will be cross with me. Let us take the suitcases home for you at least. We have the car. It's no trouble.”

“I can carry my suitcase and Bobby’s too!” The little girl said sharply. “We’re fine.”

Ed looked at her askance. Steve just smiled. “Thanks for the help, Ed. The shelf we put on the back is working out fine.”

The children stopped and stared at him. Diana used the distraction to lean over and say something quietly to Ed, who was a sensible man with an over large heart, for all his bluster. He made a face.

“All right, if you’re sure,” Ed said. He did not look entirely happy. “If you need the car, you let me know. Etta and I are always happy to drive you folks anywhere you need to go.”

“I know, Ed,” Steve smiled at him. Ed had come home from the war to find his fiancé as devoted to a wounded soldier, his rather odd wife, two spies and a smuggler as they were to her. His reaction had been to become thoroughly entangled with the lot of them, even if he did not quite understand half of what they were talking about, most of the time. Diana had been a happy if confused bridesmaid at their wedding. “I take you up on it enough. Can’t fit the chair in there, though. Don’t worry about us, the shelf is working out well.”

“If you’re sure,” Ed said again, not looking at all sure himself but he was also already looking around as if he sensed Etta’s displeasure at his absence on the wind. He shook Steve’s hand and then Diana’s before going back to his wife in the queue.

“We can put the suitcases here, see?” Diana said, speaking to the girl. Diana had already picked up both of them and was securing them onto the shelf they had attached to the back of his wheelchair.

The children were not really paying attention to her. The girl was watching what happened to their little suitcases very carefully. The boy, who seemed far too young and small to be away from his mother, was staring at Steve.

“This is Ann,” Diana told him solemnly. “And this is Robert.”

“Bobby,” Ann corrected, scowling at Diana. “No one calls him Robert.”

Bobby was chewing on a cookie. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Steve. Steve had gotten used to that, people stared or they ignored him until they got used to him.

“Can I sit with you?” Bobby asked suddenly. “Had to stand on the train. S’was loads of people.”

“Bobby,” Ann hissed. She did not have a cookie.
“Sure,” Steve said, grinning. Children, he had long since decided, were much better than adults. At least they were direct.

Diana grabbed Bobby when he tried to climb up himself, smiling as widely as Steve was.

“Stay on this side, okay buddy?” Steve asked, trying to get Bobby settled and not bouncing on the left. “The right side is the bad side.”

“Why’s it bad?” Bobby asked.

“It hurts sometimes,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Bobby said. He peered at Steve’s leg as if he would suddenly see what was wrong with it. Steve could see Ann looking as well. She looked around, suddenly alarmed.

“Isn’t someone going to come push him?” Ann asked.

“I am going to push him,” Diana told her.

“You’re going to push him,” Ann said. She looked suspicious.

“Yes, are you all right to walk?” Diana said, looking concerned suddenly. “It is about twenty minutes to our house.”

“You’re going to push him?” Ann repeated.

“Yes,” Diana replied, looking at her steadily.

Ann did not look convinced. “I can walk. We didn't have to stand the whole way on the train.”

“It felt like it,” Bobby said, unaware or ignoring his sister's glare as they set off.

Ann kept glancing over at Diana as they went, eyes wide, but did not offer any more commentary.

Bobby, on the other hand, pointed out everything they passed, a constant stream of chatter. Steve found it impossibly charming, Diana seemed to think it was entirely sensible and answered all his comments as if she were speaking to an adult. Ann scowled and trudged along beside them.

Bobby went quiet, when they got inside the house. Diana lifted him down from Steve’s lap and he stood there, staring silently as Diana took their two suitcases off the back of the wheelchair. Steve hefted himself up with his cane and Diana tucked it away in the hall closet, expanded for just that purpose.

Ann’s frown deepened. Bobby just looked around with wide eyes, chewing on his fingers.

“This is bigger than our house,” he mumbled around them. He turned big eyes on Diana. “Do you have a garden too?”

Diana crouched down to his level and smiled at him. “Yes, we have a garden. Would you like to see it?”

Bobby nodded. Diana stood and went to take his hand. Bobby held both his arms up to her instead. Diana’s face melted and she scooped him up, settling him on her hip.

Steve was so utterly lost at the sight.
Diana looked at Ann and smiled for her too. “Do you want to come see the garden?”

Ann remained unmoved. She shook her head silently.

“I'll show Ann her room,” Steve offered. “Get their things upstairs.”

“Leave the things,” Diana told him.

“I can carry my own suitcase,” Ann said crossly.

“Okay,” Steve said. “I won’t stop you.”

He exchanged a look with Diana. She raised an eyebrow at him and gave him a little, teasing smile, for luck, then disappeared with Bobby.

Steve looked at Ann. Ann looked at Steve. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at him.

“How come you sat in that chair all the way here if you can walk?”

Steve leaned a little on his cane and met her angry brown eyes squarely. “I was in a plane crash, in the last war. It took me a long time to be able to walk again and sometimes I still can’t manage long distances so I use my chair instead.”

“Is that why your face looks like that?” Ann asked, pointing to the side with the scars.

“Yes,” Steve answered, seriously. He patted his chest. “I have more scars here and bad lungs. It was a pretty bad crash.”

Ann considered him for a moment then declared: “My brother Davey is a pilot. He says the old planes were death traps and you had to be crazy to fly them.”

Steve thought about the last two times he had flown and could not exactly disagree. “They’re better now, I’ve heard.”

“I dunno. Davey’s pretty crazy,” she eyeballed him again. “Are you sure you should be showing me upstairs if you're hurt? I can find it myself, I'm sure.”

It was all Steve could do not to laugh. He did not think he was supposed to laugh at children, particularly ones who been separated from their parents for who knew how long. “I think I can manage but thank you for asking.”

He paused before they tackled the stairs. “Are you sure you don't want a cookie?”

She looked at him. “How’d you know I didn't have one at the hall?”

“Lucky guess.”

Ann considered it. “Okay.”

Steve gave her a cookie and showed her the room where she would be staying, and then where Bobby would sleep too, in case he needed her at night.

It was not, of course, that easy. By night, Bobby was sobbing for his mother and asking when they could go home. He calmed down a little when Steve promised to help him write her a letter, right away, and then fell asleep in his lap as they were. Diana’s eyes were wet when they carried him to bed.
Later that night, Ann tried to run away back to London. She slipped climbing out of her window and she would have fallen if Diana had not heard her and caught her. Ann just stared at her with huge, resentful, surprised eyes, but deigned to go back to bed for them.

This was how they spent their second war.

Diana would wait until the children went to sleep at night, kiss Steve goodbye and leave, often for London, often for other cities. There were nights when she crossed the whole of England, digging people out of the rubble if she could not deflect the falling bombs. Myths quickly sprang up of women lifting tonnes of rubble to get to children trapped beneath. Men and women traded stories of walls being lifted away from collapsed houses, beams and metal and brick being torn away. Pilots told tales of bombs suddenly knocked off course, into the depths of the Atlantic.

Sometimes she would be gone for days; they told the children she helped at a hospital to explain it. Most nights she was home before dawn, smelling like smoke and covered in dust and rubble.

Steve always met Diana at the door. They embraced and the longer she held onto him, the harder he knew the night had been. Most mornings, he would make coffee – or whatever they had in their rations that they could pretend was coffee – while she stripped her clothing and washed herself, but after the worst nights she would keep hold of his hand, and pull him into the bathroom with her. He would help her with her clothing, stay within reach as she washed, and simply be there, when she wanted to be held.

Diana smiled for the children, no matter what. Steve made breakfast and walked the children to school. She would be asleep, usually, when he came home.

Sometimes, the times she could not sleep, Steve would sit in bed with her, her head against his thigh and stroke her hair as she told him about the horrors he had imagined on an airfield in Belgium over twenty years ago brought vividly and horrifically to life.

He kept waiting for there to be gas among the bombs, his chest aching and throat burning at the thought. High Command seemed content to use bombs and fire and bullets to wreak destruction this time but Steve knew War. Diana had killed its god but it was an entity unto itself, fuelled by pain and misery and fury and, most of all, invention. The bombs that blitzed London would not be enough for it in the end. Steve knew it in his bones. He dreaded what they kept out of the intelligence he got his hands on and what the course of this War would bring.

But he got up every morning to greet Diana, covered in grime and dirt and he tried to hold on to hope. He walked the children to school every morning while she slept, did the shopping and was at home promptly for 10:00 am in case any…couriers came for him.

Steve was well aware that the packets of information he got from SIS were exactly what they wanted him, and by extension Diana, to know. Someone in British Intelligence remembered the rumours, if they did not, he didn't think, know exactly what those rumours meant. Darnell had likely left a trail, Steve knew, but just that his team, had gotten miraculous things done. He knew, very well, that they were being used. He made sure Diana understood too. The information they were getting was limited and highly selective. They could not fully trust it. They had a fragment, not the full picture, and the few independent contacts he had left could not flesh it out in full. Most of them had disappeared shortly after the war started.

But that fragment was usually decoded German bombing plans, headed for London or Manchester or Portsmouth or any of the cities and airfields and factories they were targeting. Neither of them could ignore that.
If nothing came, Steve got dinner prepared and stored it in the icebox to cook when the children got home. Some days, Ed picked him up and drove him a town over, where they were housing an American battalion doing their final training before going to the front. He was acting as a somewhat unofficial liaison between them and the British. Some of the men considered him a good luck charm, some bad, given he came with the scars of the last war, but most of them had a question they wanted to ask, even if half the time it was where they could find condoms without their officers finding out.

Ed insisted on driving the children home from school because Ann was surreptitiously trying to figure out how to drive by watching Ed. Steve didn't protest except for show and Ed narrated everything he was doing carefully. Diana would be up when they arrived, in the garden or in the study. She would smile, kiss him, and be treated to a full run down of Bobby’s day, monosyllabic answers about Ann’s.

Bobby was rambunctious and fun and went full throttle until bedtime. He cried for his mother every night for a year and a half. He let them comfort him but they weren’t his parents, only poor stand ins, until the war ended and he could go home.

Ann seemed to like Steve well enough but for the longest time she was distrustful of Diana. They both noticed the way she clung to her mother, on the few visits the woman managed around her work as a nurse. She never cried, like Bobby, but sometimes they caught a glimpse of her face when she thought they weren’t looking and the loneliness there made them both ache for her.

They came to a truce, nearly six months into their stay, when Ann came to breakfast one morning and demanded, as was her way: “There are books in French in the parlour. Whose are they?”

Steve had never had a problem lying for a good cause. He nodded to Diana and said, very casually. “Diana reads French and about a hundred other languages. I can’t read a lick, myself.”

Ann’s eyes went wide and, for the first time, they were not just angry but hungry. “Can you teach me?”

Before Diana could reply, Ann seemed to remember herself and stop, then forget herself again, all in a rush. “Please? Mum bought me a little French book because I wanted to learn and she knows a very little but I couldn’t bring it with me and I didn’t think there would be anyone to help. She used to help me when she was knitting and I...”

She sniffled and tried to stop. Her lower lip trembled. Bobby looked like he was about to burst into tears too.

“Of course,” Diana said. Steve could tell it was taking everything in her to not simply reach across the table and take Ann’s tightly clenched hands. That, they had discovered, did not work with Ann. Diana only smiled at her instead. “Of course. We can start this afternoon. I have books in other languages as well. Spanish, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Chinese. We can start with whatever you would like.”

Ann gave her a wobbly sort of smile and Steve upset his water glass to try and diffuse the situation before anyone ended up in tears. It worked, Bobby laughed and Ann wiped at her eyes furiously when she thought everyone was distracted.

But this was also their war.

Sameer and Charlie both tried to enlist. They turned Charlie away, too old and medically unsound, they said, besides, but his son enlisted with the Gordon Highlanders like his father and his daughters went to the ATS, one manning an anti-aircraft gun and one with the fire brigade in London. The SIS
took Sameer back despite the grey in his hair, for his intelligence and his acting talents and many languages, and sent him to North Africa. Chief had gone back to North America in the 1930s but both his sons came with the Canadian Air Force. Intelligence had recruited Etta early in the war and she was home more and more rarely.

Once, before the war began but after Steve knew that it would come, he and Ed drove out to Warwickshire. He still knew a few people at the airfield, turned trainers due to their age. They took him up in an Oxford, once, a training flight, they said, laughing, and let him take the controls, let him fly again and it was...it was wonderful. He loved flying, he missed flying, nothing but sky in front of him, higher than it was possible to go during his war. The whole world, laid out below him, and above, just the wide blue, never ending. Steve even missed the rush of wind from the open cockpit from the biplane days.

Back on the ground, he felt sick about how good it felt, how much he would have liked to have been back up there, in the air.

He have would enlisted, he thought, if they would have taken him. Before he had been a spy, he had been an aerial photographer and, by necessity, a dogfighter. He was a solid flyer, not fancy, but he had never been shot down, never lost a plane until Themyscira. The Royal Flying Corps had taken him – an American who didn't believe in isolationism and couldn't stand to do nothing even in 1914 – for his brief experience with planes and his steady hands. His aerial photographers, the analysis in the notes he made for them, brought him to the attention of the Intelligence.

Surely, there was more he could be doing with the world at war again.

But the very thought of going back made him want to vomit, made his chest ache and his throat burn. He still dreamt of it sometimes and being in the air had been so different than being a spy, being in the trenches then. He knew in this new war, there were fewer differences between them.

So instead Steve walked the children they were hosting to school. He helped Diana as best he could. He tried not show it, and never complained when the pain got bad, though Diana always knew. Chief’s sons visited when they were on leave – they told the children light-hearted stories and brought them chocolate; they told Diana and Steve about the bombings runs and the close calls with enemy fighters and flak from the antiaircraft guns and brought Diana coffee and Steve letters from their father.

Half way through the war, while he was in Libya, Sameer’s flat in London was bombed. His wife, Farah, had been driving her ambulance at the time, their three little girls sleeping at a neighbour’s house. They moved in with Steve and Diana after that. Steve lost his study to Farah and little Sofia and Ann gained two roommates who she could practise French and Arabic with late into the night.

Their house was suddenly full and loud and sometimes, when they were all there and content, Steve thought he might be the happiest he had ever been in his life.

It was a wonderful, horrible feeling. Like being in that Oxford trainer. Like knowing, no matter how much he might want to enlist, the SIS would never take him back, that he would never have to go to war again. Steve knew War, knew it better than most, and he couldn't forget the suffering that it wrought in the world while he was happy, not for a moment, not for a breath.

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Diana did not know what made her look up. The girls did not. There had been no sound and she had been dozing more than reading the book open in her lap. But some innate sense made her blink and look to the half open door.
Steve was there, just shifting his weight to lean against the door frame. He caught her eye for a moment and smiled, lifting his finger to his lips. His eye went very soft, looking at the scene before him and Diana could not help but smile.

Language lessons had been usurped when both girls became obsessed with the same novel. The only rule was that they had to read – and talk about it – in French, the language it was written in.

But for once they were silent.

Ann was in the arm chair, sitting very still and serious, scowling at the text fiercely, as if she could consume it faster that way. Nadia was laying on her stomach on the rug, her legs swinging randomly, thump-thump-thumping on the floor every few minutes. Every now and then there was a shout from outside, where Yasmine and Bobby were playing.

Nadia sighed and flopped onto her back. Steve ducked back but she only stared dreamily at the ceiling. “Je ne comprends pas pourquoi Marius ne va pas en Angleterre avec Cosette!”

“Pas d’argent,” Ann said, not looking up from the book on her lap.

“Mais elle l’adore!”

“Alors? Il n’a pas d’argent. Qui se soucie de l’amour? Il est un idiot,” Ann said, so seriously that Diana saw Steve cover his mouth to keep from laughing.

“Sois gentile, Ann,” Diana reminded her, trying very hard not to laugh herself.

Ann rolled her eyes. There was a sly grin on her face. “J’aime Javert. Il est intéressant.”

“Mais non! Il est tres mechant,” Nadia spun around to look at her.

Ann cracked and started to giggle. Nadia huffed and threw a pillow at her. Ann shrieked but caught it. They both froze. Nadia jumped to her feet. Ann brandished the pillow triumphantly and swung back to throw it.

“What is going on in here?” Steve said, pushing the door open and slouching against it. He was hiding something behind his back.

“Literature,” Diana answered flatly and hid her smile at his snort.

“What are you going to build a barricade next?” Steve said.

The girls looked at each other and grinned. Diana put her hand over her face so they wouldn’t see her laugh. Steve groaned as if he was very put upon.

“Outside, for barricade building. Wait, wait,” Steve said as they started to charge past him. “I have snacks.”

They turned as one. Diana understood now why Steve had braced himself against the door. He looked ready to raise his cane to fend them off. They were a fierce force.


“Et voila,” Steve said. “Carrot cookies and if you’re sick of those, we’ve got regular old carrots you can have.”

Neither of them looked thrilled but they took them and ran. Diana heard Ann say, just as they banged

Diana closed her book and put it on the table, smiling at Steve but also pointing to the plate he held as he came into the room. “You're not foisting those on me.”

“Heaven forbid. There’s still a bit of chocolate in the tin from the last time Lenny and George visited, if you need something sweet,” Steve said.

Diana frowned. “They brought us their entire ration last time.”

“I know, I'm hoarding it for Yasmine’s birthday,” Steve said. He set the cookies down on the table and perched there himself, in front of her. “I've hidden it well so if anyone finds it this time, it will be Ann.”

“She is very curious.”

“She's a snoop. She’s a sneak,” Steve said but he was smiling. “I'm very proud.”

“You do not think I could find it?” Diana asked. She leaned forward, her fingers trailing along Steve’s leg.

Steve raised an eyebrow at her. “All you have to do is ask, love.”

Diana grinned at him and leaned forward to kiss him. Steve’s hand cupped her face, slid into her hair. She shifted closer.

There was a loud thump upstairs, a pause, then the patter of small feet moving fast on the floor above them. They broke away from each other and both looked up, tracking the sound of the footsteps automatically.

Steve groaned and rested his head against hers for just a moment. He pulled away, smiling ruefully. “Three...two...one...”

“Auntie!” Sofia shrieked and there was a loud thump as she jumped the last two stairs and fell on her butt. Diana was up in an instant to scoop her up, Steve hovering behind her, but Sofia just laughed and held her arms up to be picked up.

Sofia’s little hands immediately tangled in Diana’s hair and she smiled a big, toothy smile. Diana grinned at her and kissed her chubby cheeks. When she looked up, the smile on Steve’s face, the soft look in his eyes, it made Diana ache.

“Is that my little Sofia I hear?” Farah called from the kitchen.

“Mama!” Sofia shrieked in Diana’s ear.

“Should we go help mama and Uncle Steve in the kitchen?” Diana asked. She hoisted Sofia into a more secure position. She liked to wriggle.

“Yes!” Sofia yelled, nodding vigorously.

Diana could see Steve hiding his face again as he opened the kitchen door for them, hiding his laughter. Diana had not expected so much of child-minding to involve hiding mirth over their antics. They were not her children but...still, there were days when she wished she could speak to her mother about it. About all of it.

She did not know how she could have described the feeling that fluttered in her chest when she
looked at Steve at night, reading Bobby and Yasmine bedtime stories, or the way Ann leaned into his side, sometimes, when she needed the comfort she never let herself ask for. The way he looked at her with them, soft and fierce at once. But she would have liked to try.

Farah looked up as the door swung open and brightened. “Hello my darling.”

Sofia shrieked and made grabbing hands at her mother. “Mama!”

Farah leaned close, kissed both her cheeks and rubbed their noses together but left her in Diana’s arms. Her hands and forearms were covered in flour. When Sofia whined, she dotted a tiny smudge on Sofia’s nose to make her giggle.

There was a shriek from outside. Yasmine and Bobby seemed to be objecting to barricade building – Ann had just overturned their wheelbarrow – in favour of their ongoing stick-sword fight. Sofia’s attention was immediately enraptured.


“Sofia!” Farah said sharply. “What do you say?”

“Please!” Sofia shouted. The bouncing increased. “Down please!”

Diana and Farah raised their eyebrows at each other but Diana let her down and Steve opened the back door for her.

Sofia shrieked as she toddle-ran across the small patch of lawn that remained. She ploughed into her target – Bobby today – at full steam.

“I am raising a hyena in place of a child,” Farah sighed. “My mother would say it served me right.”

“She was such a happy baby, we should have known the twos would be terrible,” Steve said. He had automatically started washing more potatoes for dinner.

“The terrible twos should be just about over,” Farah groused. “She’s just getting louder.”

“When did Nadia and Yasmine settle down?” Steve asked.

Someone let out a roar in the backyard and they watched as Bobby and Yasmine took down Nadia, who was on top of the upturned wheelbarrow. Sofia squealed and flung dirt at all of them. Ann hoisted her up and swung her around so she could fling it even further.

Farah looked at Diana and smirked. “When did you or I settle down, ami?”

Diana grinned. Steve groaned and raised his hands in defeat. “Point taken.”

“Can you pass me the...?” Farah said and Steve handed her a knife before she even finished.

“What can I do to help?” Diana asked, peering over their shoulders.

Farah flicked a dish towel at her. “Go nap or sit if you won’t nap. You have a longer night than we do and you’ve been entertaining half the hellions half the day.”

“We’ve got it, promise,” Steve said. He leaned forward to kiss her lightly and smiled. “Thanks.”

Diana sat at the kitchen table. She did not need the sleep and she enjoyed watching them cook together. Farah was not like Sameer, blunt and honest – she would have made a terrible spy – but
warm too and kind. Steve had been surprised when they got married – Farah had been 32, a spinster; Sameer 53 and, a confirmed bachelor, or so Steve had thought – but she had fit into all their lives as if she had always been there.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice that only the kids ate my cookies,” Steve said, teasingly. He was mashing potatoes in a pot and his hair hung into his eyes a little. Diana still always thought it was too long, every time it did that, though he wore it that way now so it covered more of the scars.

“I am so sick of carrots. As soon as this war is over,” Farah said, chopping an onion with more force than necessary, “I am teaching you how to cook with actual spices.”

“I’ll just be glad when we don’t have to rely on Ed bagging us a couple rabbits every week,” Steve groused.

“I hate potatoes,” Farah said. “I hate them.”

Steve paused. “I think they’re in every single thing that’s going on the table tonight.”

Farah choked on a laugh. Steve grabbed a potato and tossed it into the air. He offered it to her with a slight bow. “Want to smash it? I won’t tell.”

“Give me the damn masher,” Farah said, still laughing. “You finish this.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve said cheerfully, twirling the knife once to make Farah roll her eyes, before taking over the onion.

Diana could not help but smile at them, at the shouts coming from the children outside. Her heart felt very full.

It would have been easy, for someone visiting their home in that sunny moment and many others, to forget about the war raging outside of its confines.

There were all the signs, of course. There was never enough of anything, with the rationing. Clothing was patched until it fell apart. There were the locked drawers of the desk in their bedroom, the packages of information inside. The clothing Steve painstakingly washed and mended at night, when the children were asleep, that Diana left in night after night, hiding her gauntlets and her shield. There were the young men in uniform that ate at their table, Chief’s sons, and for a time the Americans Steve had befriended, before they were deployed and their furloughs in England ended.

There was Sameer’s absence, so visible in Farah’s eyes sometimes, the funeral for Charlie’s son, Etta’s long disappearances to Bletchley, the strict way Ann and Nadia, children still, worried about the blackouts at night, the bruises under Diana’s eyes and Farah’s, from her duties in London and Diana’s...everywhere, and Steve’s who slept less and less, keeping their hearth warm for when they returned.

And yet, it felt very far away, as Diana watched Steve make Farah laugh until she cried and clutched her stomach. Steve would snag Sofia as she ran back inside – covered in dirt from head to toe – dump her in the bathtub before dinner and end up soaked himself because that was what happened with Sofia. Bobby wanted a cuddle and then Yasmine wanted a cuddle and they decided together that Diana’s lap was big enough for both of them at once. Nadia and Ann were whisper-plotting something, again, and Farah made them help wash the dishes after dinner to keep their hands busy.

It was only after the children went to bed that they allowed the buried tension to creep back into the house. The lines on Steve’s face – the ones that were not there at the beginning of the war, no matter that he was not aging as he should be – deepened and he hovered close to her as she dressed.
Farah disappeared into her room and shut the door. They waited for her together, well past the time Diana had planned to leave. Steve had his arm around her shoulders and she leaned into his side, held one of his hands in both of hers. And they waited.

Diana was meeting with Sameer that night. Farah had not seen her husband in four years, his leave had not been long enough to make it back to England, even after he had been transferred to France and then Germany. Letters were sporadic, dependent on the length of his missions, but yesterday he had called – only the third phone call they had gotten from him during the whole war – and told Diana she needed to meet with him, given a code in Chinese that only Steve had understood after Diana translated it.

Diana could not take Farah with her, could not bring Sameer back from the war, but she could give her as long as she needed before Diana saw him when Farah could not.

Farah’s face was dry when she joined them in the living room. Her back was straight, her shoulders proud.

Diana thought she would have gone into battle with Farah even more quickly than she had with her husband. She stood to meet her.

“Give this to Sameer for me, would you?” Farah asked and there had been no awkward moments between them for a long time, living as closely together as they did, but now, for a moment, she flushed. “From me and the children.”

The envelop was lumpy as if many letters were folded inside. Diana had seen Farah getting Sofia to scribble on a piece of paper early in the day, had heard her encouraging Nadia and Yasmine to stop playing and write something for their father.

Diana wondered how long it had taken Farah to write hers. The ink was still drying on her hands.

Farah took a breath. “Give him a kiss from me. And tell him not to get shot doing anything foolish.”

“I will,” Diana promised.

Farah gave her a nod and a very tight smile and turned and walked away. Diana could see her hands clenching into fists and unclenching. As a rule, Farah did not cry.

“I’ll make sure she’s okay,” Steve said. “Break out the chocolate hoard or sic Sofia on her. Something. Tell Sameer I second not getting shot.”

“I will third it,” Diana told him. She straightened his collar and he smiled at her before hugging her tightly.

“You be careful too,” Steve said into her shoulder, his voice muffled. “War’s almost over. It’s got to be almost over.”

There was hope in his voice but also the strange surety he had sometimes. And yet...he sounded wary too, almost frightened.

Diana looked at him quizzically when they parted but Steve just shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m worried. I wish I could go with you. I want Sameer to come home.”

Diana cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. He kissed her again, nearly as soon as they parted. They held onto each other a moment longer than they normally did.
“You have to go,” Steve said finally, allowing himself another, short kiss. “I love you.”

Diana touched his face. “I love you too.”

Steve stood in the doorway as she left. Diana did not look back, she had not for a long time, but she knew he was there.

Diana met Sameer outside where the British and Canadians had set up, near the small town of Celle, just far away enough to avoid the sentries. Sameer looked tired and so much older than she remembered.

Diana did not hesitate. She hugged him, very tightly. He squeezed back so hard she thought even she might have complained, if she had not had her armour on, under her nondescript clothing.

“It’s good to see you,” Sameer said, holding her at arm’s length just to look at her. There was hunger in his gaze not lust just a sharp, intense longing for the home she could go back to when he could not.

Diana kissed his cheek. “From Farah.”

Everything Sameer had been trying to hold back for her sake broke wide open across his face. His hands tightened on her arms. “How is she? My girls? I got a backlog of her letters weeks ago but they never come on time.”

“They’re all well,” Diana told him. She pulled the large, lumpy envelop out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Farah sent this as well.”

Sameer held it almost as if he were afraid of it and then he was tearing it open. He only managed to spare an apologetic glance at her. “I’m sorry. I have to...I have to.”

“No, of course,” Diana said. “Please.”

Sameer’s fingers shook as he pulled out the pages. There were two sealed envelopes inside, letters from Nadia and Farah, a page of scribbles from Sofia, two drawings from Yasmine, and a photo of all four of them. Ed had driven them to get it taken just a few weeks ago.

Sameer wiped at his eyes and tucked the photo inside his shirt pocket, over his heart. He gave a watery laugh at the drawings.

“Yasmine has drawn me a picture of her marrying that boy you’re looking after – Bobby?” Sameer said, looking at her.

“He has proposed several times,” Diana said. “Once less than she has, I believe. Steve is keeping count.”

Sameer smiled just a little. He wiped at his eyes again. “You think this is a good match?”

“He is a sweet boy,” Diana said. “They have become fast friends.”

“Nadia and Ann are still getting along?”

“Steve says they are as thick as thieves and twice as dangerous,” Diana said.

“And Sofia?” Sameer took the photo out again. He smiled at it but tears spilled over again. “She’s gotten so big.”
Sofia had still been a babe in arms when Sameer had left. She was nearing four now. “Farah calls her a hellion and blames you entirely.”

Sameer laughed, wiped his face with his sleeve. “That’s my girl.”

Sameer’s fingers skimmed over Farah’s letter as if he could touch her through the paper. He took a shaky breath. His hands closed over the envelop. He did not open it. The drawings went back into the large envelop and he folded it up, tucked it all away in his pocket. He seemed to wrestle himself under control again. He looked at Diana with something like fear, something like pity in his eyes.

“There’s something I have to show you, Diana,” Sameer said. “I don’t want to. I want to...keep it from you.”

He laughed, harshly. “But you have to know.”

Sameer’s face was so drawn it was like he had aged another ten years before her eyes. She squeezed his arm. “Why am I here, Sami? What do I have to know?”

Sameer took a breath and looked her in the eyes. “There are things they’re not telling you or Steve, you know that. But this...we found it two days ago. I didn’t understand, before I saw it. It’s called Belsen and Diana, you must understand. There are no words in any language to describe it. And it is not...”

Sameer stopped, his face almost grey in the half light. “It is not the only one. They told me they have been finding them all over and the people here – I’ve been translating – some of them came from another one. They say there were gas chambers where they sent people to be killed, ovens to get rid of the bodies. They call it Auschwitz.”

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The way home did not seem real to Diana. Everything familiar had suddenly turned alien. The village – the home Etta had found for them – was dark. She walked through it.

Nothing felt real.

How could this be real and that?

Diana had long since glimpsed the darkness of the world, of humans. She thought she had understood.

This was beyond understanding, beyond evil. Committed by people. There was no Ares fueling this, no god working from the shadows.

This had been done by men not gods, not monsters.

Men.

Diana stopped when she reached their house, their home, went through the back gate and into the garden with the rows of vegetables so carefully planted and tended. She stood there. Even the garden was too much. She could not go into the house. How could she? How could she go into this...peace they had made for themselves, in spite of all the horror in the world? Rage consumed her. She did not want to wake the children...

The children...
“Diana?”

Steve stood before her in his pajamas, leaning on his cane. He looked sleep mussed and soft. His eyes were worried, confused and always so loving when he looked at her.

As if he was not a part of this. As if they were not part of this.

They had done nothing.

“We should have chosen a side,” Diana spat at him. “I should have marched into Berlin and killed him myself. This...this warmonger you made for yourselves. I could have ended this so long ago. I should have!”


“You people, you cannot be trusted! You just want to kill each other and kill each other and, and no one is spared not the old, not the children!” Diana shouted. “How can there be so much hate in your hearts?”

“Diana, please. What happened? What happened?” He was close enough to reach out now and touch her arm.

She did not know what happened, how it happened but suddenly it was as if he was with her and he saw them as she had, as she did. The camp. The bodies. The piles of bodies, too many to bury, too many to count. The survivors who shuffled forward like skeletons, who she could not help, there was no one to fight, no one left, they had fled. They had tried to kill them all and then fled. He saw and heard and knew and felt what she did and she was glad of it, he should have to see, they should all have to see.

Steve made a sound, low in the back of his throat and just as suddenly he was gone. He staggered and fell hard onto the cobblestones.

Diana did not catch him. Horror and surprise dulled her reflexes and she let him fall.

He yelped, as he hit the ground but she heard the impact of his hip, of his head, the breath knocked out of him. He curled up instinctively at the pain – she could nearly taste his pain in the back of her throat, in her lungs and her hips – and gasped, panicked, as all the breath locked inside of him.

“Steve,” Diana said, on her knees at his side at once. She made herself be gentle as she pulled him into her lap, into her arms, and forced his body to uncurl. She needed to see what damage had been done. “Breath. Breath. Steve, beloved...”

It only took a moment for his chest to unlock, just the wind knocked out of him by the fall, that was all, and still there were tears on her face as he panted and coughed, panicked, too shallow and too loud. The gasps evened out slowly.

Steve gripped her forearm and tried to force himself to smile because that was what he did, who he was. “I'm okay, I'm okay.”

His body twitched and spasmed when she tried to straighten his leg out and he had scraped his cheek, the scars more vivid and terrible from the new rawness, the blood that dribbled down them.

“I'll be okay,” he told her, reaching up to touch her face. “I'm okay. Just...what...what was that?”
Diana took a breath. Steve never looked away from her. He felt so vulnerable in her arms. “The Nazis had...camps. Extermination camps. They sent Jewish people there to kill them. And gypsies. Poles. They sent children. They murdered children. They...”

She could not speak. Tears ran down her face. Steve ignored the pain, forced himself to sit up enough to hold her properly, to press their foreheads together. They said nothing for a very long time. There was nothing to say.

“What you - what I just - that was...?” Steve asked, haltingly.

“Yes.”

Steve exhaled slowly as if the very action caused him pain. “What can we...”

He began and then stopped, swallowed. “What’s being done?”

“Sameer had reports, I brought them. Asking for doctors. They’re still dying. They’re still dying, Steve. Sami said so many that they can’t count them,” Diana said, in a rush.

Steve made a quiet, distressed sound. Diana stroked his face, his hair. It was more for herself than him. It had turned back into a comfort, the weight of him in her arms. “He made me change, burn my clothing. So I would not bring typhus back.”

Steve exhaled. “How could we not know about this? How didn’t Intelligence find out?”

Diana went still. She could feel her face go cold.

Steve made a noise that was like laughter but was not. His voice was very quiet. “Of course. How long...how long has Sameer known?”

“Days only, when they found the camp,” Diana said. “He was telling the truth. I checked after I...saw.”

Steve was quiet for another long moment. “And British Intelligence? How long have they known?”

“He did not know,” Diana said. “He thinks...perhaps years.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Why would this war be any different?”

“There are...many camps,” Diana said. “Sami did not know how many. He could only tell me the location of a few that had already been liberated.”

Steve was quiet for a moment. “When are you going back?”

It took her a moment to answer. She had thought to go back immediately after delivering the plea for doctors who knew how to treat starvation. But her body had brought her home. She had not even realized that was where it was taking her.

Diana curled tighter around Steve as if hoarding him, just for herself, and he stroked her arm, waited for her to speak. “Tomorrow, before the children come home from school.”

She paused. “I don’t know when I will be back.”

She felt Steve nod. His fingers curled around her forearm, holding tight. “Send word when you can, okay?”
“Yes,” Diana said. She sniffled. Her face was wet again. “I don’t know what I can do but I have to go. I have to.”

Diana swallowed. There were so few things that made her feel small. This amount of death and pain, this level of hatred and indifference, it staggered her. She did not know what to do, what she could even do, in the face of it.

“You have to try,” Steve said. She looked down at him. His face was wet too. He did not try to smile for her. His eyes were resolute and very, terribly blue.

Steve patted her arm and took as deep a breath as he could. It only stuttered a little, on the exhale, and he did not start coughing. “You want to clean up?”


She got Steve’s wheelchair out and carried him to it, cleaned the blood from his face, bandaged the scrapes. She could not let him out of her sight, not now, not yet. He pulled himself closer, hand on the tub, as she cleaned herself. She knew he was in pain, the way he held himself, but he would not be moved any more than she would let him go.

They had only just left the bathroom, when Farah appeared like a ghost in her nightshirt. She looked between them and her face went grey and pale.

“Sameer?” Farah asked. Her voice did not waver but it was as if the fate of the world rested on his name.

“No, he's fine. He’s fine,” Diana said, letting go of Steve long enough to stop forward and take Farah’s hands. Farah did not look like she believed it. “He’s fine. I promise.”

“You're sure?” Farah said, looking between them. “What's wrong then? You're sure?”

“He's okay. Diana promised. He's okay,” Steve reached out and took one of Farah’s hands from Diana. He tried to smile and did not quite manage it. The fall was catching up to him.

Farah looked so relieved Diana felt it like a pain. And then she seemed to really see them. Her face creased in concern.

“What happened?” she demanded. She bent to look at Steve, her hand on his cheek as she peered into his eyes. “What have you done to yourselves?”

Farah looked up at Diana, frowning, and whatever she saw on Diana’s face made her let go of Steve. She hugged Diana, tight enough it would have made her bones creak if Diana had been human.

Diana hugged her back; for a moment, she was so taken back to Themyscira and her sisters she had to remind herself not to embrace Farah with her full strength.

When they let go, Farah reached out and wiped the tears from Diana’s cheeks. She nodded. “You’ll tell me later.”

“I have to leave, for a time,” Diana told her.

Farah nodded again. “We will be fine until you can come back.”

She looked at Steve, her hand still on Diana’s face. “You need ice and morphine and to lay down. I can tell.”
“Not until after breakfast,” Steve said. His voice was rougher than usual. “The children will be awake soon.”

Farah glanced at Diana and shook her head. “Stubborn man.”

She stepped away, went to cup Steve’s face in her hands and thought better of it, eyes cataloguing the bandages, the way Steve held himself. She squeezed his shoulder instead and pointed at Diana. “Sit. I'll make breakfast.”

Sofia was the only one young enough to be fooled by their performance at breakfast, despite Farah’s attempts to fill the pauses Steve usually would. Bobby and Yasmine were suspiciously quiet. Nadia looked near tears and shifted her seat to be closer to Ann. Ann’s brow furrowed as soon as she saw them and it never eased, even as she tried to play along. She told them, as Bobby and Yasmine helped clear the dishes without being asked, that she and Nadia could walk the children to school, they were too old to need Steve to walk them, really.

Diana did not think Ann understood why Steve’s eyes went wet at that but they let them and there was nothing ginger in the way she hugged him and Diana before they left.

Steve curled in on himself as soon as they were gone, at the end of his ability to pretend and put on a good show. Farah looked faintly alarmed, though she had seen him on bad days before. Diana got him settled in bed and Farah got the ice and the morphine tablets. Steve did not protest taking them.

There were things Diana would need to do before she left but one of them was to rest and still needed to be close to Steve. She lay down beside him and listened to his breathing as they waited for the morphine to take effect.

They lay in silence for so long that Diana thought he had fallen asleep.

Steve, when he spoke, did so very quietly.

“My grandfather was Jewish, you know,” Steve said.

Something curdled in Diana’s stomach. She lifted herself up to look at him; his pupils were pin pricks and his muscles were finally beginning to relax. “What?”

“Mmm,” Steve said. “Came from Russia, during the pogroms.”

“I wasn’t,” he cleared his throat. “I wasn't supposed to know that. We converted, you see. He married a good Protestant girl and they took my mother to church every Sunday. We weren’t supposed to talk about where grandpa came from. We were American.”

“He tried to teach me a prayer once, but I don’t,” Steve said and his eyes were very far away. “I don’t remember it. I remember something...something Y’Israel but...”

He stopped and had to close his eyes for a moment. “I don’t remember. I just remember...My mother was so angry at him for teaching me. She was...she was scared, I think. My father never knew. We both had to promise no more after that.”

Diana traced her fingers over his cheek, stroked the fine soft hair at his temple. Steve struggled to focus on her but Diana knew he had not forgotten she was there, listening, not even for a moment.

“We moved to Boston when I was eight,” Steve told her, so quietly. “I never saw him again. He died that winter. My mum just...kept crying and saying that me and her, we should have stayed behind with them. And my dad, he didn't have any family, you know, just my mom’s. They were supposed
to come live with us, that summer, once grandpa sold his store. My grandma came and we...we didn't forget him, we talked about him but never...never about that.”

“I understand, you know, why she was afraid and she...my mom loved her dad, she loved me. She was a good mom, great,” Steve said. “I love her. But I wish...I wish I remembered more.”

Diana knew Steve better than anyone in the world. She had often felt she knew his family, long gone now, from his stories of them. That they had loved each other had always been in his words, his voice, his bearing. This, she had had no inkling of, he had kept it so close and secret in his heart.

Steve frowned, shifted, as if to reach for her. She caught his hand instead and kissed his palm. She knew her face was wet with tears but she tried to smile for him.

“I’m sorry,” he began. His eyes were heavy-lidded but he tried to open them again. “I didn’t mean...”

“Do not apologize,” Diana told him. She stroked his forehead, just above his eyebrows, until his eyes slid shut. “Go to sleep.”

“Wake me before you leave,” Steve said, his voice soft and slurred.

Diana kissed his forehead. She felt him exhale slowly, felt his body relax.

“I will,” she promised as she lay down beside him and held on tight.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not Jewish and feel uncomfortable using the Holocaust in a work of fiction. At the same time, given that Gal Gadot is Jewish and Chris Pine has Jewish heritage, I don't feel comfortable glossing over it either, which is why I choose to write about their reactions to finding out about it. I can't imagine Wonder Woman not intervening if she knew about concentration camps and, though Allied Intelligence certainly knew about them, they were not general knowledge until 1945. If I have overstepped on anything in this chapter, I apologize and will be happy to amend it. I've also gone with gypsies instead of Romani because that would have been what was used at the time.

If it's not clear enough, the first camp Diana sees is Belsen-Bergen, which was liberated by British and Canadian forces in April 1945. I made Steve part Jewish because of Chris Pine's heritage.

Ann and Bobby were evacuated as part of Operation Pied Piper. Ann and Nadia are fangirling over Les Miserables. Nadia is mooning over Marius and Ann is trolling her.

I've generally stuck with the actors' ages for the characters' ages but I've de-aged Sameer by about ten years, to Steve's age, to make this chapter work. Confirmed bachelor means Steve thought Sameer appreciated women but preferred the company of men. I don't know how much I'm going to explore it but Sameer and Farah are both bi as hell and made it work for them. Also, there is an invisible * beside Chief's sons but that's for another chapter.

This chapter is 23 freaking pages long and I'm going away for a week so there might be
a delay before the next one.

Kind of nervous about this one so I would really love comments.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paris, 2014

The text arrived as Diana was getting ready to leave for to get a coffee with a colleague.

Steve: *Got a head’s up on something. Pretend I’m not there if you see me.*

Diana hardly had time to frown before Paulina was in her doorway, raising an elegant eyebrow at her. Diana closed her email and smiled at her as she picked up her purse.

She pretended not to see Steve studying a tourist map as they exited the Louvre. She actually did not see him for the rest of the day but…she had an awareness of him at the edge of her senses and she knew if she turned at the right moment, walked a few steps more, followed the thought of him up or down a flight of stairs or around a corner, she would find him.

It was odd, ignoring that, ignoring him, but she smiled and did, going about her day.

Diana stayed at work late, trying to get things wrapped up for the upcoming days off they had planned. She picked up dinner on the way home. She was setting it out when Steve entered the apartment, about twenty minutes after she had arrived.

He was wearing a scruffy baseball cap, ill-fitting jeans and grey t-shirt with a hole in one corner under a flannel shirt. His cane was metal, a folding one, instead of the wooden one he favoured. She raised her eyebrow at him.

“What are we having? I'm starving,” Steve asked, taking the hat off and running his hand through his hair.

“Thai,” Diana told him. His limp was more pronounced than usual. That was not part of the disguise. “You should have used your regular cane.”

“That’s harder to stash so I can pretend I don’t need it,” Steve said, grimacing as he walked to the table.

“Steve,” Diana said appalled. It was past eight. He had been out walking around for hours.

“I know, I know. It was stupid but, I needed to make sure,” Steve said. “Painkillers and a bath tonight and I’ll take it easy for a few days, if we decide we still want to go this weekend.”

“Put your leg up for now,” Diana told him. Steve did not argue and only winced slightly at the motion when she helped him sit and stretch his leg out onto another chair.

“Thanks,” Steve said. She started fixing them plates. “Alex called me this morning. Someone flagged and copied a recording of at the bank using a facial recognition system he’s never seen before.”

Diana looked up at him, surprised. “Who?”

“We don’t know,” Steve said. “Thought it might be some marketing thing or something but then Alex couldn’t track it. He couldn’t even find the country of origin. He got frustrated, used SIS systems.”
“He knows better than that.” She passed Steve his plate and sat next to him at their table.

“I told him as much,” Steve said. “Jenny did too.”

“Jenny’s involved?” Diana asked.

“He used SIS systems. Besides, who do you think suggested he create a program that monitors anyone looking for us? Jenny’s the paranoid one,” Steve said. “He’s just her protégé, kind of.”

“Jenny's supposed to be retired,” Diana replied.

“Yeah, well, you know spies,” Steve said. “This is good, spicier than usual.”

Diana smiled. “Do you want a glass of milk? You know it doesn't work the way you think it does.”

“It's the placebo effect then and yes, thank you,” Steve grinned at her and she kissed his temple before going to the fridge.

“As far as Alex can tell, this is the first hit they've had from CCTV,” Steve said. “And if they've got eyes on the ground, they're better than me.”

“I only saw you once,” Diana told him. He touched her waist lightly and smiled as she put his milk down beside him. She brushed his hair back from his face. “I suspect you were letting me.”

“Yes,” Steve replied. “I would prefer to do a few days of surveillance but...”

“I would prefer not to change our plans for the weekend,” Diana said. “And you will not be going anywhere if you repeat today.”

Steve nodded. “It might actually be a good idea to extend it a couple days, get out of Paris for longer. You always know where all the goddamn CCTV cameras are. A good look into one in Barcelona might not bad idea. Jenny agreed.”

“And what did Alex think?” Diana asked with a very straight face.

“Well, now. Alex thinks we should come back to England and live in a bunker for a few years. Lie low. He offered to bring us take out,” Steve said nonchalantly. There was a grin lurking at the corner of his mouth. “I told him you probably weren’t going to go for that.”

“No, I do not find myself so amenable to that,” Diana said and watched as the grin broke free. Steve dipped his head just slightly as he chuckled and his hair fell into his face again. “I am certainly more amenable to a few additional days in Spain with you.”

“Better than living in a bunker? Gee, I’m flattered,” Steve said, smirking. Diana wrinkled her nose and poked him in the side with the handle of her fork. “We should dig your big hats out of storage.”

“They are not quite the fashion now,” Diana said.

“Some would still work, they’re just better made than most of the ones you see now,” Steve said. “You already have an eerie avoidance of CCTV cameras. At least, usually. Why were you distracted about this morning anyway?”

“You will laugh,” Diana told him.

“Probably,” Steve said. She glared at him. He shrugged, unrepentant. “You tend to know when I’m going to laugh at something.”
Diana considered him. Steve looked back at her steadily. “Ellie’s kittens escaped this morning as I was leaving for work. We should get a cat.”

Steve didn’t laugh but from the way his eyes sparkled Diana could tell he wanted to badly. He rubbed his hand over his mouth to keep himself from it but could not hide or contain his dopey smile. Smitten, Etta had called it once.

Diana loved him so very much.

“We can get a cat,” Steve said. Diana laughed at him. His smile only grew. “What? We can get a cat. Maybe not Ellie’s cats because there’s no way she’s giving those up but we can get a cat.”

Diana leaned over and kissed him because she wanted to and she could. His lips were always sweet and they were sweeter when he smiled.

His smile had gone even dopier when she leaned back in her seat and continued eating dinner. “So. Big hats. Big sunglasses, I assume? Avoid thinking about kittens and looking directly into security cameras.”

“That’s the ticket,” Steve said. “And I might do a little surveillance tomorrow. Maybe again in a few days.”

Diana just looked at him. He started bargaining immediately. “Just a little. A few hours. Whoever it is might not have been able to get their shit together that fast. Just to be sure, depending on how I’m feeling.”

“Steve Trevor,” Diana said sternly. “I am not buying a plane ticket now. Either you will fly me to Spain on Friday or I will fly you there.”

“Okay, okay,” Steve said. Diana knew he had no intention of listening to her if he felt it was necessary not to. “It's probably an overreaction. There’s been no unusual search activity on your name or work. The usual overzealous students and postgrads but nothing nefarious. But, you know, we’re spies. Just don’t let them post your photo on the website.”

“None of us have photos on the website,” Diana reminded him.

“The Louvre is such a sensible place,” Steve said.

“You have never been in a full day meeting to coordinate an exhibit roll out,” Diana said.

“Nope,” Steve said cheerfully. “I am retired.”

“I’ll remind Jenny of that, shall I?” Diana said.

“And her while you're at it?” Steve smiled. “Good luck.”

Diana rolled her eyes at the ridiculous people she loved.

Steve tried to get up to help with the dishes but relented easily enough at the look she gave him. Another look kept him in the chair until she had run him a hot bath and helped him into it. He sank into it, groaning and closed his eyes.

Diana pulled up a chair beside the tub. There was room for both of them in the bathtub, they had had installed one large enough for her to get in and help him on the very bad days. But Steve was managing tonight. There was a dignity to that she refused to trample and she guarded it jealously.
from people who did not understand its necessity.

She did dip her hand in to flick water at him and make his nose scrunch up in pretend annoyance. “Maryam would be very cross with you.”

“Maryam is always cross with me. I didn't screw up her masterpiece that much, promise. I just overdid it. Scar tissue is crap but I’ll be fine,” Steve said. He stretched his leg out, trying to get the muscles to loosen, and winced. He opened his eyes and reached his arm over the side of the tub to take her hand. “I had to make sure you were safe.”

Safety could mean so many things. She doubted there was anything that could physically harm her but they had made a life here, and Steve knew how much it would hurt Diana to have that threatened.

It was no less than she would do for him.

Her hand curled around his, suddenly possessive. “Steve. What about you?”

Steve blinked and looked at her blankly. “Huh?”

“Were there any image captures of you? Any increased searches?” Diana asked, feeling more unsettled than she had all day.

“No,” Steve said, still looking mildly confused. “I can have Alex double check but they would have less to go on to start with. I still mainly exist on paper and everything I use now is forged. You’ve got a public electronic footprint. And yeah, they could theoretically go after my actual paper records. That might be...interesting for them.”

The last person who had tried to access Steve’s record had been a FBI agent with an interest in early aeronautics who had never figured out why they had been unceremonious reassigned to Toledo with restricted access after requesting the records of early Sopwith Camel pilots. That was in the early 1980s. All mentions of Steve’s service had been classified and permanently pulled promptly after. Agent Jennifer Keene, Etta’s granddaughter, kept her own records coded, on paper and private.

Dr. Maryam Davies, Steve’s long suffering doctor and Sameer’s granddaughter, was if anything more tightlipped about her favourite and most complicated patient.

Diana brought Steve’s hand to her face and kissed his palm. Steve cupped her cheek and smiled. “Besides, I’ve got you looking out for me.”

“You do,” Diana said. “Which is why you are being carried to bed tonight. Do not!” she warned before he could even get his mouth open, “make the princess joke.”

Steve groaned. “You are wrong. You’re wrong about my princess jokes. I have it on good authority...”

“Maisie is three.”

“That they’re funny,” Steve said. “And, by the way, Mark thinks they’re funny too.”

“Mark is six,” Diana said. “And he is humouring you.”

Steve put a hand over his heart in feigned shock. “That is cruel. That hurts.”

“I am in love,” Diana said very seriously, “with the most incurably ridiculous man.”
“Thank you, I do my best,” Steve said and though pain still lined his mouth and his eyes, he was smiling.

She left him sleeping the next morning, a cup of coffee, a granola bar and his bottle of painkillers by the bed. He usually got up with her but it was earlier than usual – she knew to change her routine, just in case, and she had work to do if she was going to take additional vacation days – and she wanted him to sleep if he needed it.

When her cell phone rang later that morning, she thought it might be him, calling to say thank you but he had decided to be stubborn and shadow her again.

It was not Steve though. It was an unlisted number.

Diana closed her office door and picked up the phone. There were a series of clicks and then a beep. “Hello Jenny.”

Jenny chuckled. “Good morning, Aunt Diana. How are you this morning?”

“Well enough,” Diana told her. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Heavens no,” Jenny said. “Alex is sacked out now. He had the harder job, mind, and we switched his coffee to decaf at around five. Did Uncle Steve sleep?”

“You should go to bed,” Diana told her. “And yes, he spent most of yesterday shadowing me. He was still sleeping when I left.”

“I did tell him not to,” Jenny said, hesitantly. She was clearly trying to avoid getting Steve into trouble. “Was he...as thorough as he planned to be?”

“You mean did he sneak underneath the building to skulk around? Yes,” Diana said. Steve had told her part of his route while they were laying in bed together as a comment on Louvre security but also as a possible exit route, if need be. She had been less than pleased but Diana would hardly expect less from him.

“Ah,” Jenny hesitated again. “I did try to talk him out of it.”

It made Diana smile a little. Jenny’s colleagues had started calling her Dragon Slayer two years after she joined MI6 but Diana would always remember the young woman who had sat in front of her and Steve and asked for their help, terrified because she thought what she was asking meant she would lose them as family but determined to do what she thought was right.

They were the only ones left who still called her Jenny since Etta and Ed died. It was a privilege only given to grandparents, Jenny told them once.

“No one can talk Steve out of something once he sets his mind to it,” Diana told her.

“Well, you can tell him to knock it off. Alex has solved our problems, at least temporarily,” Jenny said. “Whoever is tracking you has a lag in their program. It’s not much but our Alex believes he’s gotten it beat and based on his demonstration, I believe him. His doesn’t look for quite such exact matches. Anything close to a match and the camera has sudden technical difficulties. It’s why it runs faster.”

“I do not like CCTV but that could lead to problems,” Diana said.

“I’m well aware. This is a temporary fix, fueled by four pots of coffee and those energy drinks
Alexander thinks I didn’t see,” Jenny said. “When he’s slept for twelve hours I’ll set him on refining it.”

“Steve suggested finding a camera while we’re in Barcelona,” Diana said. “To throw them off.”

“Yes, quite right. We’ll find a way to let that go through,” Jenny said. “When Alex is back to it I’ll see if he can futz with the location too. Have you pop up in a few different places. I imagine you’ve changed your routine?”

“Yes, of course,” Diana said.

“I won’t insult you by going over the checklist. I’m sure Steve already did,” Jenny said. And then, because she could not help herself. “Just stay off Facebook and Twitter and all those other rubbish sites that could help an algorithm learn your face better. I know you already avoid them. And for god’s sake, don’t let them put your picture on the Louvre website.”

Diana turned the phone away from her ear and let her head fall back, staring at the ceilings for a moment. This was what she got for surrounding herself with spies.

“...Franny’s been banging on about a vacation,” Jenny was saying, when she put it back to her ear. “So you’ll have to send me a list of recommendations. She laughed when I suggested the El Camino. There’s nothing wrong with a walking holiday, I say, but she wants something more relaxing.”

“You were supposed to retire two years ago, Jenny,” Diana reminded her. “Franny might be more interested in walking holidays then.”

“I would be bored to tears if I really retired,” Jenny said. “If a vacation is longer than three weeks it makes me itch.”

“You must give Franny my sympathy as well as my love then,” Diana told her.

“She would hate to have me underfoot all the time,” Jenny said. “Maybe in a few years. I'm too young yet and Alex isn't ready to take over looking out for you lot anyway.”

Diana was bemused as always. Whatever her early colleagues thought of her, Jenny was the biggest mother hen Diana had ever met. “We can manage.”

“I'm well aware. That does not mean I'm not still going to do it,” Jenny said. “I keep my promises, when I can.”

“You've got a good heart, Jenny,” Diana said. “Steve and I love you very much.”

“Yes, well,” Jenny said, uncomfortable with too much emotion even coming from the large and loving family she did. Too much time clawing her way up in a field dominated by men, Diana thought. “Well. My love to you and Uncle Steve, of course. I'll call him later. Check in.”

“He will appreciate that,” Diana said. “You can scold him for me.”

Diana could practically see Jenny blinking, flummoxed. No matter how they tried to deflate it or how close they had become, Jenny maintained a little hero worship for Captain Steve Trevor of the SIS.

“I think I'll leave that to you, Aunt Diana,” Jenny said. Her voice was a little lighter – she knew she was being teased. “Take care.”

“Go to sleep, Jenny,” Diana told her and heard her laugh in response before she hung up.
Steve called just over an hour later. Diana smiled fondly. Jenny had likely called him immediately after calling her. She was surprised they had only spoken for an hour, it was hard stopping them, once they got started.

“Did you tell Jenny to scold me?” Steve asked. He sounded absolutely delighted.

“Yes,” Diana said. “She actually did?”

“She tried!” Steve laughed. “I’ve never heard her sound so awkward in her life. That was mean.”

“You both deserved it,” Diana said. “Am I going to not see you when I go for lunch today?”

“No, I’m being good,” Steve said. “My hip is sore but my mobility is fine. I did the light set of physical therapy and called Alicja to set up an appointment for tomorrow. Maryam called me an idiot but says it sounds like I’ll be fine. I’m going to make her a batch of harira before we leave, she works too hard.”

“Hm. I don’t know anyone like that,” Diana said, her eyes narrowed. “Who has eyes on me then?”

“Alex patched Franny into the Louvre’s system,” Steve said, cheerfully. “She says you’re doing a good job avoiding giving the cameras a clear view and there doesn’t seem to be anyone set up for observation so far. And that it’s not a holiday if you have to walk 20 km a day. I’m on her side.”

“I think they are looking for an excuse to bicker,” Diana said.

“Franny actually slept last night so she’s winning, I think,” Steve said. “Are you going to be late tonight?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “But we will have two more days in Barcelona.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Steve said. “And something that’ll keep for dinner. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Diana said. “Wait, Steve, how many texts am I going to get today?”

“So, so many,” Steve said, he sounded amused and quietly pleased. “The phone tree may have been prematurely activated for this one.”

“Please tell them I'm working,” Diana said. “I have actual work to do before we leave.”

“Yes,” Steve said. “I'll get them to keep it until after 7? The sisters will probably call you en masse at lunch.”

“I would expect no less,” Diana said. “Take it easy today.”

“I will,” Steve said, there was laughter lurking in his voice. “I might go see the kittens later.”

“I hate you.”

He laughed. “Have a good day, love!”

They left for Spain on Thursday. Jenny had reported no further meddling and Alex had spent three hours excitedly describing the technical details to Steve who said *uh huh* and *that's about three steps beyond me, buddy*, for most of the conversation.

They took a taxi to Beauvais-Tille and Diana waited while Steve said hello to the ground crew and did his checks. He was smiling when he came to get her and offered her his arm as they walked
across the tarmac to the Cessna 172 ready to go and waiting for them.

Diana always enjoyed watching Steve in the cockpit but it was a special joy to see his face as they first lifted off. The ground fell away from them and his face broke wide open as something giddy and free stole across it. It was always the same when he could just fly. It was something she did not quite understand, the far blue horizon that lived in Steve's heart, but it was a joy to see.

“Changed our flight plan a little. It’s a short hop so we’re going to go along the coast for a bit, just for fun,” Steve said. “It would be a shame not to take advantage of the clear skies.”

“Much better than commercial,” Diana said.

“Don't even tease me with that,” Steve said, but if anything his smile got wider.

“Did I ever tell you,” Steve began, with his eyes on the sky in front of him and his hands steady and calm at the controls, “about the time we tried to teach Sameer to fly?”

“Yes,” Diana said, grinning. “Tell me again.”

They landed near Valencia in early afternoon. Diana threw her head back and laughed when she saw the car he had rented them.

“What? Is it not red enough or not fast enough?” Steve asked, smirking.

“It’s perfect,” Diana teased and leaned over to kiss him. “But not exactly incognito.”

“We flew in on a private plane,” Steve said. “I find the nouveau riche, asshole works pretty well as a disguise myself but if you want to change cars...”

“Don't you dare,” Diana said. “Get in and buckle up.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve said.

They stayed in a little village outside of Valencia overnight and meandered up the coast to Barcelona the next day. Diana liked to drive fast but it was worth going slow to see the little towns and the people along the way. She liked to watch Steve poke through the shops for anything he thought might delight or amuse her. It was perfectly captured in her mind, the way he would look, smiling, eyes bright and eager, and yet she could not see it enough, wanted to again and again.

Steve looked up at her and the corners of his eyes crinkled, he smiled so widely, and he shook his head as if he knew what she was thinking.

“Come on,” Steve said, offering her his arm. “Let’s go get you some ice cream.”

They found a spot on the boardwalk, facing the sea. Diana had found her large hats and she settled a floppy white one with a red ribbon on Steve’s head.

“How do I look?” Steve asked, raising an eyebrow as he handed her ice cream back to her.

“Like you won't get a sunburn,” Diana said.

“I put sunscreen on this morning,” Steve complained but he didn't take it off. Diana lifted her phone. Steve smiled as she took a photo.

He took a bite of his ice cream. “Who are you sending that one to?”
“Jenny,” Diana said.

“Make sure it’s encrypted.”

“I am sure she will say the same thing,” Diana said. “Maryam will appreciate it as well.”

“She will be glad I’m wearing a hat.”

“I know,” Diana said and smiled as she stole a bite of his ice cream. He tilted his cup at her to let her get a better scoop. She wrinkled her nose. “Mine is better.”


“Do you want a bite?” Diana asked.

“Yes,” Steve said and let her feed her one from her spoon.

“See?”

“It’s good,” Steve agreed. “I still like mine better. I felt like sorbet.”

“Men are such foolish creatures,” Diana said, straight-faced.

Steve hadn’t bought it in years. “That’s why I stick with you.”

She kissed him for his answer and because his lips were sweet and tart with the taste of the lime sorbet and it was a pleasant contrast. He finished his before she did and he put his arm around her, looking pleased.

Diana watched his face. “Have you seen anyone?”

“Nope,” Steve said. He shrugged. “The whole thing might have been a fluke.”

“You do not think so, though,” Diana said.

Steve smiled. They knew each other very well. “We aren’t that lucky.”

Diana entwined their hands. Steve brought hers to his lips and kissed it. “I think we are very lucky.”

“Not with this. Not this time,” Steve said. “Call it a hunch.”

“But you are not worried,” Diana said. “Not like you could be.”

Steve shrugged. “Jenny thinks we’re not worried enough.”

“Jenny hadn’t slept for two days when she told you that,” Diana said.

“You’re not either though, worried, like you could be,” Steve observed.

“No,” Diana said. “I might be if you were but I trust you, and them, and I am capable of protecting myself.”

Steve’s smile softened at the edges. “I know you talked to Alex.”

“And you spent the day skulking around the Louvre and all our favourite places in Paris,” Diana said. “Even though it hurt you. It cost me nothing to call Alex and make sure he was giving you the same protection as me.”
“I have many worries and cares in this world and a sacred duty to it but as long as I am the target and not you, let them come. They will not like what they find if they have ill intent in their hearts,” Diana said. Steve's eyes were on her face again and she cupped his cheek in her palm, stroked her thumb along it. “But I do not care to lose you again, Steve.”

He turned his face just enough to kiss her palm. His eyes were fierce and soft at once. “You never lost me. You will never lose me. If I died tomorrow, I would still love you forever.”

“I would rather have you here with me,” Diana told him. She kissed him gently then settled back, leaning into his side. “Now explain to me why you aren't worried

“Call it a hunch,” Steve repeated. Diana flicked the brim of the hat. He laughed. “It is a hunch but I've learned to trust my intuition. We don't know what the threat is – if it is a threat – yet, which puts me on edge more than anything. But you're surprisingly good at counter intelligence for someone who dislikes lying as much as you do. And we've got good people on our side. I think, together, we're good enough to ward off the attention for long enough to make a plan for how to deal with whatever they try next, if they try anything next. And we've built a good life, for ourselves, I know we both value that too much to let anyone ruin it.”

“Plus, it's a nice day. I've got – or had – my sorbet, I'm with you, and I know you're going to drive so insanely fast in about half an hour that we might as well be flying,” Steve smirked. “If I was going to worry about anything right now...”

Diana stuck her tongue out at him. Steve laughed and kissed her.

She did drive too fast, Steve relaxed in the front seat beside her. It was hardly the fastest that they had gone together and it meant they checked in to their hotel on the Barcelona waterfront with plenty of time to change before dinner.

Diana’s dress was black with red and blue colour blocking and a plunging back. She wore simple, dangling, gold earrings that Farah had given her, years ago. It was a fun dress, she thought and it made Steve’s eyes widen slightly when she wore it.

Then again, Steve looked at her like that in all manner of outfits, from the most mundane to the most dramatic. He just looked at her like that sometimes, like there was nothing else in the world but her.

“We could cancel,” Steve said, his eyes never leaving her face. “Stay in. Order room service. They’ll be, you know, a wait wherever we go.”

“We are all dressed up,” Diana said. She appreciated the way he looked in his suit.

Steve shrugged, “Yeah but...”

He hit a button on the remote control on the table and music started to play. Diana laughed at him and he smiled, offered her his hand, where he was standing in front of the balcony.

“We have a great view here,” Steve said and his eyes were light.

Diana smiled as she took his hand. They stepped outside, onto the balcony. The moon was still climbing into the sky, full, and spilling reflected light onto the water below them so it shimmered and danced.

Steve’s smile was soft. He put his hand on her waist and they began to sway, slowly, their faces close.
“You planned this,” Diana said.

Steve tilted his head back and forth, conceding the point. “I did but for after dinner. You just...”

He didn't finish but he touched her face, just for a moment. His eyes were bright and sure. She kissed him and kissed him, foreheads pressed together as they swayed because they could never be close enough.

They ate room service in bed, much later. Her dress was crumpled on the floor – she had not managed to take it off, only managed to stumble to the armchair just inside the open balcony doors before Steve was on his knees, pushing the skirt up and peeling her underwear away to taste her – his suit was strewn across the bedroom from when she had stripped him of it and thrown it aside to return the favour until he had pleaded with her to stop so he could be inside her and she had happily obliged.

She had put on one of the hotel robes when the room service arrived but thrown it over a chair when she got back into bed, sitting cross legged and eating paella while they argued over whether eating the last canelon entitled the other person to more crème Catalan as if Steve wasn’t going to take two bites, lean back against the pillows arranged behind him and cede the rest to Diana.

Which he did, because he was a good man and a smart one and because she had told him to just order two from the start.

And because he knew she would feed him the last bite and chase the taste on his lips.

That look was still in his eyes when she was wearing nothing at all and his eyes never strayed from her face.

Diana removed the empty dishes from the bed with exceeding haste. Steve laughed at her until she swallowed the sound with her mouth, replaced it with moans. Tomorrow they would go to her favourite museum and his favourite market, they would actually make it out for dinner, the next day they would get caught in the rain at Sagrada Familia and sit in a pew to wait it out, watching the way the colours changed as the light did, the next they would spend in the old town, poking through the shops and finding a cafe where they could while away the early afternoon and the morning they left Diana looked straight into a CCTV camera – wearing a ridiculous floppy hat that Steve would triumphantly fling off their balcony in Valencia that night –and smile.

Tonight, though, she would love him with the windows open and the moonlight on the water and think of nothing else.

It worked for just over a year. Alex tinkered with his program. Whoever was tracking her spent a year collecting partial matches, and the occasion split second full match, all over the world, mostly in Asia, Hong Kong specifically, though sporadically elsewhere, even in Paris.

And then, when Diana was stepping out of a cab, running late to meet Steve for dinner, she spotted the photographer.

He was dressed professionally but unassumingly, like he might be on an assignment for a magazine. It would have been easy to miss him. But Diana could tell his eyes were on her, tracking her, before he even lifted his camera and took a photo of her looking straight back at him.

Diana could see the back of Steve’s head. He already had a table for them. He was waiting for her. She turned away. There was a bank in front of her with two entrances she could use but there were too many cameras. She would not tip them off to Alex’s program if they did not already know about
A block over, there was an alley. She turned and walked by the bank, ducking her head and a walking a pace faster than she would have liked, perhaps tipping him off, because in a moment Steve’s head would turn and he would see her and smile and she would not give him away. She would not allow it.

She could feel the man following her, just far enough behind that he should have avoided suspicion, just far enough behind that she could lose him. She turned down the alley. There was one camera, behind a pharmacy. Two more were mounted further down but they were fakes. She walked out of view of the first. There was a door, into the back of another restaurant, which she assumed the man following her would go through when he arrived.

She did not. Instead, she looked up and leapt.

She crouched on the roof, out of sight, and marshalled her forces.

To Jenny and Alex.

Followed. Sending coordinates. Camera behind pharmacy.

To Steve.

Stopping for a bottle of wine. Be there in 15!

She could almost see the blankness that would come over his face, then the fake, easy smile, the way he would sit there for an exact beat of 12 minutes before apologizing to the waitress and leaving. It was a code they had set up before cell phones existed. They had never had to use it before.

Her phone buzzed, Steve: ok. See you soon!

It buzzed again, Jenny: Got him.

Diana waited. There were footsteps below, a pause. The door back door to the restaurant opened. Closed. She checked the alley below her. Empty.

She travelled over rooftops for a mile before exiting from an apartment building in Montparnasse and doubled back to a non-descript and slightly dingy hotel in Pigalle. Half way there she got another text from Steve: Remember I’ve got a meeting tomorrow at 6:15.

There was no one following her, she was sure, when she entered the hotel through the front entrance, walking as if she belonged there and headed for the stairs, up six camera-less flights to room 615.

Steve opened the door before she had finished her first knock, eyes wide and worried. She stepped in quickly, the door closing fast behind her, even as Steve touched her face, eyes searching, reassuring himself that she was safe. She gripped his arms, doing the same. They rested their foreheads together and held on for a long moment.

“You gave him the slip,” Steve told her. “They’re tracking him. He’s still wandering around St. Germaine. He hasn’t gone anywhere near our place.”

“He didn't see you,” Diana said because she needed to know for sure.

Steve shook his head. “No. Promise. He didn’t know to look.”

She kissed him, briefly. They pulled apart sooner than she would have liked. Steve took her hand in
his. “Jenny’s on the phone. I might have, ah, dropped it when you knocked.”

He pulled her in the direction of the bed. She could hear the tinny voice coming from it even before Steve hit speaker.

“...I will deploy the SAS if I have to, see if I don’t,” Jenny said. There was a sudden pause. “You’ve put me on speaker. I can tell. Aunt Diana?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “You got him?”

“We do,” Jenny said. “He’s not...quite a spy. He's a tabloid photographer who appears to moonlight. He's spent the last four months in Hong Kong, in the areas Alex targeted for the partial matches of you. He spent several weeks in Patras, Greece before that. That's where Alex last placed a partial match.”

“And now the place where they first found me,” Diana said. “Shit.”

“Quite. It was a bit of dumb luck, unfortunately, you were about five blocks from the bank where they got their first image” Jenny said. “There is a silver lining, however. This particular individual has, ah, several warrants out for him in France. Likes to trespass when getting his celebrity shots, it seems. Alex got into his email. ANSSI has had access for some time. He's taking side jobs while pursuing you. He’s taken a contract to get photos of Charles and Camilla in a rather private location a week from now. We should be able to get him arrested and deported back to the States.”

“In the meantime, Alex is going to have a full match of you in de Gaulle two days from now and a partial in Denver at about the time that flight would get in,” Jenny said. “Just like we planned.”

“Alex’s program is still working?” Steve asked.

“As far as we can tell,” Jenny said. “I was going to come to Paris if things escalated. We should talk about next steps in person. All things considered, it might be best for you to come here, to the cottage.”

“I told you a bunker was the way to go!” Alex said in the background.

“Friday evening?” Steve said, looking at Diana. She nodded.

“Yes. If you can avoid an identification check, that would be best,” Jenny said.

“Wait, Friday?” Alex said. “How about right now?”

“No, too many coincidences,” Steve said immediately.

“They are not likely to be watching that closely but if a curator at the Louvre takes emergency leave at the same time as their photographer gets my picture, it could tip them off,” Diana explained. “We will come Friday, after work.”

“We’ll get you up to snuff on field work eventually, Alex, dear,” Jenny said, a little bit of disdain in her voice.

Diana ignored it. “You will track him in the meantime?”

“Franny and I are on it,” Alex said, sounding much too cheerful for what amounted to staring at screens in a dark room for long periods of time. “His hotel is in the Latin Quarter. We've got a great view of all the exits.”
“We’ll stay here for now,” Steve said. “I brought essentials and it looks like it’s safe for me to go home.” Diana looked at him. She was not sure if she liked that plan. Steve looked back. “Or we can ask Maryam.”

“Do we have any idea who this is yet?” Diana asked.

“No,” Jenny said as Alex said: “I’m working on it.”

Diana could picture them glaring at each other. Steve huffed a little and almost smiled at her. She squeezed his hand.

“Let us know what you find,” Steve said.

“Keep me appraised of his movements. Make sure to tell me immediately if you lose him,” Diana said. She knew Jenny knew her craft but this had become a home for her. She was loathe to give it up.

“Use the catacombs if you have to,” Jenny suggested. “If Steve didn’t map out routes down there, I’ll eat my hat.”

Steve shrugged, unapologetic. “It’s a useful thing to know.”

“It is,” Jenny allowed. She paused. “Maryam would be very cross with you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Diana carried me for most of the exploration part. I just spent a lot of time with old maps and blueprints. I am not actually that reckless.”

They were all silent for a moment. Diana laughed first. She kissed the corner of Steve’s mouth when he looked at her, betrayed.

“Jenny,” Steve appealed. “Back me up here.”

“I’ve read your file, Uncle Steve,” Jenny said. “I’m going to abstain from commenting.”

“You fly a Cessna. A little four seater nothing plane for fun,” Alex said, unprompted. “And you like it. You're crazy.”

“I’m a pilot.”

“Pilots are crazy!”

“Alex,” Jenny said. “You realize I am going to make you get flight certified at some point.”

“Yeah, but I won't enjoy it!”

Steve covered his mouth to keep from laughing. Diana rested her forehead against his shoulder for a minute and smiled, beginning to feel relieved.

She kissed his shoulder and lifted her head. “You will keep us informed?”

“Of course,” Jenny said. “I'm going to set Alex digging again. See if we can't ferret out the employer. We'll call when we find something. You two, you stay safe.”

“Love you Aunt Di, Uncle Steve!” Alex called.

“Love you guys too,” Steve said and hung up the phone and tossed it onto the other bed.
Diana turned into the circle of his arms, her own tight around his waist and they held on to each other. He kissed her forehead, her cheek and her lips. She revelled in the feeling of his closeness.

“Well,” Steve said, after a time. “That was terrible. Let’s never do it again.”

“It seems to have worked,” Diana said. She ran her thumb along the line of his jaw and kissed him softly. “But I agree. You brought my work clothing?”

“Hung up in the closet already,” Steve told her. His eyes had not left her face. “I was pretty sure we wouldn’t have to run, after I talked to Jenny, but I grabbed everything necessary just in case. If they haven’t gone anywhere near the apartment by Friday, I’ll drop it back there.”

Diana could not help but tense. Steve frowned. He ran his hand down her arm. “Or with Maryam. What’s scaring you, Diana?”

“He was steps from you,” Diana said. “I know there are things we both have to now but I do not want to let you out of my sight and they will be actively looking for our home.”

“Yeah, I can’t say that text didn’t terrify me,” Steve said. He dropped his head against her shoulder for a minute, raised it again to look at her. “And I had Jenny on the phone giving me a play by play as soon as I left the immediate area. You’re practically invincible but still...I love you, I worry.”

Diana kissed him. “And you can take care of yourself but I love you and I want to protect you.”

Steve smiled. “You can stash me in a closet at the Louvre when I’m not...taking care of things, if you want.”

“It would be wise for you to stay away from the Louvre, right now. From me,” Diana said. “But I do not want you to.”

“It would be wise for us to leave Paris altogether,” Steve said, his mouth set. “To disappear. If we wanted to be completely safe, we would find a boat and sail for Themyscira.”

“I could not live like that,” Diana said.

“Me either,” Steve said and the left side of his mouth quirked up.

“So you will assist Jenny and Alex on the ground,” Diana said. “I will go to work and keep up appearances there. And we will be as safe as we can, without sacrificing the life we have made here.”

“And hopefully, in a few weeks, we’ll be able to go back to normal,” Steve said. “When I’ve got nothing to do, I’ll come by the Louvre so you can keep an eye on me.”

Diana snorted. Steve smiled. “Alex can erase me from the cameras and all the security guards know me. They already let me in the side entrances so I don’t have to walk as far. We’ll be fine.”

Diana held his face in her hands and kissed him, slowly, sitting on the end of the dingy hotel bed. “I love you.”

Steve kissed her back. “I love you too.”

It was Tuesday night. Friday came too slowly. It was easy to avoid the photographer with Alex and Franny keeping her updated on his location. He came to the Louvre once, on the Thursday afternoon, loitering near the entrance, with a sandwich and a book, camera at his side, pointed at the
crowds. She texted Steve to stay away and did not leave her office until he was gone.

Steve, she knew, broke into his hotel room and cloned his hard drive for Alex, among other things she tried not to think about while they were happening.

It was a relief to stand on the sandy bluff at Cap Gris Nez as it grew dark.

“Awful day,” Steve said, looking out over the Channel. It was drizzling rain and the waves were high from the wind. He looked at her and smiled. “Too bad it’s you not me this time.”

“We will stay low,” Diana said, looking at him and frowning. “It’s colder than I would like.”

Steve shrugged, fiddling with the backpack before handing it to her to put on. “I’ll be fine.”

“We will be fast, at least,” Diana said.

“Was that a comment on my piloting skills?” Steve asked, grinning.

She smiled back at him. “Are you saying I am slower than a Cessna?”

“Yeah, okay. That’s fair,” Steve said. He zipped his rain jacket up. “Ready when you are.”

Diana picked him up and secured him easily. She had carried him like this many times. When it was warmer, he liked to face the ground below, pilot that he was, but in the cold and wind, he tucked his face against her neck. It was reassuring to feel his breath against her skin, since she would not be able to hear him over the wind, and she would feel it if he began to cough.

They landed in South Foreland, just down from the lighthouse. Steve staggered, a little, when she set him down, coughing.

She held him up. “Steve?”

“Just...the cold air...” Steve managed, closing his eyes and relying on her. He put his hand over the arms that held him up and squeezed. He coughed again. “Give me a minute...I’ll be okay...”

There were headlights coming toward them. Diana recognized Jenny’s car. She shifted, just enough so she could spare a hand to wave them to right place.

Jenny banged out of driver's seat and ran over, towels in hand. The car headlights made her white hair glow. “Maryam called me. We have an oxygen in the car.”

Steve opened his eyes and raised an eyebrow at her. “That's overkill.”

“We have it anyway,” Jenny said, her chin lifting in the way that meant she was going to be very stubborn. “May as well use it.”

Steve looked exasperated. “Oh for Christ’s sake...I'll be fine.”

Jenny raised an eyebrow at him back at him. He sighed and looked extremely annoyed when it caught and turned into a cough. He would be fine. His breathing was still wheezy and he was sporadically coughing but his colour was already improving and Diana knew what he sounded like when he was truly struggling.

But they both knew that he would be fine faster with oxygen. It was why he was grousing at Jenny instead of looking to Diana for back up as they walked to the car. Diana kept her arm firmly around Steve’s waist.
Franny jumped out of the driver’s seat and opened the back door for them, the very face of good cheer.

“Hello lovelies,” she said, kissing Diana on the cheek and hugging Steve before handing him the nasal cannula with an eye roll and a grin. He took it slightly less grudgingly because no one was trying to put it on for him or take control of the tank.

“Alex is still at the cottage,” Franny told him. “We left him tracking your little pest. Last I heard, he had settled in for the night and Alex wants us to stop at McDonald’s on the way back.”

Jenny and Steve gave her the exact same look, annoyed, fond and resolutely not going to stop at McDonald’s. Franny burst in giggles. Their scowls matched too.

Diana smiled, a little bittersweet. Half of the expressions Jenny seemed to have inherited from Steve really came from Etta. They had been so close during their war parts of them began to mirror each other. Ed used to tease them about it until he realized, after fifty years of marriage to Etta, he had begun to do the same thing.

“You two,” Franny said. “God save us analysts from the oh-so-serious master spies.”

“I have been retired since before you were born,” Steve reminded her.

“Why couldn’t be that the thing to rub off on you?” Franny asked, looking at her wife.

Jenny sighed. “Yes, that seems to have taken so well, doesn’t it? I didn’t just leap across the English Channel.”

“Darling, we all know you’d choose invisibility over flight as your superpower,” Franny said.

Steve snorted in the back seat and nearly dislodged the oxygen. Jenny scowled. Franny just grinned, started the car and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

Franny drove as fast as Diana did; Jenny was considerably less relaxed about it then Steve. It did not take them long to reach the cottage.

The cottage was just that, though larger than most: a summer home that had been in Franny’s family for generations. It also happened to be remote and situated on enough land to be a decent place to meet when they wanted it to be particularly private.

They barely gotten inside before both Diana and Steve were hit with a massive bear hug.

Diana could not help but grin, looking: “Hello Alex.”


“You’ve been saying that to me since I was 15,” Alex complained but he smiled at Steve when he let them go.

“That’s when you grew taller than him,” Diana told Alex. Alex’s grin widened; Steve huffed a little but smiled.

“Alex, dear, aren’t you supposed to be watching our friend?” Jenny said.

“I think he’s in for the night. I’ve got an alert set for my phone if there’s motion outside his hotel room door. That’s been fun. This might be a swingers’ hotel, by the way, I swear I’ve seen couples swap in the hallway,” Alex clapped Steve on the back, observant enough to be gentle about it even
though Steve had left the oxygen tank in the car and his colour and breathing were almost back to normal. “Thanks for the plant in the hallway, it’s way easier than watching the door cameras.”

“My eyes were beginning to bleed,” Franny agreed. “One can only take so much grainy footage before you go mad.”

“I don’t mind it,” Alex shrugged. “But it has given me more time to do more digging.”

“We have some answers,” Jenny said and her smile was sharp and pointed as she handed Steve the spare cane they kept for visits like these.

“I’ll make tea and check on our little pest,” Franny said. She held up a hand to stall Alex’s protests. “I know. I know you have an alert. I’m of the old school.”

“We’ll be in family room,” Jenny said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. “Alex, do you need one of your computers?”

“Right, sorry, yes,” Alex said, looping after Franny. His footsteps thudded heavily on the floor as he went upstairs.

“I’m never going to make a proper field agent out of him,” Jenny said, watching him go. “But he’s a damn good analyst.”

“He’s been 6’ 7” since he was 17 and grew so fast he never got comfortable with it,” Steve said. They had this conversation many times. “He was never going to be a field agent. You’ve taught him what he needs to know to be his best. That’s all you can do.”

“He is well-suited for what he does,” Diana agreed. “And you have made sure he can protect himself.”

“Well, I’m not quite finished yet,” Jenny said, as they walked down the hallway into the family room.

It was a cozy, cheery little room. The couches were on the older side and well loved. Toys were spilling from baskets on the bookshelves – Franny’s children from her first marriage spent part of the summer with them – and there was an abandoned mug of tea sitting stone cold on the coffee table. Among the generations of pictures of Franny’s family hung on the wall was a photo of Franny and Jenny at a Christmas party when they were young, before they had fallen in love, well before they had imagined they would be married, one day, and not fired or shunned who they loved. Jenny’s hair was red and curly like her mother’s and grandmother’s and tied back neatly. She was wearing a sharp, precise, dark green suit and did not smile. There were already frown lines carved into her forehead. Franny’s hair was blonde and bobbed, she was wearing a bright red skirt and cream blouse and cardigan and she was beaming at the camera.

“I’m guessing you have good news,” Steve said. They settled on the couch. Jenny took the love seat.

“We’ve found the source,” Jenny told them. “It’s something and I’ll, ah.”

All three of them looked up, Jenny shaking her head, as Alex thumped back down the stairs and joined them, grinning.

“I’ll let Alex explain,” Jenny said. “It was an impressive piece of work.”

“It wasn't that by a deal, not really,” Alex said. “Not really. There were multiple payments made through a few shell companies but someone got sloppy, and I managed to trace one back to a possible source and then verified it through some other, sketchy payments on related surveillance.
And then when I had that to work from, I could deconstruct some of the source coding and compare it to coding from other projects and, yes, anyway, I tracked it back to a company in the States called Lexcorp. And they've thrown a significant amount of money into finding you.”

“Seriously?” Steve said, looking disbelieving and appalled. “Lex Luthor is a prick.”

Jenny blinked. Steve was not usually so blunt about other people.

Alex laughed. “He seems a little weird, yeah.”

“Have you met him?” Jenny asked, intent.

“No,” Diana said. “Publically, he has engaged in art acquisitions that would be considered rude in my circles. Privately, he has attempted acquisitions of stolen art and artifacts. I believe Steve had a hand in preventing a few.”

Jenny gave Steve a worried look. He shook his head. “My involvement is anonymous for the other reason. Even the people I work with don't know who I am. And I'm neither the first nor last link in the chain for him to go after. I'm essentially a nobody.”

“Neither of us have met him,” Diana said. “But we have heard stories.”

“If we can keep it that way, let's, shall we?” Jenny said, faintly relieved. She looked at Diana. “Do your colleagues know about Steve's...work?”

“They believe Steve does freelance research,” Diana said. “We've allowed them to believe it's because of his disability and that I support him. How convinced they are of that is...questionable but they are unlikely to guess either of us have any involvement in disrupting smugglers or returning stolen art.”

“Good,” Jenny said. “Well, if that was the reason Lexcorp was tracking you, I imagine we would have seen more activity around your name, not just the image searches.”

“I am very careful to keep my name and image from becoming associated online,” Diana said.

“Alex would have scrubbed anything he found,” Jenny said. “You have kept an exceptionally low profile digitally.”

“What are they working from then?” Steve asked. “Do we have any idea why they're looking for Diana?”

“It's not explicit but reading between the lines, they're looking for her for exactly the reason you would expect,” Jenny said, shifting a little uncomfortably.

Steve’s fingers laced with Diana’s. “But how? How did they know to look for her in the first place?”

“They have some kind of photograph,” Alex said. “We don't have the image – the photog is working off the CCTV footage – but there’s some back and forth about it in his emails. I actually just found out there was writing on the back from a forward that probably shouldn't have been forwarded in full to this guy, you know?”

“What?” Jenny said sharply.

“Yeah, I kept working while you were picking them up,” Alex said. “It's in my notes, hold on, it was...Wonder Vrouw. Veld, 1918.”
“What?” Jenny repeated, shocked, then angry. She had read Steve’s files until she had them memorized. “What?”

Diana felt like she could not breath for a moment, like her chest was being crushed by tank treads. Her hand tightened around Steve’s, he squeezed back, painfully hard. She looked at him. He was looking back at her. His face had gone pale.

“I’m missing something...” Alex said quietly.

Diana took a breath. “We liberated Veld from German occupation during WWI. It was my first battle here.”

“And then Ludendorff and Maru gassed it into oblivion,” Steve said. His face was very controlled. “It was a test run for a new type of mustard gas. No one survived.”

“Okay,” Alex said, looking a little grey. “And the photograph?”

“There was a photographer,” Diana said. “He took our picture after the battle. They all died, though. All of them. I saw it.”

Steve was shaking his head. “We never went back there after the battle at the airfield. We never went to see it after they turned it into a memorial. We don’t know what or who could have been taken from it. Hell, are we even sure the photographer was still there the next day? We didn’t get his name.”

“I did not...take an inventory of the bodies,” Diana said. She could feel the rage and sorrow in her voice. She knew what he was saying made sense and yet...and yet...

Steve put his other hand on top of both of theirs, drifting his fingers lightly over her clenched knuckles. When she looked at him, his eyes were full of remembered sorrow.

“They have all of us then. Diana, me, Charlie, Sameer, Napi,” Steve said. “Everyone but Etta.”

“They don't have names,” Alex said quickly. “I haven't found any references to names. Our search tracker shows no indication either.”

“What about paper records?” Steve asked.

“What paper records?” Jenny asked. “We pulled everything we have from the moment you stepped on British soil on. There may be records of you in America but they would end in 1914. Anything after the late 1970s are falsified documents anyway. Diana never had records, all of them are forged and Alex updates them as needed.”

“The monitoring you do on our names and images, can you check Sameer and Charlie’s?” Diana asked.

“Not your other friend,” Jenny asked, a wary curiosity her voice.

“He does not wear that face anymore, except for us,” Diana said. “We warned him, when this began. We will warn him again.”

“Have pity on the person who tries to find Napi when he doesn't want to be found,” Steve said. “Because he won't. And neither will we.”

“Right,” Jenny said, understanding it was also a warning for them.
“I can check for name searches but not image searches,” Alex said. “I can have it done by tomorrow.”

“Why not facial recognition as well?” Diana asked.

“There’s nothing to find,” Alex said. “I can’t tell if someone is searching for you. I can only tell after the image has been singled out and collected. I need that starting point.”

“But Steve isn’t as good as avoiding CCTV cameras as you are, I had to go back and scrub some images of him after they got the first capture of you. And no one collected those. Unless they’re outsmarting my program, for his image but not yours, no one is searching for him. There haven’t been any hits on him. We’re still seeing it when they get the planted images of you so that’s a good sign they don’t know what we’re doing,” Alex explained.

“You were wearing your armour that day,” Steve said, quietly. His face was...sad, almost regretful. Veld was not...it was difficult, still. “We thought we had won. That we could, hell, that we could put an end to war, before...” he swallowed. “You would have stood out, amongst the rest of us. Your outfit wasn’t from that time and besides...”

Steve shrugged. For a moment, he only looked at her. “You were a beacon, that day. You would be the person anyone searched for.”

Diana touched his face, brief and soft. Even when Steve had not believed her, even when she had been wrong, he had believed in her.

Diana looked at the descendants of their dearest friends, their family. Jenny looked slightly abashed. Alex looked a little intimidated. Both of them meet her gaze without hesitation.

Diana felt resolute. There was only one outcome acceptable, whatever path they took to it.

“Lexcorp is in Metropolis, if I remember correctly,” Diana said. “I am sure I can arrange for work to send me there.”

Jenny was immediately wary. “Why? What are you planning?”

“That photograph is ours, our family, our history,” Diana said, her jaw set. “And I am going to get it back.”

Chapter End Notes

Edited to add: I just rewatched the WW scene in BvS and realized I somehow flipped which image Luthor collected first in my head and got this TOTALLY WRONG. The photo is first and then the recording at the bank. I might go back and try to rewrite this so it makes sense at some point but right now I'm hip deep in the next chapter and honestly kind of committed to this version of events now? Sorry! I've tried to stay within the bounds of canon but I fucked up on this one! Hope it's still enjoyable.

So this is way longer than I thought it would be? I was just watching the BvS scenes with Diana again and noticed that there aren't actually many images of her in his files and that the two we see, she's looking right into the camera like she knows it's there.
I also just really like the idea of them having back up because Etta and Sameer and Charlie's families adopted them as their own and doing that kept all of them tied together as well.

Keep an asterisk beside Napi's name. We'll get there eventually. I am going with the fanon/maybe canon theory that he's the actual Blackfoot god. I've done a little research and I'm trying to do more before we get to those chapter(s). But it's my understanding that one of the things he can do is shape shift. Please correct me if I'm wrong.

In case it's confusing: Jenny is Etta's granddaughter, Maryam (who will actually be in the next future chapter) is Sameer's granddaughter, Alex is Charlie's great-grandson. Franny married into the family.

Everything I know about spying is pre-cold war and definitely doesn't cover modern day. My tech knowledge is limited to being able to use most gadgets without a lot of instructions/a little bit of coding so allllll of that stuff is made up bullshit.

Steve would have had oxygen flying the cessna as well, it's pretty common for pilots but that part was clunky so I cut it. High altitude and cold aren't good for compromised lungs/airways.

I have tried to guess how many chapters are left but who knows - the next chapter may take longer than usual because I'm travelling again. Also! I'm very glad to get this done for Wondertrev week even though it only kind of matches the prompt. No song lyrics but yay dancing?
Chapter 8

England - 1945

The house was dark when Diana arrived. It felt strange, so familiar and at the same time like she had not been there in years, instead of just over two months. It was the longest she had been a part from Steve since they had first met.

A part of her expected Steve to be waiting for her in the back garden. He had, sometimes, when the weather was warm, like it was tonight.

Another part of her, small but screaming, expected the house to be empty when she walked inside, for everything to have turned to ash. For them all to be gone.

There was no one in the garden, just the raised garden beds and the neat rows of vegetables Steve and the children laboured over. Someone had left a book on the bench outside. It must have rained earlier; the pages were wet and warped.

She let herself in the backdoor quietly. The house was silent, the kitchen immaculately clean, though Farah never left it any other way. Still, it felt...like a void, distant, alien. Everything did.

“Diana?”

Diana’s breath caught. She held it as she turned.

Steve stood in the doorway before her in a long night shirt. He held a candle in his hand, casting his face into terrible shadows.

For another moment, Diana could not breath, did not believe her own eyes. Steve took a step forward, face creasing in concern and it was like a spell breaking. He barely had time to put the candle holder on the table before she was holding him, so tightly, so close, that she lifted him off the ground.

“Steve,” she breathed.

“You're home,” Steve said. He laughed wetly. His grip on her tightened and he buried his face in her hair, kissing her neck. “You're here. I thought it might be a dream.”

“I'm here,” Diana said. She was trying to convince herself as well. “I'm here.”

“I missed you,” Steve said, simply. Diana did not know why that hurt so much, her grip on him tightening until she knew she must be pressing bruises into his skin but could not seem to stop.

She did not speak. She couldn't.

She did not know how long they stood there.

Steve stroked her hair back from her face, kissed her cheek. If he cared that she was still holding him so his feet did not touch the ground, he didn't not show it.

“Come on,” Steve said, smiling. “I bet you want a bath.”
It was their routine. It always had been, when Diana came home after nights or days away during the Blitz, too often covered in ash or rubble.

It was routine but not. There was no routine for this. Diana smelled like the dead. She knew it. She had for months. She had become shockingly used to it.

It was suddenly a surprise that Steve would stay so willingly long in her arms.

She put Steve down abruptly. He wobbled, just a little, nothing, his balance off for less than a moment as it often was but panic shot through Diana and she grabbed him to steady him.

Something flickering in Steve's eyes for just a moment before he looked straight at her, impossibly, immovably kind.

“Hey,” Steve said. His hands covered hers, ran over her arms until he was cupping her face in his hands. “Diana, look at me. I'm okay. I promise, I'm okay. I promise. And a promise can't be broken, remember?”

“That is not true,” Diana said, choking on it.

“It is when it's me,” Steve said. His fingers caressed her cheek. “Do you believe me?”

She did. She wanted to. And yet...and yet...

She couldn’t answer him. She did but she couldn’t. She couldn’t. She wanted to.

“It’s okay,” Steve said. His hands still framed her face like it was something infinitely precious. His smile had gone sad but the kindness remained steadfast in his eyes. “It’s okay, you don’t have to.”

His hands fell away from her face, took her hands instead. His eyes had never left hers and something there made him raise them to his lips and kiss them, swiftly. It was all Diana could do not to break; all she could do not to pull away.

Steve did not linger, though. It was the only reason she could stand it. He kept hold of her hands instead, stepped back, only centimeters, but enough for them to move. “Come on. Washing up will make you feel better. And you can see for yourself that I'm fine.”

Diana followed him into their washroom. He never stopped touching her, not for a moment, not even when it meant he had to bend awkwardly and she knew it had to make his hip twinge with pain.

He said nothing, only helped her with her clothing, then her armour underneath, and let her strip him in turn. He said nothing while she inspected him. He was the same, whole and perfect, no matter the terrible scars from where the fire and gas burned his body or the way he stood to keep weight off his right hip and leg. If anything, he gained a little weight, and lost the edge of thinness Diana had spent half the war worrying about.

“Ed got his hands on some chickens,” Steve told her, following her gaze. “He keeps bringing us eggs. I don't know what Etta’s going to say about the coop in her backyard.”

Diana almost smiled. Steve touched her cheek as if to encourage it. She took his hand instead. “I want to wash.”

She pulled him with her, closer and closer until he climbed in the bathtub with her and wrapped his arms around her from behind. It was easier, then, to wash the grime and ash from her hair and her skin. Steve emptied the bathtub when the water got too dirty, filled it again, until the water went cold.
“We should get out,” Diana said, eventually. She did feel better, but it wasn’t enough. She wanted to close her eyes and open them and feel like she had every other time she had come home. She wanted it to be the same. To feel the same.

“I can fill up the kettle,” Steve offered as if he had not started to shiver, as if it was not going to pain him to stand.

Diana knew Steve would sit with her all night, if she wanted him to.

“No,” Diana said, though she did not move, not yet. “We should get out.”

Steve waited for a few more long moments, then sighed, resting his forehead on the back of her shoulder. His arms were around her waist, steadying.

“I’d carry you to bed if I could,” he said. “But I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m going to pull the plug now, okay?”

Diana took a breath and stirred herself. “Yes.”

She had to help him out of the tub, the cold always made his hip stiff. Steve said nothing, though, only gathered up their clothing and leaned more heavily on her, his limp more pronounced than usual.

“It will be hours before anyone is up,” Steve said. “Do you want to lay down? Or something to eat? Or I can make us some tea.”

“No, I want to lay down with you,” Diana said. “I just want...”

She touched his face, looked into his eyes. She did not know how to express it.

Steve understood anyway. He took hold of her hand and kept it. “Okay.”

For once, Steve did not display his usual fastidiousness or reverence for her armour. He dropped it on the floor in a heap, nudged it under the bed with his foot. She did not care, was glad of it, even, because it meant she never had to let go of him. She curled into him, pressed her head against his chest. She could hear his heart beating. He wrapped his arms around her and kept her close.

They lay there for a long time and did not sleep.

“If you want to talk about it?” Steve asked eventually.

Diana’s grip on him tightened. She concentrated on the way his chest rose and fell with each breath. “No.”

“Okay,” Steve said. There was silence for a moment. “Yasmine and Bobby and I, we’ve been reading this book. Want me to catch you up?”

The suggestion made Diana want to cry. “Yes.”

Steve shifted just enough turn their bedside lamp back on and grab the book from the bedside table. He cleared his throat. Diana closed her eyes and listened to the shuffle of the paper against his fingertips.

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of
worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort..."

Diana jerked awake, disoriented, unsure of why she had woken up or where she was.

“You’re home, it’s okay,” Steve said and Diana would know his voice anywhere from the first syllable he spoke. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Steve was sitting on the edge of their bed, the sheets still tangled around him. It must have been his movement away from her that woke her. They sky was starting to lighten through their bedroom window but it was dark out still. Diana thought about reaching for him, pulling him back to bed. She following him instead, sliding her arms around his waist and resting her cheek on his shoulder.

“It is not morning yet,” she said, half complainting.

“I know,” Steve said and she felt him sigh before he pulled away, just enough to look at her.

“Diana,” Steve said. He paused, looking hesitant. “I have to tell you something and I don’t want to but the kids are going to be up soon and I just...”

His jaw set. “If I don’t, Ann will, and she’s never had as much tact as she thinks.”

He traced his fingertips over her cheek. He smiled at her and it was so sad. “Do you know how excited they will be to see you?”

There was an ache building in Diana’s chest. “Steve, what is it?”

He sighed again but his gaze never wavered. “Ann and Bobby are going home next week, back to London.”

Diana froze. “What?”

“The evacuation is over. Most of the kids in the village have already gone back,” Steve told her. “I spoke to their mother by phone a few day ago, arranged things. They’ll be with the last group of evacuees from London on the train home from our stop so they’ll be with some of their friends from school.”

Diana would not have thought her heart could break over such a mundane thing, not after the last months, but it did. She crumpled. Steve held her and she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung. He was steady, strong for her.

She sobbed into his nightshirt. Two months of tears. Two wars of tears.

Steve did not try to stop them. He weathered her tears with her, curled tight around her as if to protect, a bulwark against despair, steady and strong. She had missed his grieving, she realised.

Steve said nothing; there was nothing to say. He gave her time, as much as she needed, kept her close, arms tight around her back and in her hair. She took her time, though she did not think there would ever be enough.

“When?” Diana asked. She pulled away to look at him. Steve turned and took her hand when she was done, brought it to his lips and kissed it gently.

“Thursday,” he told her, eyes and voice steady. He held her hand in both of his, rubbing it as if to warm it. He laughed a little, his hair falling into his eyes at the motion. “Ann’s already threatened to
show up on our doorstep if we don’t write her but...I don’t know what’s happening out there, not really, just what’s in the paper. But if you can stay until we have to take them back to London...They miss you. They’ll want to say goodbye.”

“There has been little I can do that is not already being done by others, unless I choose to start hunting down the perpetrators,” Diana laughed a little harshly. Steve’s face creased. “Except smuggle those who wish to leave the displaced persons camps back to their homes or...elsewhere. Perhaps I should have discussed such things with Napi, before he left.”

“You give people hope,” Steve said quietly. Diana could not imagine what he saw on her face at that. “You do, though. I can’t imagine what it’s like, I know I can’t, but that’s always been true. Even in the smallest things, even if they don’t know it at first, you’re kind and you’re unwavering and just...a force against the dark things in the world.”

“Maybe not for everyone and maybe...maybe this is just too big. But I would have said that about the trenches too and you just...” Steve touched her face, just for a moment. “Some of them, you’ll give them hope that the world won’t always be this way.”

“I do not know if that remains true,” Diana said, just as soft.

“I don’t think you could stop if you tried,” Steve said and his eyes were so earnest, that resolute blue, when nothing could shake him of the conviction he had chosen, that she could barely stand it.

“I’m tired,” Diana told him and she hated to confess it.

“I know,” Steve said and his voice turned as bullish as she had ever heard it. “Diana. There is nothing wrong with that. Even if you’re a demigod.”

Diana wiped her face. “It is one thing to know that. It is another to believe it.”

Steve exhaled loudly. “That I understand.”

She cupped his face in her hands. He was the same; he was different. Careworn with worry and pain and all his own traumas.

So was she.

“I love you, Steve Trevor,” she said.

His eyes were so blue and so soft and his smile was sad. He stroked her hair and looked her in the eye as if the thought of looking away had never occurred to him. “I love you, Diana, Princess of Themyscira.”

This was something she knew, unshakeable in her heart. She still felt fresh tears spill from her eyes. He wiped them away. She reached out to pull him closer again, to rest their foreheads together so she could feel him breathing and he met her halfway.

They sat like that until sunlight started to creep through their window and they could hear movement upstairs.

Steve kissed her briefly, a reassurance. “If you want to take some more time, we don’t have to tell anyone you’re here yet.”

“No,” Diana said. “We have to send them home on Thursday.”
“We do,” Steve said.

“We knew we would, it is as it should be,” Diana sighed. “But...I will miss them.”

“Me too,” Steve said. “Though, I really don’t think Ann is going to let us get away with not writing her.”

“It is not the same,” Diana said.

“No,” Steve replied. He sighed. “It's not.”

Diana exhaled and forced herself to straighten her spine. Ann and Bobby would be going back to their family, their home, on Thursday. She did not want to lose time with them before then.

She looked Steve in the eye. “How is your hip today?”

“Sore,” Steve told her. “It'll hurt if I walk around too much and I'll probably spend a lot of the day sitting. It's fine, it's normal. Don't worry about me.”

Diana raised her eyebrow at him. “Farah has gotten you to be honest about it.”

“I'm always honest about it. I am fine,” Steve said. He smiled a little. “And no, she hasn't. I just didn't want to give you a hard time for once.”

Diana kissed him lightly because she loved him, even when he was being ridiculous and stubborn.

“I need to wash my face,” Diana said. “Do you need help dressing?”

“Nah, it's not that bad,” Steve said. He hefted himself up, balancing on the bed frame until he got his cane. His limp was worse but his face did not show any additional strain.

He smiled at her. “Want to surprise them?”

Diana managed to smile back. “Yes.”

He kissed her again, just a brush of their lips, and touched her cheek briefly. Then he let her go.

She washed her face, taking just enough time so it did not look like she had been crying. She dressed and walked down the hall to the dining room. She could hear the steady sound of Steve’s voice, behind the door, teasing, and the sharp sound of Ann’s reply. Bobby’s high, boyish laughter, the way Yasmine snorted and giggled and Sofia’s laugh, still half a shriek. Nadia was quiet, overpowered by all of them, but Diana knew what her smile would look like.

She took a breath and opened the door.

The room went completely silent for a moment. They all stared at her with big eyes. Farah dropped the ladle back into the pot of oatmeal.

Pandemonium descended.

She was mobbed in the next instant. Nadia got up so quickly she toppled her chair. Bobby tried to scale her like a monkey and settled for wrapping himself around her legs, only budging over to accommodate Yasmine came to help him. Ann was in tears, arms around her waist and clinging.

She thought for a second that Farah was going to wade in and pull the children back but instead she seized her shoulders, kissed her swiftly on both cheeks and hugged her tightly, leaning over the
children to do so.

Sofia shrieked her annoyance from Steve’s lap: “No, down! Unca Steve!” He had snagged her out of her chair so she couldn’t join the mob and get squashed.

When Diana looked at him, he was beaming at her.

Diana let herself laugh. She hugged Farah back, this second of the sisters she had found in man’s world. She cupped Nadia’s teary face in her hands and kissed her forehead. She hugged Ann tightly, almost like she was grown, she had gotten even taller in the two months Diana had been gone, and let her turn and hide her face to wipe away her tears. She swung Bobby and Yasmine up into her arms, ignoring that they were too big for her to do so if she had been human.

She stopped and gave Sofia a cuddle, which was enough for her when things calmed down, she had Steve’s undivided attention for once. Nadia and Ann manoeuvred together to get the two seats next to Diana and they didn’t even try to make Bobby sit in his own chair when he climbed into her lap. Yasmine threatened tears for a moment before Nadia pulled her little sister up to share her chair.

Farah looked amused as she deftly reorganised all the plates and worried as she filled up Diana’s bowl with an extra scoop of oatmeal. The children would have been too excited to eat if Farah and Steve had not kept reminding and reminding them. They talked fast and over each other as they tried to tell her absolutely everything that she had missed.

It was hard and it was wonderful. None of them wanted to let her out of their sight, not that morning, not the rest of that day or the next. Steve and Farah clearly had a conversation at some point because they managed to herd them away when Diana needed a breath, needed a moment, overwhelmed even if it was with love.

They had six days until Ann and Bobby went home. Their routine was jettisoned, as much with the sad act of packing as the fun of school being finished for the year. Bobby swung wildly between excitement about going home, back to a London he only vaguely remembered, and crying because he was going to miss them. Ann was unusually quiet. Diana caught her looking at her and Steve sometimes as if she were trying to come to a decision.

She reached it the day before they left, a stubborn look on her face as she cornered Steve and Diana just after breakfast.

“I need to talk to you privately,” Ann said. Diana looked questioningly at Steve. It was about as seriously as she had ever heard her, which was saying something, when it came to Ann.

“Well?” Steve said amiably, though Diana could tell he was as bemused as she was. “Diana can you _-”

“No,” Ann said. “Both of you.”

They exchanged a look.

“Of course,” Diana said. “The dining room door closes. Is that all right?”

Ann considered it. “Yes. Everything else has beds in it or no doors.”

Diana did not think of how that would not be the case when they returned from London. It made her heart ache.

Ann barely waited for the door to close before she burst out. “I know you don’t work at a hospital
when you go out at night. I think you can fly and Mr. Steve should be an old man but he's not. I don't think he's ageing at all.”

Diana was shocked into silence; Steve was no better. They had spoken at length before about what to do if anyone discovered their secrets but they were so blindsided by it being Ann that neither of them knew how to respond.

“I can keep a secret,” Ann said. “I just want to know. Please. I can keep a secret. I haven't even told Nadia and she was...I made her help me find things out but I kept it a secret, I swear, she didn't know what we were finding out.”

Steve’s eyebrows had climbed very high on his forehead. He sat foreword and looked at Ann intently.

“Ann, what do you think you know?” Steve asked.

Ann fidgeted. “I might have...found a picture of you and an old plane that says 1915 on the back. You weren't underage and you haven't aged at all. The only thing that's different are the scars.”

Steve looked at Diana. She kept that photo in her bedside table. It was not locked up but it was not easy to find either.

“You shouldn't have gone into my things without asking,” Diana told her calmly. “When was this?”

“A few weeks after I got here.” Ann had the grace to look ashamed. “I know. I didn't really, um...”

“You didn't like me then,” Diana said. “Or trust me.”

“No,” Ann looked bashful but she didn't back down. “I didn't. I didn't trust either of you.”

“But you didn’t tell anyone,” Steve said plainly. “Even if that photo proved we weren’t exactly who we said we were.”

Diana had known him long enough to tell he was trying to run through all the possible outcomes of this in his mind.

“I...didn't want to,” Ann nodded. “You were nice even if...even if I didn't like you. And Bobby liked it here and we couldn't go home. And I thought maybe if I knew your secret, if it turned out you weren't as nice as you seemed...”

Steve leaned forward immediately. His voice was suddenly sharper. “No, Ann. If someone is mistreating you and they have more power than you, do not try to blackmail them. You go to someone you trust or the police or us and you tell them, okay?”

Ann looked shaken for the first time. “Okay.”

Steve grimaced. Diana put a hand on his shoulder. She could tell he wanted to reach out, that even the idea of the children he had come to love being put in that position, the idea of them being hurt, made him desperately afraid.

“I'm not trying to scare you,” Steve said, keeping his voice calm and measured. “But you're still a child and if you try something like that an adult could hurt you very badly. I don't want you to get hurt.”

“If I had had to tell someone,” Ann said flatly, a little defiant. “No one would have believed me.”
“We will always believe you,” Diana said before Steve could. “No matter how unlikely it seems. We will always listen.”

Ann’s lip wobbled. She bit it to make it stop, blinking rapidly.

Steve looked at Diana, deferring to her. Diana nodded. Ann was still a child, if older than the others. Ann had also successfully kept it from them for four years.

Steve sat back in his chair. “No, I’m not ageing. You remember that I was in a plane crash?”

“Yes,” Ann said not suspicious but curious.

“It was more of an explosion than a crash,” Steve said. “And it should have killed me. We don’t know how I survived. I stopped aging after that.”

Ann looked at him for a long moment. She seemed near tears again but also almost angry.

“I wanted you to be faking,” she said, sudden and nearly vicious. “I wanted you to be faking the...everything else. I thought it might be part of a disguise. But it’s not. You’re not.”

She held her head up very high. “I'm sorry. I wish...I’m glad you're alive but I wish the rest of it hadn't happened to you.”

Steve stared, open-mouthed. Diana squeezed his shoulders tightly. Steve was open about the nature of his injuries but he had tried very hard to keep the children from knowing the details and depth of it when he was in pain.

“Thank you,” Steve said roughly, after long minutes. He cleared his threat. “That's kind of you.”

Ann nodded. For the first time in the conversation, the two of them did not meet each other’s eyes. Ann peeked up at Diana after a moment. Her expression went bullish again but she kept quiet.

It was unlike her. Diana found she did not like it much.

“You can ask,” Diana said.

Ann didn't need more than an invitation. “What are you? You can fly! You can speak I don't know how many languages but it's so many! What do you do when you go out at night? I found...I maybe found your costume two years ago and...and what's it for?”

That they kept in their closet in a locked chest when Diana was not using it. Steve groaned and rubbed at his forehead. “Ann, you really shouldn't go snooping like that. It’s dangerous.”

“I know,” Ann said. “And...I'm not sorry, I know I should be but...I just wanted to know then.”

Steve sighed. Diana found it very hard not to smile at Ann. She could admire a thirst for knowledge, even if she did not approve of Ann’s methods.

And Steve was hardly one to talk.

“It's armour,” Diana told her.

“I thought it was maybe but I didn't want to test it in case it wasn't and I broke something,” Ann said. “But I snuck out a few times, maybe, when you left and I saw you leave, you can fly! I tried to stay up for when you got back but, well, I only managed it once. I fell asleep the other times.”
They looked at each other for another moment.

“You may not believe what we tell you,” Diana warned her.

Ann looked at Diana dead in the eyes. “You are a terrible liar. You just don't answer the question somehow and then Steve lies for you.”

Diana blinked and then laughed, she could not help herself. Neither could Steve.

“She's not wrong,” Steve said. His eyes were so very fond when he looked between them. “Miss Ann Baker, you would have made one hell of a spy.”

Ann lifted her chin. “I don't want to be a spy, not ever. I'm going to go to University and I'm going to study languages and I'm going to go find new ones not even Mrs. Diana knows.”

Steve laughed. “Good. That's better.”

“I think so too,” Diana said. She smiled at Steve briefly, before turning back to Ann.

She wished, for a moment, she had one of her mother's books. It would make the telling easier.

“Let us start at the beginning,” Diana said. “I am Diana, Princess of Themyscira, daughter of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. And I am the god-killer, for only a god can kill another god.”

Ann, Diana thought, wanted to believe everything they told her. She believed what Diana could do easily enough but Diana could tell she was trying not to scoff at the idea of Zeus and Ares and being brought to life from clay. It did not surprise Diana, Steve had been the same, once, and there were still things he was not sure he believed.

Diana understood it better now. They had been raised to think of the things she knew with certainty as myths and half the things they knew for certain were things she had never heard of.

Mostly, though, Ann was pleased to learn that Diana had had to learn all her languages, it was not an inborn knowledge. To Ann, that meant it was still possible that she could learn them all too. The hundreds of extra years Diana had to learn them did not seem to faze her.

Diana packed extra books into Ann’s luggage that night. She wanted to send her home with trunks full of books in every language she could possibly learn in her lifetime. But Diana would not be there to carry them for Ann and she could not carry them all herself. They were not Ann’s parents. She settled for what could be packed in a suitcase.

It was sunny, the next day, and warmer than usual for June. Steve made pancakes for breakfast and packed lunches for Ann and Bobby that were larger than either of them could eat. Diana caught Ann trailing her fingertips over the spines of the books in their floor to ceiling bookcases and found a way to fit another into her suitcase.

They arrived early for the train. Ed had offered to drive them but it was the nicest weather they had had all week and they did not want to separate the children until they had to. Ann had a stubborn, stony look on her face – if she had cried, she had done so privately – but Bobby kept sniffling and Yasmine had spent most of the morning in tears.

There were seven children going back to London, three more headed to Brighton in the afternoon, and then the village would be empty of evacuees, except for the two Smith sisters, whose parents had been killed by one of the bombings and were waiting on their older brother to come home from the Pacific.
The train was on time; Diana thought for the first time she understood why Steve found it charming that it always ran ten minutes late. They hugged Bobby, hugged Ann and then, they boarded. Ann must have marched herself and Bobby straight to a window because one crashed open and they were there, hanging out and shouting goodbye as it pulled out of the station.

And then they were gone.

Steve put his arm around Diana’s shoulders for a moment, wiping his face with his handkerchief. Farah was busy with Yasmine, who was in her mother’s arms, sobbing into her shoulder. Diana took Sofia, who started crying when Yasmine did. Nadia leaned into Steve’s side. He put his hand on her shoulder and passed her his handkerchief so she could wipe her face and pretend to be stoic like Ann, if that was what helped her.

They walked back home slowly.

The house seemed so much quieter with Ann and Bobby gone. Yasmine was subdued, missing Bobby, her partner in crime for years. Nadia had always been the quietest of the bunch but she withdrew more with Ann gone, spending more time reading alone in the bedroom she and Ann had shared instead of hauling books out into the garden with her friend.

Steve and Farah tried to fill the silences as cheerfully as they could. Diana felt so out of sync with them it left her disoriented. It had been easier to mask when they were all bracing for Ann and Bobby’s departure but once they were gone Diana felt it. The three of them had always been so coordinated, a hand ready when a load was too heavy for one person to hold. It felt awful to suddenly be out of step. They both saw it, she knew, and said nothing, only waited for her to catch up, Farah squeezing her hand and putting more food on her plate, Steve kissing her cheek and always there, hand already outstretched to meet her whenever she reached for him.

They managed. Sometimes, Diana caught a drawn expression on Steve’s face at the end of the day and worried. She could tell he missed Ann and Bobby as much as the children did. But even on the days when his physical pain was at its worst, he had learned to smile through it for the children and they all come to rely on that.

It was a rainy day at the end of July when there was an unexpected knock on the door. Diana answered it absently. Ed was still bringing them eggs, trading them for whatever baking Steve managed to cobble together. Diana assumed it would be him.

It was not.

Sameer smiled at her from under the brim of his hat, ignoring the water that dripped from it. “Hello Diana.”

Diana hugged him, tight, then tighter still. She pulled back to look at his face. She had seen him only months ago but it felt like a lifetime. “Are you on leave? Discharged?”

Sameer did not have time to answer. Farah stepped into the hallway, asking: “Diana? Who is it?”

She spotted Sameer in the next moment and for a second, froze. She closed her eyes and opened them again. Sameer’s smile started to droop.

She lunged forward, seizing Sameer by his collar, knocking them both back out into the rain with the force of her eagerness as she kissed him and kissed him again.

Diana heard a sharp intake of breath behind her and moved aside just in time as Nadia barreled past her, yelling: “Papa’s home! Yasmine! Yasmine, come quick, papa’s home! He’s here!”
She flung herself at her parents with more abandon than Diana had ever seen her display. Sameer caught her, hoisted her up in his arms and spun her around twice. Diana thought he might have never put her down if he had not had to crouch down as Yasmine ran to join them, wrapping his arms around both of his girls even as Farah leaned over to kiss him again.

“Well, now isn't that a picture,” Steve said, quietly, from behind her.

Diana looked at him, holding Sofia awkwardly on his left hip and trying to balance with his cane in his right hand. There was something so pleased and happy in his eyes, she could not help but reach out and touch his cheek, even as she took Sofia from him.

Sofia was happy to be out of the rain and in Diana’s arms. She looked at her mother and sisters in confusion. She had been a baby when Sameer left. She didn't know him.

“Who’s that?” She asked, chewing on her thumb.

Steve brushed her hair back. “That's your papa, sweetie. Like in the pictures your mum shows you.”

Sofia frowned and did not say anything else to say, just stared, chewing on her thumb. Diana and Steve exchanged a look, it was rare that Sofia kept quiet.

“Hey!” Steve called. “You can do that inside, you know! Where it's warm and dry.”

They didn't untangle from each other but moved toward the door in a sodden mass, all grinning. Sameer broke away long enough to hug Steve.

Steve clapped him hard on the back. “Welcome home, old man.”

Sameer held on for a suspiciously long time. His voice was rough when he spoke. “Thank you. For taking care of my girls.”

“Aw hell, they took care of me,” Steve told him as they reluctantly let go of each other.

Steve smiled at him and nodded in Diana’s direction. Sameer looked at her again and his face went still, awed.

“This can't be my little Sofia,” Sameer said.

Sofia looked back at him frowning. She didn't recognize him. She couldn't.

Sameer didn't falter. He inclined his head to her, almost a bow, said: “Enchanté mademoiselle.”

And produced a wrapped chocolate bar from his pocket. He offered it to her as if it were gold. “Et voila.”

Candy was rare enough with the rationing, Diana could not say for sure but she did not think Sofia had ever had a chocolate bar just for herself before. When Lenny and George brought them, they were shared among everyone.

It won a smile out of Sofia. She grabbed it with her still pudgy fingers and grinned at him. Sameer smiled back and Diana could tell he was already as hopeless as Steve was when it came to her.

Yasmine gasped and tugged at his coat. “Papa! Me too!”

Sameer laughed and pulled more chocolate bars out of his pocket. “Yes, you too. And Nadia. And maman.”
He presented them just as grandly to his older daughters. Nadia looked bashful taking hers; Yasmine tore hers open immediately and took a great big bite.

“Okay, don’t spoil your appetite for dinner,” Farah told them but she did not make either of them hand it over. “We’re all soaked through. Go change, the both of you, before you catch cold.”

Both girls pouted. Farah pointed upstairs. “Dry clothing. Your reprobate father will be changing as well, don’t worry.”

Nadia paused on the stairs and looked back at Sameer. “You’ll be here when we come back down?”

Diana’s heart ached. A muscle in Steve’s jaw clenched, as if he were in pain, just for a moment before it smoothed out.

Sameer put both his hands over his heart. “I promise.”

Nadia smiled, heartbreakingly sweet and started upstairs again.

Sofia tugged on Diana’s hair. “Down please, auntie!”

Diana let her down and she immediately went running after her sisters.

“They’re all so big,” Sameer said quietly. “I knew but...”

Diana watched Steve’s face forcibly lighten. He reached over and snagged the chocolate bar still hanging out of Sameer’s pocket.

“What did you do, huh? Mug a supply officer?” Steve asked, waggling it at him.

Sameer rallied. He snatched the chocolate bar back. “I never reveal my secrets.”

Then he tossed it at Steve because he could.

“It would have to be an American supply officer for this much,” Farah teased. Her hand was on Sameer’s chest and she gave it a pat, looking at the duffel he had with him. “Do you have dry clothes in there?”

“I have dry uniforms in there,” Sameer said.

“I can get you something,” Steve said. “It won’t fit well but it’ll be dry and not a uniform.”

“If it is both those things, I’ll take it,” Sameer said. “I can guarantee I’ve worn worse.”

Steve grinned. “I’ve known you too long. I can guarantee that too.”

Steve’s hand curled around hers and squeezed once. Diana did not need it to know to follow him. If it had been her, when it had been her, Steve just returned to her, she had fiercely guarded their moments alone – without the others and when the pain was not so bad it was a physical presence in the room with them.

Sameer and Farah deserved that now.

“I think we’ve got some clothing rations squirreled away but if Sameer doesn’t have some, we’ll have to take some of mine up,” Steve commented, digging through his drawers. “Farah’s better at alterations than I am but...”
Diana interrupted him with a soft hand on his face. Steve blinked at her, surprised. She leaned forward to kiss his lips slowly.

When she drew back, there was a soft smile on his face. His eyes dropped to her lips and then returned to her eyes. “What was that for?”

“I need a reason?” Diana asked and kissed him again.

Because she could. Because he was there and she needed no reason.

Sameer had three weeks leave before he was meant to report for his deployment to the Pacific theatre. Farah had gone very pale when he told them. Steve had read every scrap of information he could get about every front and even with the heavy censorship, they knew that things were bad there.

It was only luck that they had the radio on when it was announced. Sameer had suggested they play cards after the children had gone to bed. Diana found all card games unbearably boring but Sameer and Steve talked as much as they played and it was amusing to listen to them.

“Steve is the worst person to play cards with,” Sameer was telling them, not for the first time. He gestured to Steve’s face. Steve just looked at him with a relaxed half smile. “He has no tells. It is impossible to win.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Sami,” Steve said, arranging the cards in his hand. “I remember Chief holding his own against me pretty well.”

Sameer scoffed. “Chief cheats. I don’t know how but I’m sure of it. No man can win as much as he does. And he was the only one who would play against you half the time.”

“That's not true,” Steve said, shaking his head. “That's not true. Bish never turned me down, neither did Ball or...”

“Bah, pilots don't count,” Sameer said. “Your idea of risk isn't normal.”

Steve laughed. “I hate to break it to you, Sami, but you're a spy and you signed up for two wars. If anyone here has a skewed idea risk, it's you.”

“Ah, but you're right, I am a spy,” Sameer said. “So I take calculated risks.”

“I was a spy!”

“Even when you were a spy, you were first and foremost a pilot,” Sameer said. “This is only making my case. As a spy, you had no tells. As a pilot, you are crazy. Et voila.”

“Quiet!” Farah hissed suddenly, already turning the radio up.

“...following message from President Truman.

“Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British “Grand Slam” which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

“The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in
destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

“It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East...”

No one spoke until well after the announcer came back. There was something like relief breaking over Sameer’s face. Farah moved across the room to sit beside him. She gripped his hand very tightly.

Diana looked at Steve. He was staring at the radio, his cards still clenched in one hand. He had gone very still. He must have felt Diana’s eyes on him because he turned his head slowly to look at her. There was something desperate and afraid in his eyes.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“It means the war is over,” Farah said. Sameer closed his eyes and let out a shuddering sigh. Farah put her hand on his back and could not keep her hand from clenching in the fabric of his shirt. “Yes? It has to be. Something like that, they can’t continue.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. There was something too measured and calm in his voice. It made the hair on the back of Diana’s neck stand up. “But what does it mean? What did it do?”

Sameer looked at him and what he saw in Steve's face made him pause. “Steve?”

Steve smiled at him, a bitter, miserable thing. He shrugged. “I think it's the future, again, Sami.”

Sameer stared at him for a moment, confused, and then he went very pale. Farah frowned, looking between them. “What do you mean?”

Steve shrugged. He put his cards down. “I know what a plane full of hydrogen gas does when it explodes...”

Diana shuddered beside him, she could not help herself. Steve’s head jerked around to her. She grabbed his hand, brought it to her lips to kiss it swiftly. He squeezed once, an apology in his eyes. He looked back at Farah and Sameer. “What’s – what was it – 20,000 tons of TNT do?”

He paused and then: “Isn’t Hiroshima a city?”

Sameer scrubbed a hand through his hair, his face tight. “Yes.”

They were all quiet.

Sameer went into London to report. The information was...sparse. There had not been a surrender yet. His access was more restricted than usual, though he got his hands on some preliminary decoded reports describing the level of devastation. They extended his leave until further notice and sent him home. He had not been officially reassigned yet and he was a field man, not an analyst. They had nothing for him.

He began chain smoking again, whenever he was alone, a nearly unconscious habit ingrained by the years of stress and horror and war. He did not fully realise what he was doing until Steve started coughing, woke up unable to breath, lungs and throat so easily irritated by the scarring left behind by the gas.

The second bomb dropped on Nagasaki.
Steve found out first, when he got the paper in the morning. Diana wished it had been her or Farah to head for the front door that morning, to give him that buffer, at least. Steve had not slept well for days. Diana had been jarred awake many times by his coughing, even after Sameer realised what was happening and retreated to the very back of the garden to smoke. It was too easy for Steve to develop a chest infection when his lungs were stressed.

But it was Steve who came white faced into the dining room and handed the paper to Diana without a word. Nadia was talking about the book she had just finished and Steve smiled at her, asked the right questions, played along with the veneer of the home they had made themselves even as his back went ramrod – military – straight and tension crept into the room as the adults slowly passed the paper around.

Farah made the girls go out to play after breakfast. She could see as well as Diana could the way Sameer’s fingers twitched for a cigarette, the way Steve's eyes had gone distant and calculating, the way Diana shifted her weight, ready to spring, needing to move, all of them unwilling to act lest they frighten the children.

Farah shut the back door behind them. No one seemed to want to speak first.

“They have to surrender now. With Russia invading too. It would be madness to continue,” Farah said flatly, unable to stand it any longer.

Diana saw the way Steve's face contorted. He wanted to laugh but he would not do that to Farah. “It’s war. You can read all about what kind of madness that inspires.”

He stood. Diana could see he wanted to move, wanted to pace to do something and part of her wanted him to because it was what she wanted as well. But he had been dizzy that morning, when he first got up, and after a few steps he visibly restrained himself.

“If it wins the war,” Sameer began haltingly.

Steve nearly stumbled even though he was standing still. He looked at Sameer as if he had been betrayed.

“I’m so tired of fighting, Steve,” Sameer’s shoulders slumped. He looked very old and exhausted. “They will send me to the Pacific next. I’m shocked they didn’t already. I speak Japanese. And you’ve heard the stories. I know you have. You can’t stand not knowing. You have heard what that front is like.”

“They kept you here, within easy reach, because it helped manipulate them,” Farah said. Her eyes were fierce and unapologetic. “I know when your letters got through to us and when they didn't. You think they don't know Steve shares everything with Diana? The weeks when the Blitz was the worst was when the most came through. When Diana was out every night, that was when the backlog of your letters suddenly came.”

Steve’s lips thinned and he hunched forward, leaning on the back of the chair. Diana covered his hand with hers. He had figured that out halfway through the war, though they had never discussed it with Farah. He had not wanted Sameer to know.

“I won’t apologise for it. It kept you safer than you would have been if they had tried to send you to China or, god forbid, Japan. North Africa was bad enough. But I know why they kept you close enough to recall,” Farah’s jaw clenched. “And I want the war to end as much as anyone. I cannot care how they end it when I am still counting the days until I get my husband back to stay,” her voice cracked but she blazed on. “But we all know why they dropped those bombs – an entire city in the
blink of an eye, you said! – on the Japanese and not the Germans.”

Sameer looked shocked but he shook his head. “They didn’t have the bomb then. We firebombed the Germans. You don’t know what you’re taking about.”

“Lenny told me about Dresden,” Steve said. “His CO bragged about it and he didn’t…he didn’t want to tell his father so he told me. It’s not the same as using one bomb, one plane, to do the same thing.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know what the Japanese were doing,” Sameer said. “You haven’t seen...”

“I know what the Nazis were doing,” Diana said. Her hand curled around Steve’s shoulder tightly. Steve covered it with his own and squeezed. They did not have to look at each other. “I know what they choose not to tell me.”

“And they should have,” Sameer said. “But I’ve seen the reports. How many died on Okinawa? I don’t even know if this will force a surrender but if it does, if it ends the war...”

“An entire city,” Steve said. His voice was quiet and flat. “Our greatest scientific achievement.”

He coughed once, and smothered another. He shook his head. “I wonder what arguments Ludendorff made for himself. I wonder what Haig thought when...what did he say, when I told him the gas would kill everyone, all of us, on both sides?”

“That is what soldiers do,” Diana said. It was burned in her memory.

“And that’s what he believed,” Steve said.

“Steve, you don’t know what it’s been like. Another war, this war. You can’t understand it,” Sameer told him.

“I know,” Steve said. “I know I can’t. And I can’t blame you for wanting it to be over. I just...I can’t...”

He coughed again, tried to smother it, tried to force himself to stop. It made it worse, this time and he doubled over, clutching at his chest.

“...can’t...” Steve gasped, reaching for Diana even grasped his arms to steady.

They got him into a chair. Diana knelt in front of him and braced his shuddering body as he coughed and coughed, unable to stop it. His body twitched, out of his control. She could feel his chest seizing and there was nothing she could do except hold him through it.

“I’ll get the doctor,” Sameer said, behind them. “Where...”

“No,” Farah said, grabbing her husband’s arm. “No. No doctors.”

“What are you talking about?! He can’t breathe! He...”

“He is a 62-year-old man who hasn’t aged since the end of the last war and that war, you know how it aged men,” Farah told him, voice sharp and urgent. “You call for the doctor, have him come and treat a gas injury that should have killed him? That took everyone else’s sons even if they made it back? Saying he enlisted underage isn’t going to work forever. You can’t rub it in their faces what he is!”
“He can’t breathe, Farah!” Sameer shouted. “It was like this in the hospital...”

“There’s nothing they can do for him,” Farad said. “Look. His colour isn’t good but it’s acceptable. There’s no cyanosis. There’s no blood. Just phlegm. We have to save the doctor’s visits for when he really needs them now.”

“Farah,” Sameer sounded near tears, sounded helpless. “We can’t let him...”

“...stop...” Steve gasped. The coughing had calmed, though Diana still felt how his breath was hitching and laboured. “...she’s right...stop...”


Steve nodded against her shoulder. His fingers curled around her blouse, holding on lightly.

“Steve...” Sameer said.

“We did not want it to be now but we are going to have to talk about it sometime,” Diana said. “Elsie has helped and some of Farah’s colleagues but when the doctor here retired and we went to a new one, he found the nature of Steve’s condition strange, suspicious. We have not gone back.”

Sameer swallowed. He knelt down beside them and Steve turned his face to look at him but did not lift his head off Diana’s shoulder. Sameer put his hand on Steve’s back, rubbing gingerly, feeling him breathe. Diana understood the feeling behind Sameer’s expression all too well. “Okay. Okay, Steve.”

Steve tried to sigh and it caught, he choked a little, coughed briefly and Diana saw Sameer’s expression go tight again, even as Steve settled again and the tension started to leach from his body. Exhaustion would come in its wake, she knew.

Steve closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his strength. Diana knew the signs Steve’s body gave as he stitched himself together, the way his jaw ticked and the slightly open set of his lips, the way he forced himself still, even if his body was still trembling beyond his control. The look in his eyes when he opened them again: calm and clear, like the ocean surrounding Themyscira on the days it was so still you could see straight down to the ocean floor, and so utterly resolved it was reassuring and terrifyingly sad at once.

Diana knew it was what he had looked like when he pointed the gun back and fired at the gas bombs in the moment before he died. She was sure of it.

“Can you move?” Diana asked. She smoothed her thumb along Steve’s cheek.

“Sure,” Steve said but he did not. He trusted her with his vulnerable body, trusted Sameer and Farah to see him like this. He would not have, even when the war started. “Might be sick.”

Farah was already on her way with a bucket and a blanket. Sameer wrapped the blanket around Steve so he did not have to leave Diana’s arms.

“I’m sorry, Sami,” Steve said, hoarsely. “I’ve no right to judge and I’m so glad,” his voice wobbled, “I’m so goddamn glad you’re home. But I would have died to stop this.”

“Ah, mon ami,” Sameer said. He touched Steve’s cheek. “There were times when I looked over my shoulder and thought, ‘Where is Steve?’ but you barely survived one war. I think we would have lost you to another.”
“Can’t even stand cigarette smoke,” Steve said with a wry smile. “Hardly fit anymore.”

Sameer chuckled but he had to wipe the tears from his face. Steve sighed. Diana could feel him fighting not to cough again.

“Steve,” Diana said. “You should lie down.”

Steve hesitated. “I think I’ll faint, if I stand. Can you carry me, please?”

It cost him to ask, Diana knew. She had carried him in front of Sameer before but in the last few years, he had always been able to joke through it, put them at ease and only show the most vulnerable parts of himself when there was no one to see but her. Farah had glimpsed the edges of it but it was a different thing, when he asked.

“Of course, beloved,” Diana told him. “Always.”

It was only after she had gotten him settled, that he asked.

“When are you leaving?”

Diana smoothed back his hair. His face was so sure but so pale. “Soon. I will need to make travel arrangements but we cannot let another of these bombs fall.”

Steve just nodded. “It’ll be harder to get there, even for you. I'll help...I'll help...”

He coughed again, hunched forward. She braced him against her body. His face was wet, when he finished, and his body sagged.

“Oh,” he mumbled. “Sorry. I'm...sorry.”

“Steve?” Diana asked, suddenly fearful. The last time he had sounded like that, so many years ago now, he had realized he was coughing up blood before the rest of them did.

But there was no blood now, just a helpless, shattered look in his eyes. “I didn't think...I didn't think they’d drop another one. Or I’d’ve told you to go before. I thought – hoped – we had learned something. My own damn country, I don’t know why I didn't think we would...”

His face creased and he tried to keep himself from crying but he could not. It made him cough terribly.

Diana climbed into bed with him, cradled him against her body, held him still until the shudders stopped. He clutched at her, grip weak.

“...dizzy...” he mumbled.

“Close your eyes,” Diana told him. She held him tight against her with one arm, stroked his back with the other. She kissed the top of his head and tried to ignore her own tears as he did what she told him, trusted her so implicitly. “Shh. Just breath for me, Steve. That's all you have to do. That's all you ever have to do.”

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Steve slept through most of VJ day.

It had not been his intention to but a bone deep weariness always accompanied his lungs acting up and even though he was starting to feel better, less dizzy and sick, all he wanted to do was sleep.
Sameer and Farah had taken their children out into the streets to celebrate. Steve had insisted. He was only going to sleep. Everyone was celebrating.

The war was over.

The problem with having multiple ailments, he thought, as he made his way to the bathroom, leaning heavily on the wall and his cane, was as soon as one thing started malfunctioning, all the others joined in. If his lungs were acting up, he got dizzy and tired and was more likely to stumble or fall and aggravate his hip and leg. If his hip and leg were bad, he had to exert himself more to get around, which made him more likely to strain his lungs.

It was the world’s worst domino effect. He hated it.

He had to brace himself against the wall just to take a piss and when he splashed his face with cold water, trying to make himself feel just a little better, he avoided looking in the mirror. He did not want to see his own face, haggard and scarred and pale.

He braced himself against the wall, heading straight back to bed when he was done. His hip was stiffer than usual, he could not keep up his regular therapy for it, but he had not managed to wreck it again yet. He knew he should have waited until someone else was home, just in case, but he had not been able to wait and he was damned if he was going to use a bedpan again.

It was such a relief to get back into bed. He wished it was not. He tried not to fool himself, when it came to his limitations, tried not to pretend too much for other people, but it still grated when shuffling to the bathroom and back made him want to take a three-hour nap.

Steve did not try to fight it. There was no reason to. Sameer and Farah and the kids wouldn’t be back for hours and Diana...

Oh, he missed Diana with every breath, every thought. And he ached for her. She had just gotten used to being home again, just started to smile without reserve again, as if the weight of the world, of all those lost, were not clinging to the corners of her mouth. He wished the world was what she had once believed it could be, what she made him hope it could be.

But she was exactly where she needed to be, trying to save the world. She would always pick that over him, over herself; she should always pick that first.

It was her duty and his. If he had to do it again, he would still walk away from her and into that plane. He would still fire, even if it would kill him and if it wouldn’t, even knowing all the pain that would follow.

Steve turned over in his empty bed, facing away from the side Diana normally occupied, and exhaled. It was easier to breath on his side, that was all.

His dreams were full of planes of late, of gas and bombs and what happened if they landed, if there was no one to shoot them out of the sky. It was better, now, that he was not waking up coughing, unable to breath, with the phantom taste of blood in his mouth.

It still meant he shuddered awake, disorientated, and it took a moment before the light in his eyes was the early afternoon sunlight through their bedroom window, not flames rushing up to consume him, and that the hand on his shoulder was Sameer’s, looking concerned.

Steve rubbed his face, straightened, a little, so he was not entirely reliant on the pillows propping him up into nearly a seated position anyway.
“You’re back,” Steve said, summoning a smile from somewhere. “What time is it?”

“About four o’clock,” Sameer said.

“It’s early,” Steve commented. “Thought it would go all night.”

VE day certainly had.

“Farah wanted to make sure the children had one good meal today,” Sameer told him.

He was looking at Steve with a sad, guilty expression though. Steve had expected Farah would want to check in on him at some point. He should have known it would be more than just sticking her head in the bedroom to make sure he was still breathing.

“I’ll be fine in a few days, you know,” Steve said.

“You said that a few days ago,” Sameer said, looking almost angry.

It was true, though. He was not coughing himself awake anymore. That was an improvement. His chest still felt heavy and tight and he could not inhale too deeply but it was starting to not ache every time he took a breath. He did not feel as dizzy, most of the time, just exhausted and weak.

Eventually it would get better. Eventually he would not feel so tired. Eventually he would not feel a twinge on the end of every inhale warning him against trying to breath too deeply. He just had to wait it out. It was frustrating but he had been here before, even if it had been a while, he thought maybe he was learning to handle it a little better. Or maybe there was just less pain because he had managed not to completely fuck up his hip this time.

Sameer had not seen him like this since before he had stopped needing a full time nurse, though. “I thought you were better. It’s like when you were still in the hospital.”

It wasn’t. The parts of that Steve could remember, he remembered very vividly.

“I am better,” Steve said. “It’s a setback. They happen. It’s not that bad.”

“It’s not that bad?” Sameer repeated. “You couldn’t breathe.”

“I’m breathing now,” Steve said. “So it’s not that bad.”

“You should find another doctor,” Sameer said. “Someone else, where they don’t know you.”

“We’re looking into it,” Steve said. “But even if I do, I’ll have to lie about what’s wrong with me now. Not that they ever knew how to treat it well anyway. I must have met, what, a couple hundred other guys with gas injuries by the time they released me? I kept in touch with a few of them. I’m the only one left now. The rest have been dead probably ten years at least.”

Sameer stared at him. He folded his hands together and put them over his mouth and stared. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. “What was the point of this, of you not ageing, of you...you maybe living forever, if it’s going to be like this?”

“Well, I’m not dead for a start,” Steve said drily. Sameer’s face creased but Steve got it, he did, and he was too tired to be angry, not just because he was ill and never at Sami. “Are you angry at whatever inept god brought me back but botched it half way?”

“Yes,” Sameer said. “No. I don’t know.”
“Me too,” Steve said. He shrugged. “Or I was, sometimes, when the pain was worse. I am doing better. I got more used to it, I don’t know. I can get out of bed, most days, I can walk around. And there’s so goddamn much to be angry about right now and I’m so goddamn tired I’ve got to pick and choose. My own health is pretty far down on the list these days.”

“Yes, but the war is over, now,” Sameer tried to smile. “Maybe things will get better.”

Looking at him, Steve was sure Sameer believed that about as much as he did, no matter how much they both wanted it to be true.

But the war was over. Sameer’s second war. He deserved a day to celebrate.

“Yeah, it is,” Steve said, trying not to think of bombs or the dead or Diana standing in the middle of the carnage trying to put the world back together again. He dragged up a smile, instead, because he loved Sameer. “And I won’t be an invalid forever so there’s no need to get maudlin about it.”

Sameer forced a chuckle: “Okay, Monsieur Invalid, Farah is cooking your favourites, carrots and potatoes in everything, I promise.”

Steve smiled. “If my wheelchair is around, I think I can join you.”

Sameer looked honestly delighted. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Steve replied. “I’ll leave it up to you to save me if I fall asleep in the mash.”

He got dressed while Sameer was getting his wheelchair. None of them would care if he came to the table in his pyjamas but Steve did. It was like the bedpan, if he could make it to the bathroom, if he could get dressed, he needed to do it for himself.

It was a balm, the way Yasmine’s happy face lit up even more when Sameer pushed him into the room. Sofia had to be held back from climbing over his wheelchair and into his lap. Farah pushed his hair back and scolded him and kissed his cheek. Nadia just wanted to hug him, did it twice in quick succession, more gentle than a thirteen-year-old who had been out celebrating all day had any need to be.

She did not want to leave, when dinner was over and Steve was happier than he had been but still so exhausted it was a bittersweet relief when the dishes were cleared away and Yasmine was excitedly talking about the fireworks Ed and the mayor let slip they had for tonight.

“I can stay,” Nadia piped up. “I don't mind. We can read more Pride and Prejudice.”

Steve smiled. He had only been sick – not like this but bedridden for a couple days – once while Farah and the girls were living with them. Most of his worst days were because of his hip and they were less noticeable, especially when Diana was there. He knew he could be...unpleasant, when the pain was at its worst, and he had put a lot of effort into keeping that from the children.

Confronted with a better glimpse of how ill he could get, Nadia just wanted to help. When it was feasible, and after checking that Steve did not mind, Farah insisted they let her, even if it just meant keeping Steve company when getting out of bed seemed insurmountable. Nadia’s convictions were not less strong than any of theirs, for all that she was quieter about them.

“I appreciate that but I don't think I would be very good company,” Steve said. Nadia got the same stubborn look her mother did. Steve half expected her to insult him instead of just looking mutinous. “I’m probably not going to stay awake too long, sweetie. Definitely not long enough to make it worth missing the fireworks. We can read more tomorrow.”
Sameer offered as well, before they left. Steve appreciated it, he did, but he preferred it when Farah came in, left him a cup of tea, kissed him on the forehead and warned him not to do anything stupid while they were gone. He knew they would stay if he asked; Farah knew the last thing he would want was for them to stay because of them.

And she knew better than to offer to take him in his wheelchair. He did not mind, most of the time. That wasn’t it. He just...he just wasn’t up to it. Not today.

He slept, deeply. He did not dream.

At some point, it stopped being VJ day.

The sound of the door closing quietly behind someone made Steve jerk awake. It was dark out. The house seemed quiet. He frowned, pulled himself up a little. They must have gotten home and wanted to check on him. Farah had lived with them long enough to know all the places the floorboards creaked. “Sameer?”

There was a pause long enough that Steve thought Sameer must not have heard him. He was just relaxing back against the pillows when the door creaked open again.

“Not quite,” Etta said, standing in his doorway looking sheepish. “Didn’t mean to wake you. Sami told me you were ill but I just had to pop my head in. I hitched a ride to get back tonight. Ed’s nearly shot a firecracker into his face when he saw me. I’ll come back tomorrow, let you sleep.”

Etta’s hair had gone completely white since the last time she had been home on leave a few months ago. She was still wearing a uniform, usually the first thing she lost on visits home and she was thinner than she ought to be. There were new wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes.

She still looked so much like herself that Steve thought for a moment he would cry.

“No, I’m glad you woke me,” Steve said. “Come here. Come in.”

Etta did not need more than that. She crossed the room, sat on the edge of his bed, and hugged him so tight there was a moment he couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t remember the last time that had been a good feeling.

“Oh, it’s good to see you,” Etta told him. Steve hugged her a little tighter, as best as he could manage, because her voice sounded watery. She pulled back and held him by the shoulders to look at him properly. She laughed a little. It was always her favourite way to mask her tears. “What are you doing, going getting ill like this and missing the first good fireworks we’ve had in ages?”

“You know me,” Steve said, smiling. “Don’t always have the best timing.”

“I don’t know, you’ve done fairly well for yourself,” Etta told him. “Bit of bad luck here and there, certainly.”

“Just a bit,” Steve said drily.

“But you’re still here,” Etta poked him in the shoulder and smiled at him. “All anyone can ask, really.”

“True,” Steve said, inclining his head. “But it would have been nice to see the fireworks.”

“I rather think you’ll have many more chances for fireworks,” Etta said. “And on nights when you’ll
enjoy them better.”

Steve chuckled. “You’re probably right.”

“Sami told me where Diana’s gone,” Etta told him. She was trying to look more cheerful than she was. “Maybe she’ll come back sooner, now that the war’s over.”

“Maybe,” Steve said, though he doubted it. Even if what they were publishing in the papers was the full extent of the damage – and Steve knew they were highly censored – Diana would want to help make sure no one else died needlessly.

“She’ll come back when she can,” Steve said, shrugging. He knew that, truly, without a single doubt. “What about you? How long Ed’s got you for this time?”

Etta grinned, her eyes crinkling. She pulled a twice-folded envelope from her pocket. “I made sure it was all signed and proper before I left.”

Steve looked at her incredulously. “It’s the same damn day as the surrender!”

“It’s after midnight now, dear,” Etta told him. “And besides, it was special circumstances, on account of Ed’s bad heart.”

“Ed doesn’t have a bad heart.”

“He might well have! He’s declined in my absence, certainly. Honestly, we’ve hardly got a back garden in the first place and he went and filled it with chickens,” Etta shook her head. She hesitated and took Steve’s hand. “I think they were ready to be rid of me, really. It’s always been a young man’s game, spy work, and I am an old hen now. Best leave it up to the spring chickens for, well, whatever comes next.”

Etta looked cagey. Steve was well aware there were things she knew that she would never be able to tell him. He forced himself not to ask. Not now. Not tonight.

“I’m sure Ed’s pleased you’re retiring,” Steve said, instead.

Etta’s smile grew rather wicked. Once upon a time, she would not have shown it to the likes of him but that felt like a lifetime ago. “Pleased as punch. And waiting.”

“You shouldn’t keep him,” Steve said, grinning. “He missed you.”

“He was the one who suggested we stop by before heading home,” she squeezed his hand. “He knew I would want to. He’s a good one, my Ed.”

“He certainly is.”

“Even if my backyard is full of chickens.”

“I’ve appreciated those chickens, you know,” Steve told him.

“You’re as bad as he is, I’m sure,” Etta narrowed her eyes at him and then hugged him again just as tight as the last time. “And you’re to come round for dinner as soon as you’re well.”

“Will we be having chicken?” Steve asked just to hear Etta laugh. He gave her hand one last squeeze as she stood. “I’ll be there with bells on. Soon, I promise.”

She left as heavy-footed as she had come. Steve listened to her steps all the way down the front hall,
until the front door closed behind her.

He turned on his bedside lamp when he was sure she was gone. He would not be able to go back to sleep right away, he knew, no mattered how fatigued he still felt. But that was all right. All he wanted to do was sleep and he hated feeling like that.

He reached into the drawer of his bedside table instead, pulled out a book, a few sheets of paper and a pen. There was no way to send letters, he had no address to send them to, did not even know what country Diana might be in, at the moment.

He wrote them anyway.

Dear Diana,

_Etta came home for good today. Sameer has been assured his discharge will come through any day now. To me, that is better than the firecrackers they let off tonight. The war is over. I just wish everyone was as lucky as I am and got to see their loved ones walk back through their front door..._

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is both late and super depressing. I was travelling and everything in the world is so terrible lately that I have been constantly refreshing the news instead of writing. I didn't want to post anything too close to the anniversaries of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. And it was really disquieting to write about atomic bombs when nuclear war is more likely than it's been since the end of the Cold War.

I also have one hell of a head cold. Reviews would be very, very welcome because I am iffy about this chapter and need a pick me up.

I'm not going to argue about the a-bombs. I have done that in multiple academic papers, I don't want to do it in something I do for fun. In regards to the characters' views on this, please keep in mind, all of them would have extremely limited information in the immediate aftermath. I'm not trying to minimise anything just write their reactions realistically based on what they would know.

Italicised text is quoting from other text. The first is *The Hobbit*, specifically the 50th Anniversary Golden Edition. The second is Harry Truman's released statement after the bombing of Hiroshima.

When Steve mentions playing cards with Bish and Ball he's talking about WWI flying aces Billy Bishop and Albert Ball.

I think that's all I had to mention but I am kind of foggy right now so. Next chapter will be shorter, happier and sooner, I swear.
Chapter 9

**England - 2008**

Steve woke later than usual and for a moment he wasn't sure when he was. The room was entirely different, even the bones of it had been tweaked during the last renovation but they had lived in the house for 30 years. It was intensely familiar.

He blinked and the curtains were light blue and well-kept instead of faded green paisley and they hadn't lived there in more than 50 years.

The light still drifted through the window the same way in the mornings, though. And Diana was warm beside him.

She was awake but pretending to be asleep. Steve knew it by the slight curve of her mouth and the shift of her forehead. He knew all the ways she liked to tease, the things no one else would expect from her. He smoothed his thumb over her collarbone, followed it with his lips. When he looked up again her eyes were open and she was smiling at him. She cupped his cheek in her palm.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” she replied. Her thumb drifted over his bottom lip. “I've been waiting for you to wake up.”

“I hope it wasn't for too long,” Steve said. He loved her eyes. He knew it made some people uncomfortable, the way she looked at you and didn't look away, as if she could see to the very depths of your soul.

Steve had never been the best of men, he had done things he wasn't proud of – that no one should be proud of – sometimes he considered himself a good man but not always, not even often, during some periods of his life. Diana saw the very worst in him, knew it more intimately than anyone else, but she saw the very best, too, more clearly and sure than he could imagine.

And she loved all of him.

She made him hopeful.

“Not so long,” she said, smiling, the same way she had on the beach the first day they met, the same way she had the first time she saw snow, the same way she had a million other times since then. “But long enough.”

Her lips followed her thumb and she kissed him. He moaned into her mouth, tangling his hand in her hair. Her fingers found the buttons of the pyjama top she always laughed at him for wearing.

“Hey!” Karim shouted cheerfully, banging hard on their door. “Breakfast in fifteen minutes. Mum’s making pancakes!”

Steve’s head fell to Diana’s shoulder. She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. He groaned and rolled away onto his back.
“Tell me we remembered to lock the door,” Steve said.

“I did,” Diana told him, a smile in her voice.

“You know,” Steve said. “I remember why I like that we live alone now.”

Diana followed him, leaned over him and kissed his smile, her hand light on his chest. “You love being in a full household.”

“I do,” Steve said. His hand drifted up her side. “I also love you and uninterrupted mornings.”

“Mmm but you don’t love Leila’s pancakes,” Diana said.

Steve wrinkled his nose and Diana’s obligingly rolled off of him as he groaned and sat up. “Is that what she’s making? That’s not right.”

Diana laughed at him. She sat up and wrapped her arms around him, kissing the spot where his jaw met his neck, on the bad side, under the ear he only half had. A ghost of a kiss – parts of the scars under her lips had no sensation.

It was not the terrible thing it once was, time and her unwavering touch had tempered his feelings about his scars.

“You are a very predictable sometimes,” she told him, dropping another kiss to his shoulder.

He turned his face to hers to kiss her properly. “The door is locked. We can ignore them and just eat Leila’s cold pancakes later...”

Diana let go of him abruptly. Steve laughed and kissed her nose. He loved the way it wrinkled.

“We’ll sneak away later,” Steve said.

Diana snorted. “Do not make promises you can’t keep.”

“You don’t think we’re stealthy enough?” Steve asked, teasingly.

“I think the rest of the family will begin to arrive this afternoon and then we will not have a moment alone for another three days,” Diana said.

“There's hours between now and then,” Steve said. “But somehow I don't think we're going to be lacking for company.”

“No,” Diana said. She leaned over to peck his lips once more. “Go on. Save us from Leila’s cooking.”

He stole another kiss and had to pull himself away before they leaned in for another and another. He grabbed his cane and dressed haphazardly, well aware he would be mocked for it and accepting his fate. Diana, he knew, would come down perfectly dressed. Time was a factor, though, if Leila got it in her head to cook.

She was the only one in the kitchen when he got downstairs, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee in hand and looking pleased with herself. She raised an eyebrow at Steve.

“Your son told me you were making breakfast,” Steve told her.

Her eyebrow climbed higher. She reached behind her for a cereal box on the counter and shook it at
him. “Breakfast! Milk’s in the fridge.”

Steve huffed and shook his head. “I’ve been had by a 13 year-old.”

“Hardly the first time that’s happened,” Leila said. “You get used to it.”

She pointed at the coffee maker. “Pot’s full, if you want to drown the shame of it. I suspect we’ll need gallons this morning.”

Steve poured himself a cup and leaned against the counter to take the first sip. Leila watched him, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

Leila took after her father’s side of the family, but when she smiled like that she looked disturbingly like Sameer had whenever he managed to con some posh bastard into paying for their drinks or liberated a box of rations off an American officer.

“So,” Leila asked finally. “Since you’re already up, what’s for breakfast?”

By the time Diana made it down stairs, the kitchen was full of food. Steve was at the stove – pancakes and eggs and roasted tomatoes and mushrooms on the go, turkey bacon, oatmeal cooling mostly ignored on the counter and hash browns just about done. Karim had powdered sugar on his cheek and was helping to butter stacks of toast as punishment before he got a second helping of food.

“Leila herded everyone into the garden for breakfast,” Steve told her. “They’ve got more lawn chairs than dining room chairs apparently.”

Diana smiled at him. “What can I carry?”

“The scramble and the - is that toast ready, kiddo?” Steve asked, turning around just in time to see Karim shov a piece in his mouth.

His cheeks bulged: “Yeth, Unka Stev.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. Diana chuckled even as she reached around Steve to snag a piece of turkey bacon from the plate.

“I’m under assault on all fronts,” Steve complained. “Okay. Everything but the last batch of pancakes can go. I’ll bring those out. You can sort it out among yourselves. Now get the hell out of my kitchen.”

Diana laughed at him, took a moment to turn his face toward him and kiss him deeply. She tasted like toothpaste and bacon and it clashed with the two cups of coffee he had already had. He did not care. Behind them, Karim made a gagging sound, grabbed a couple plates and bolted from the kitchen.

Steve laughed when they parted and tucked a stray few strands of hair behind Diana’s ear. “Oh good, he’s at that age.”

“It certainly seems so,” Diana said and there was something amused in her voice. “We will have to keep that in mind.”

No one ever believed him about the little streak of teasing Diana had in her. It was their loss.

He kissed her again, in their old kitchen, and the smells were all wrong for it but for a moment he was just waiting to hear the shrieks of the children playing outside and for Farah to bustle through
and snap a dish towel at them.

Diana broke away instead, regretfully. “The food will get cold.”

“Mmm,” Steve replied. He was tempted to say hang it all and leave it to burn on the stove but there was laughter coming from the garden.

They had years of not being able to keep their hands off each other in front of them. Not everyone they loved had the same amount of time.

Diana kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t be too long with those pancakes.”

She gave him a smile as she pushed through the back door. Steve watched through the window for a moment. There was one long tendril of hair Diana had missed when she put her hair up. It was a dark, soft line down the back of her neck.

And she had stolen one of his shirts again, tied it up on one side so it wasn’t as loose on her.

There was a general cheer that went up as the food came out. Steve smiled to himself and poured more batter into the frying pan. He had not made an impromptu feast for so many people since...the last time may have been the day after Farah’s funeral, in that very kitchen.

Technically, they still owned the house and had then too but they had not lived in it for more than a month at a time since the late 1940s. They had offered it as a place to start off when Yasmine and Bobby when they eloped to Scotland at age 17, to the consternation of both their parents, particularly Bobby’s. It had been empty for six months before that. Steve and Diana had been living in Rome when Steve answered a call from a defiant but slightly desperate Yasmine. They eventually made up with their parents – Farah took two days, Sameer a week and the promise they would let him throw them a reception, at least, Bobby’s parents much longer – but they had never moved out.

When Bobby died, two weeks short of his 70th birthday, Ann had moved in with Yasmine – she had divorced her husband in her early 30s and raised their only daughter by herself and more importantly, at the time she had finally retired from her position at Cambridge. When Nadia’s husband – ten years her senior – had died earlier in the year, she had joined them as well.

Sofia, having followed her father’s footsteps into the theatre, was still in London, though she joked about joining the “widows retreat” when her partner – Lou, then Sarah, then both of them together – finally kicked it, as she said.

They were all in his garden again – but it was Nadia’s garden now, mostly – Sameer’s three girls and Ann, Sofia’s partners and one of Yasmine’s children – Leila, Leila’s husband Nasir and Karim, their youngest son. The rest of the family, Sameer’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren would start arriving that afternoon along with Etta’s and Charlie’s. Nearly 150 of them, in all, from as far away as New Zealand. They had had to rent a banquet hall to fit all of them in one place.

It was Steve’s 125 birthday tomorrow. The family was having a reunion for the first time in 25 years to celebrate.

Steve flipped the last pancake onto the plate of them he had been warming in the oven. In the garden, Diana and Ann were arguing about something – likely the translation they had been arguing about for the last two days. That tendril of hair was still loose. Nadia was laughing at them. Karim had added a spot of jam on his nose to do with the sugar on his cheek. Leila was watching them all with a pleased expression on her face. She glanced Steve’s way, saw him doing the same, and winked.
There was a brisk knock at the front door, hardly a beat before a voice called: “Mum? Hello?”

Steve smiled, walking into the hallway. Sofia’s only daughter, Olivia, spotted him and beamed: “Uncle Steve!”

She kissed him on both cheeks and hugged him tightly. “Oh, it's good to see you. Sorry we're late. Someone was fussy last.”

Behind her, her partner Ruth gave him the tired smile of new parents. She was holding a carrier seat with their still rather new baby boy inside.

“Nonsense, you're just in time for breakfast,” Steve said, grinning at her. “We had a late start this morning. They're all in the garden. We ran out of chairs inside.”

Olivia grinned. “That sounds more like Mum than Auntie Yasmine.”

“Oh, if you're mother runs out of chairs at a party, she meant to,” Steve said.

Olivia laughed and looked back at her partner, smiling. Ruth was fishing a bottle out of their bag. She chuckled. “Let's just say the apple doesn't fall far.”

“Oh, shush, you,” Olivia said, kissing her briefly.

There was a sound from the carrier. Olivia grinned. She took it from Ruth and held it up for Steve to see.

“Meet your latest great-great grandnephew,” she said. “Alfie.”

“Hi there, Alfie,” Steve said, he touched the baby’s clenched, tiny hand with one finger. “You giving your mums a hard time?”

Alfie didn't reply, being less than a month old and sleeping still. Steve thought he looked just about the same as all new babies did, a little squished still, so wonderfully, terrifyingly small, and just about perfect even though he was starting to fuss a little in his sleep.

“I know better than to butt in front of his Nana but put me and Diana on the list for some cuddle time when she's through with him,” Steve said.

“It's going to be a long list,” Ruth said dryly.

“That's why we got a hotel room,” Olivia told her, kissing her briefly. “For when we need to steal our baby back from all the aunties.”

“Let’s get some breakfast in you both before he wakes up and starts getting passed around,” Steve said, walking back down the hallway. “Diana told me I wasn't allowed to ask but please tell me he's not named after the movie.”

Ruth laughed. “He's named after my father.”

“I've got those, Uncle Steve,” Olivia told him, taking the pancakes from him. “Ruth’s got the baby. I've got to give everyone some reason to pay attention to me.”

“Good luck with that,” Steve said.

The pancakes did not receive the attention the rest of breakfast did, not with a baby in the mix. Not with anyone except Karim, who wrinkled his nose at his new something-cousin and ate half the
stack. Ruth and Olivia split the rest while the aunts fought over who got the baby once his grandparents gave him up.

Steve sat beside Diana and put his arm around her, brushing his thumb across the skin under that streak of dark hair on the back of her neck. She raised an eyebrow at him. He leaned closer and kissed the corner of her mouth, soft and quick.

“You had a bit of jam there,” he said, though she didn't and she knew it.

Diana smiled and said quietly. “Did you get it all?”

“I'll have to check more thoroughly later,” Steve told her.

She leaned closer, their foreheads almost touching. “I will hold you to that.”

“You know,” Ann said, “I don't remember you two being this bad when I was a child. And here I thought I was fairly observant.”

Leila snorted. “When you have children running around, you learn to get your hands off each other quickly.”

“I think you were occupied with unravelling bigger mysteries at the time,” Diana said, leaning back and giving her an amused look.

Ann looked slightly defiant, still, after all these years. Steve had to turn his head to hide his smile. Old age gave it a dignity that youth couldn't claim. Ann’s glare, infamous among her students, came from behind glasses now, her hair was silver and she had her own cane. But part of Steve would always see a twelve-year-old, stubborn and sure in the way only young people could be, behind it.

“I can't believe you didn't tell me,” Nadia said, unexpectedly. It was softened, somewhat – she had won the baby battle and Alfie was trying to grab her necklace and making spit bubbles at her. “Honestly, Ann. I had to wait until my parents told me when I was 17.”

Ann sniffed. “It was a secret, you know.”

“I taught you how to pick locks!” Nadia said. “You couldn't have found the armour without that and you didn't even tell me about it!”

Steve laughed. Diana looked thoughtful. “I did always wonder about that.”

“Should have known it was really Sameer’s fault,” Steve said.

“It could have been worse,” Yasmine said. “I only told Bobby after we had been married for nearly ten years.”

“My brother, God rest him, was too kind hearted to ever be suspicious,” Ann said. “It wouldn't have occurred to him to ask.”

“He would have thought it was all the carrots,” Yasmine said slyly.

The sisters cackled and Steve and Diana joined in. Ann nearly fell of her chair, laughing. Everyone under the age of 60 just looked confused.

“Oh bless him,” Yasmine said, patting her neck where she wore Bobby’s wedding ring on a gold chain. “I miss that man. Even if he wanted carrot cake for his birthday every year. You made it for us too often, it imprinted on him.”
“Steve is not allowed to make it anymore,” Diana said, surprising everyone but Steve with her vehemence. “I hate carrot cake.”

That got them all going again. The younger set looked at them in confused amusement, the way young people sometimes looked at their parents when they didn't quite understand them and thought they might be going a little bit dotty.

Steve was well aware that he and Diana changed the family dynamics. There was a point in each generation where they were adopted as contemporaries instead of part of the older generation. Diana was timeless and Steve was adaptable, he worked hard to make sure they did not become anachronisms. Some of the later generations forgot that they were not their parents’ friends or even grandparents’ friends, originally, until something – a joke or a reference or story – reminded them.

Even Steve could forget sometimes. He would say something to one of Sameer’s now middle aged grandchildren and forget that they had only ever known him for a brief time when they were very young. Steve had held Charlie’s first great-great-great granddaughter a few months ago. None of Charlie’s children – toddlers when Steve met Charlie in the trenches in 1915 – had lived to see her born. They had named her after Charlie.

It was a strange thing, wonderful and terrible, to live so long. He knew that Diana’s and his kept the three families together when they might have drifted apart otherwise – it was always easier when there was a centre for everyone to come together around, but each generation choose to keep them in their lives, part of the family, again and again.

It was something else, something indescribably valuable, for a man who had lost all the family he had in the world before he went to war and a woman who had walked away from hers for the sake of the world.

New arrivals streamed in and out all through the day. Even having been thoroughly renovated, the house only fit so many. Charlie’s and Etta’s families had taken over the hotel just outside of town where they were having the party. The rest of Sameer’s had booked up the village’s bed and breakfasts.

But they all dropped by when they first arrived. After breakfast, Steve only saw Diana in passing, pressing his hand against her back and a kiss to the corner of her lips when they found themselves, briefly, in the same room. She was always smiling at him, one eyebrow raised, not quite an I-told-you-so, because that was not Diana’s way, but knowing and full of promise.

They only found one moment alone together during the day. Mostly alone. Steve had stepped into what was once their study – now the library, a necessity for the voracious readers of the house – because it was quiet.

Little Alfie had fallen asleep in his arms in between some of Charlie’s descendants leaving – Steve had been the first person to take Colin up in an air plane, he had become a career officer in the RAF – and Etta’s son – who looked so much like his father it broke Steve’s heart a little – arriving.

Steve had sent Karim to go to find Ruth or Olivia to take Alfie upstairs for a nap but until they did, Steve settled in the plush, worn armchair in the corner with his newest nephew.

Alfie took after Ruth, Steve thought, looking at his precious little face, dark skinned and even tempered, with eyelashes for days. Steve hoped he got her kindness and her curiosity and that look she gave people when they were trying to bullshit her. He hoped he got Olivia’s singing voice and her laughter and the same number of lines that were around her eyes from smiling so much.
“Here you are.”

Steve looked up to Diana’s smile as she came into the room. He put his finger to his lips.

“Someone is finally sleeping,” he said quietly.

“Do you need a rescue?” Diana asked and he loved the way her smile went soft and how she came and perched on the arm of the chair, looking down at the sleeping baby in his arms.

“No. Karim has gone to get one of his mums,” Steve told her. “I would be tempted to hide out if Stan wasn’t supposed to be here soon.”

“I can see why you would be tempted,” Diana said. She kissed him lightly before stroking a gentle finger over Alfie’s pudgy cheek. “He is very cute.”

They had never tried to have children but they had never tried to prevent a pregnancy either. It just did not seem meant to be. It did not bother Steve, there was so much love and kinship in the family that had claimed them, the nieces and nephews that were like children and grandchildren to them. He was only wistful, occasionally, for the children they might have had, the mother he knew Diana would have been and the father he thought he could have been.

“Stan might be late,” Steve offered. “I’m sure Ruth and Olivia wouldn’t mind the break if he is.”

“William Stanley has never been late a day in his life,” Diana said. “And I am not so sure Olivia and Ruth would not prefer some time with their son as his great-aunts have to enthusiastically monopolised his company.”

“You had some baby time while we were cleaning up after breakfast,” Steve said, teasingly. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Diana kissed his forehead. “I was hardly going to interfere when Ann and Nadia claimed your time.”

“You’ve been monopolising Ann whenever the two of you have had a spare moment,” Steve said. “I had to get some time with my girls in there sometime.”

“You know we are having an argument over a translation,” Diana said and Steve grinned at the happy fondness in her voice.

“Yes, I know,” Steve chuckled. “Who is winning now?”

Diana wrinkled her nose and Steve knew, whatever her answer was, she wasn't, not as decisively as she would have liked. The door creaked open before she could answer. Ruth stuck her head in, slipping inside when she saw them.

“There's my little man,” Ruth said. Steve relinquished the warm weight of his great-grandnephew. Alfie smacked his lips a few times but did not wake. Ruth smiled at Steve and Diana. “Thanks for looking after him. We're going to go back to our B&B for a while before the next crowd gets here. Maryam’s just pulled up but...”

Steve chuckled. “She's not one for babies.”

“She looks like hell too, so it's a good time to make our escape,” Ruth agreed. “The aunties have someone else to fuss over for the moment.”

“We'll see you tomorrow, then,” Steve said, as Ruth leaned over to kiss Diana on the cheek.
Ruth closed the door behind her as she left. They had an out if they wanted it.

Diana and Steve exchanged looks. Diana kissed him, all too briefly on the lips again. “Go rescue our Maryam. I will serve as a distraction.”

“That's kind of you,” Steve said.

“I am not finished my argument with Ann.”

Steve laughed. “I take it back.”

She smiled and gave him a hand up. It took them a moment to find his cane – Karim had left it leaning against the bookcase. There were twelve steps between the chair and the hallway, Steve had counted them before, but they linked arms all the same until they parted with a kiss in the hallway.

Steve found Maryam in the kitchen, having given her mother and sister the slip. Her eyes were bloodshot, her clothing was rumpled and she was drinking what had to be stone cold coffee. She looked like she had not slept at all since they had last seen her. She had travelled with them from Paris but stayed in London for a few days for a medical conference.

“How was the conference?” Steve asked, resisting the urge to fuss.

“I didn't get in a shouting match with anyone, so better than the last one,” Maryam said dryly. “Dr. Chen and I skipped the last two sessions in favour of going to her lab. She's doing some fascinating work on skin grafts and cell regeneration that might have some overlap with my work.”

“Did you sleep at all?” Steve asked. He dumped out the old coffee grinds and started to make a new pot. There was, he knew, no point in attempting to make decaf. Maryam could drink the whole pot and go to sleep ten minutes later.

Dr. Maryam Davies was a middle-aged, enormously accomplished woman, who had personally made Steve’s life immeasurably better. She was perpetually grumpy, blunt, and had no bedside manner to speak of. She had a perfectly lovely relationship with her twin sister and parents and she hardly had more in common with Steve and Diana than some of their other nieces and nephews.

Steve worried about her as if she was his own daughter. He always had.

She was no less stubbornly devoted to him and Diana.

“No,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Did you do your oxygen therapy this morning?”

“No,” Steve answered truthfully. Her chin jutted out like it always did when she was about to argue her point. Steve raised his hands in preemptive surrender. “I will tonight. I promise.”

“You're already supposed to be doing it tonight,” Maryam said. “Two hours in the morning and two at night, since you won't make things easy on yourself and sleep with it.”

“It's annoying to sleep with,” Steve said.

Maryam harrumphed at him. “If I wasn't so tired, I would lecture you.”

Steve poured her a fresh cup of coffee. Maryam took it without a word. She took a sip, grimacing.

“The milk and sugar are right behind you,” Steve told her.

Maryam shrugged. “Too far.”
Steve huffed a laugh. He reached past her and offered her the milk, then the sugar. She smirked at him before adding both to her coffee.

“Diana’s running interference. You should go upstairs, sack out while you can,” Steve told her.

“Leila will be annoyed,” Maryam said.

“Leila will probably sneak up and join you,” Steve replied. “Twin intuition and all.”

“Again, if I wasn’t so tired, I would smack you,” Maryam said but she looked tempted. “Load of bollocks.”

“I’ll close my eyes so you can take the coffee pot,” Steve told her.

“Deal,” Maryam said. She took the coffee but then put it down and, unexpectedly, hugged him from behind for a moment. “If you skip your therapy again, I’ll fucking know.”

Steve laughed. “Go to bed!”

Maryam disappeared up the back stairs in short order. Steve could hear Ann and Diana’s raised voices when the door swung shut behind her. Leila appeared less than five minutes later. She raised an eyebrow at him. Steve simply pointed up. She grinned, paused long enough to grab a handful of cookies, like she was a teenager again, and a bottle of Bailey’s, because she was not and she had spotted the missing coffee pot, and headed after her sister.

Steve smiled to himself and went out to join the rest of the family. By the time everyone who was going to drop by had, it was late. Nadia had given up and gone to bed long ago and Yasmine and Nasir, Leila’s husband, had kicked him out of the kitchen when he tried to help clean up. Ann and Diana were in the study together, bent over a pile of very old books and one glimpse through the crack in the door told him he did not want to get in the middle of that.

Steve settled in bed with a book, his nasal cannula in and his oxygen tank on, to wait for Diana. Maryam was not above checking the tank levels tomorrow and as irritating as he found it, the few hours of supplemental oxygen Steve would put up with helped overall. Everything was less exhausting when he was getting closer to the oxygen levels his body should get, despite his shoddy lungs.

He should have expected to fall asleep – it had been a long day – but it still surprised him to blink awake to dim lamp light as Diana pulled the book from his heavy fingers.

She looked at him and smiled, perching on the bed after she put it aside just to smooth a hand over his hair and kiss him.

“Time is it?” he asked.

“Late,” she said. “Go back to sleep.”

“Who won the debate?” he asked instead.

“Neither of us. We reached a greater understanding through the discussion,” Diana told him as she stood and began to undress. “At least, on that section of text. The broader point remains.”

Steve grinned helpless. He loved her for so many reasons. “This is going to lead to a flurry of letters in a language no one but the two of you speak, isn’t it?”
Diana did not deny it. “I will translate her puns for you.”

She pulled on a loose shirt and boxer shorts. He still wore old fashioned pyjamas, at least, he did when there was company just down the hall. They covered the scars better. He had become more comfortable with them, that did not mean he wanted everyone to see them.

Neither of them wore so much when they were at home.

“They never make sense when you translate them,” Steve told her. “But I appreciate the effort.”

He shifted as she got into bed with him and went to slip off the nasal cannula – they tended to curl together to sleep and it got tangled.

“No,” Diana said, stopping him. “Leila will run interference for us until at least 10:00 a.m. if you leave it on overnight. I do not know what Maryam promised her in exchange but I accepted on your behalf.”

“Ugh,” Steve said, letting his head thump back on the pillows. “We have a family of sneaks.”

She kissed his jaw and dropped her arm across his chest, curling against his side more carefully than usual. “You taught them too well.”

“Mmm, I think the blame for that should be shared,” he said around a yawn. Diana chuckled and pressed a kiss against his shoulder that he barely felt. It was always easier to fall asleep when she was beside him.

It was hardly even light outside when he woke to her smile and a lingering kiss. They jettisoned the supplemental oxygen quickly – before it got really tangled – and between Diana’s mouth and her touch and her, just, all of her, Steve had forgotten about his own damn birthday by the time the sun had risen full and they were ready to crawl out of bed and go downstairs.

Steve headed to the kitchen because likely as not, no one had made breakfast. He opened the door and stopped so abruptly Diana ran into his back.

The kitchen floor and table and counter were strewn with balloons.

Diana laughed at him as Steve stared, flabbergasted.

“Happy birthday, old man,” Maryam said, toasting him with her coffee mug, almost lost among the balloons on the kitchen table.

Leila kissed him on the cheek and told him: “It was Karim’s idea. It’s already giving mum conniptions. Auntie Nadia thinks it’s hilarious.”

Karim barrelled into the room, a half blown balloon in his mouth. He let it go when he saw Steve and it buzzed halfway across the room before landing in a sad heap on the kitchen floor.

“Did we surprise you?” Karim asked, bouncing in excitement. “Do you like it, Uncle Steve?”

Steve laughed and hugged him. Karim even let Steve ruffle his hair, which he generally ducked away from, being a teenager. “It’s great!”

“Did you get a picture, Auntie Maryam?” Karim asked Maryam, so excited he was bouncing.
“No, kiddo,” Maryam said. “I need more coffee before things like that.”

“Aw!” Karim pouted.

“We can take one now,” Diana offered.

“Go ask your dad for the camera and be careful!” Leila said as Karim whooped and dashed from the room.

“Is this how you kept him occupied this morning?” Diana asked, deeply amused.

“It was his idea, we just gave him more balloons than strictly necessary,” Leila smiled. “Nasir promised the aunts he would help Karim clean them up.”

“I think it’s going to be all hands on deck for that,” Maryam said.

“We can take some to the party – ah,” Leila said as Karim raced back into the room and shoved a camera at her. “Are you going to be in the picture then?”

“Yes!” Karim said, grabbing a balloon from the floor and giving it to Steve. “You should hold it up.”

“Oh, like this?” Steve said, holding it up above his head. Karim nodded and Steve laughed. “Okay.”

“Okay, ready?” Leila asked, shuffle between the balloons. Diana’s arm went around his waist and he smiled at her. She put her other hand on Karim’s shoulder. He was beaming.

“One, two, three, cheese!” Leila said and snapped a couple photos, for good measure. Karim scampered over to see.

“This is going to make breakfast interesting,” Steve said to Diana.

She snorted and nudged a balloon with her foot. “I will see if I can get Karim to herd these into the library.”

“Oh, Ann’s going to love that. I thought you said you had come to an agreement,” Steve said.

“On that section of text,” Diana repeated. “The broader point remains.”

She smiled and Steve had to kiss it, if only briefly.

“Why the hell are there balloons in the hallway?”

Steve turned to see Jenny stride into the kitchen, stop and stare.

“This is worse,” she said flatly.

Karim grabbed the camera from his mother and snapped a picture of her. Behind her, Alex folded himself nearly in two, laughing.

“No,” Jenny said, in the same flat tone. “I’ll say happy birthday later.”

“We are moving them into the study,” Diana said, winking at Karim even as she took long strides and linked her arm with Jenny’s. “You can help.”

Karim was cackling too much to agree verbally but judging by the wave of balloons he began to kick in that direction, he thought it was a good idea. Jenny looked like she was going to kill someone but
she did not dare contradict Diana.

“Come on, Alex,” Steve called. He batted the balloon he was holding in Maryam’s general direction. She glared at him but did not budge. “You can help me with the eggs.”

Alex seemed glad to get out of Jenny’s way.

“Happy Birthday, Uncle Steve,” he said, wrapping Steve in a long-limbed bear hug before clearing a path between them and the counter so it would be easier for Steve to get there.

“Thanks,” Steve said.

Alex grinned as they cleared away the layer of balloons on the counter top in search of the frying pan.

The parade of relatives continued throughout the morning and early afternoon. Everyone wanted to drop in and say hello when they first arrived in town. It did not seem to matter that they were all going to be together in a few hours.

Diana abandoned Steve to do most of the socialising after Maryam started a new skirmish by mentioning casually that really, given the context, Ann and Diana were both wrong, it sounded like what they were arguing about was actually a medical process that had been lost to time.

Ann and Diana swiftly formed an alliance against her. Steve honestly could not tell if Maryam was sincere or being contrary for the sake of being contrary. Neither would surprise him.

At 2 p.m., the fleet of visiting cars abruptly left on some prearranged signal and Leila and Yasmine all but kicked them out of the house.

“It’s not a surprise party,” Steve said because he felt he should put up some kind of protest. “We can help set up.”

Ann shrugged. “There’s no making sense of the younger generation. You would think you would have learned that by now.”

“They want to decorate without you underfoot,” Nadia said, more charitably.

“It’s hardly festive to make you hang your own happy birthday banner,” Diana told him because of course she was in on it.

“Don’t show up before 4 p.m.,” Ann warned them, handing Diana a set of keys. “Give them a chance to get half done at least.”

She shut the door rather more firmly than Steve thought was warranted until he turned around and saw Diana’s face.

Steve was fairly sure at that point in their relationship, he had seen every expression possible on Diana’s face. He had enthusiastically become an expert on the nuances of each minor change, each frown and smile and roll of her eyes. He had devoted years of study to every aspect of it.

Ann had given them the keys to Yasmine’s Skoda.

Diana was looking at it like she could make the earth swallow it up by force of will alone.

Steve actually wanted to make it to his birthday party, otherwise he would have laughed and not even blamed her when she killed him. She just looked so dismayed.
Diana looked at him and knew anyway because he had not been able to hide anything from her for decades. He shrugged: “Does this mean Ann wins?”

If anything her gaze turned more murderous. “You could drive.”

“Okay,” Steve said and held his hand out for the keys, immediately calling her bluff. “I’ll drive.”

Over the years, Diana had developed a taste not only for driving but for driving very fast and shiny cars. The Skoda was an insult but not enough to keep her from getting behind the wheel. She did not overly enjoy being a passenger.

Diana made a face at him but got in the car, scowling. Steve thought he saw Ann’s gleeful face in the window for a moment when he was getting in.

The graveyard was just outside of the village, not a far drive at all. They stopped at a grocery store on the way out of town and bought flowers on their way. They had not been the only ones to stop by, the graves were neatly littered with bouquets and letters. The consequence, Steve imagined, of so many relatives coming home at once.

Charlie and his wife were buried near Inverness, where they had lived, but Ed and Etta and Sameer and Farah were all there. Ed had lived in the village his whole life, except for his time away in the Navy during the war – Etta had not been about to let death part them for all that she outlived him by nearly 15 years. Farah had chosen the same cemetery for Sameer and herself when he died, near their children, with their friends, and a place she knew Steve and Diana would come back to.

Bobby was here too now. Yasmine kept threatening to leave a lawn chair leaning against the back of his gravestone yet – the custodian had objected strongly – but she hadn’t yet. She still came to talk him for hours whenever the weather was good.

Steve did not hold much with talking at grave sites as if there was someone there to hear. He never had. The last time he had tried had been at his mother’s grave and he had been so sure, down to his marrow, that she wasn't listening, that no one was listening. He had not tried again. He had written a letter to Charlie, once, all the things he regretted not saying while he was alive. It had not made him feel any better either.

In a strange way, he thought graveyards were for the living, for all that they were memorials to the dead. He thought you kept a person with you by the way you carried their memory, by the way they lived on inside you. Flowers at a gravesite were a marker that this was a person who was still loved, who was worth remembering.

Still, if Steve’s luck ever ran out, he wanted to be buried here, with the people he had loved.

Diana entwined her fingers with his. She did not believe the same things he did. Memorials were important to her; honouring the dead was important to her. It had to be done right or it was the worst, final insult.

“Maybe not the best place to come on your birthday,” Diana said eventually.

Steve shrugged. They were standing in front of Etta and Ed’s grave. “I was the one who suggested it. We hadn’t visited yet and I suspect we will be busy for the next few days. And...I still miss them. More on days like this.”

Steve could not say who moved first. They seemed to both lean closer together at the same moment. Steve put his arm around Diana’s waist and she kissed his temple.
“Etta would have enjoyed the balloons this morning,” Diana said.

Steve smiled a little. “Sameer would have made the worst speech. I swear he knew every embarrassing thing I ever did.”

“It would have been the best speech, then,” Diana said, her smile had gone soft. “And Charlie would have sung for you.”

“Mm,” Steve hummed but went quiet, after. Charlie had not sung often, anymore, near the end.

“It is too bad Napi could not come,” Diana said.

Napi had not travelled abroad much in the past few decades. “We should go visit him soon.”

“We will call him tomorrow,” Diana agreed.

Steve checked the watch Diana had bought him just after the Second World War had ended. “We should go or they’ll start the party without us.”

“You would not want to be late for your own birthday party,” Diana teased.

“This is the last one,” Steve said. “I’m not having anymore.”

“You have been saying that ever since you turned 100,” Diana said. She took his arm as they walked back toward the parking lot. “We have been ignoring you.”

“Any excuse for a party, I guess,” Steve said.

Diana grinned at him, eyes dancing. “You make for an excellent excuse.”

Steve laughed. “Thanks, I think.”

The party was just starting when they arrived. Someone – or several someone's – had shuffled the balloons over from the house and scattered them all over the banquet hall. At least, Steve hoped they were from the house and Karim had not just blown up more.

It took Steve over an hour to get more than five feet from the door – the room felt full when they got there and people just kept arriving – and only then because Maryam marched through the crowd and demanded he sit down, now. Someone, he did not see exactly who, brought him a plate from the buffet and he escaped the crowd three times to sway on the makeshift dance floor with Diana.

Steve thought he had successfully imposed a ban on presents. He would discover the next day that everyone had gotten around that by dropping them off directly at the house while they were out.

He thought he had also successfully banned speeches.

Just family, he had said. Just socialising, he had said. He didn't need anything more.

He should have known better than to trust it.

The music cut off and Colin let out an ear piercing whistle to get the room quiet. “Oi, shut up!”

There was a pause, then someone ran forward with a step stool. Colin offered his hand and then Ann’s silver head appeared over the crowd. She was standing on a chair with a bullhorn. Colin and her daughter hovered behind her anxiously.
Steve groaned. Everyone close enough to hear him laughed. Diana squeezed his shoulders. He looked up to see her grinning widely, the corners of her eyes crinkling.

“Steve made everyone promise no speeches,” Ann said. Everyone booed. Ann glared until they stopped. “No, we agreed. So this is not a speech. This is an announcement.”

She grinned. “It is time for the cake.”

It got more applause than was warranted, particularly since Colin was helping Ann down in the next moment. Steve looked up at Diana, confused.

The cakes came streaming out, ten of them, all different kinds and far too large, one after another, ten candles blazing on each one, laid out on the long table until the last one was placed right in front of him with 15 candles on top.

Happy birthday rang through the room, devolving into thundering competing renditions of *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow* from Charlie and Sameer’s families and *Why Were You Born So Beautiful* from Etta’s.

Steve laughed until he cried. He couldn't even speak; he was laughing so hard.

Leila stood there with her hands on her hips, beaming, radiating pride at her plans coming to fruition. Nadia and Yasmine and Sofia were cackling with laughter. Jenny had a crooked party hat on, looking nonplussed. Maryam was hovering close, no doubt calculating all the breath he would need to blow out the candles.

“Okay, okay,” Steve croaked, throat sore and lungs aching from laughing so hard and so incredibly happy. Ann handed him a bullhorn and he had to stop to laugh again.

“Okay,” he said, through the bullhorn this time. “I'm going to need some help blowing these out.”

He felt Diana’s hands on his shoulders, sliding down to hug him from behind. He closed his eyes for just a moment and inhaled as deeply as he could. She kissed the top of his head. God, he loved her.

“Okay,” he said, opening his eyes, their family crowded around them in the glow of the candles. “One, two, three!”

They blew them out together.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be a short, happy chapter because I wanted to show Steve and Diana surrounded by family and had the idea for the scene at the end (originally it was supposed to be a video Bruce saw on Diana's phone in the sequel to this - the sequel to this is already 16,279 words, btw.)

I don't know what happened. I have family trees for Etta, Charlie and Sameer now.

In case relations need to be explained:
Sameer and Farah had three daughters. Nadia married Mohammed (deceased) and had unnamed children who are just part of the crowd. Yasmine married Bobby (deceased) and had Maryam and Leila who married Nasir and had two children, one of whom is Karim. Sofia and Lou and Sarah are doing their own thing but Sofia and Lou had Olivia who married Ruth and had Alfie.

Colin is Charlie's great-grandson. Jenny is Etta's granddaughter. Alex is Charlie's great-great grandson's.

I think that's everyone mentioned by name.

I promise Napi will return. I haven't forgotten about him. He's also a much larger chunk of the sequel.

The next present-working-backwards chapter will deal more explicitly with how Steve's health has improved...although not how he's not ageing, though I will get to that. But, basically, having a doctor and modern medicine helps. I don't actually know much about medicine, though, particularly the respiratory part of it - I know more about hip replacements. So I hope it doesn't come across too much as just plonking research into the story.

I would really love to hear what people think of this chapter because I am not entirely sure what I think of it.

Oh, and the Why Were You Born So Beautiful song is a weird song that my family sings after Happy Birthday. We think it originated in the commonwealth Navy, although it seems to have largely found a home in Australia. It is terrible and hilarious.
Chapter 10 Part 1

England - 1946

Sameer and Farah waited until Diana got back from Japan to move out. Steve had recovered by then but neither of them wanted to leave him alone in the house that had so recently been full, not even with Etta right down the street.

But two weeks after Diana returned, they were gone, back to London.

The house seemed very quiet.

Diana did not like it. It did not feel like the home they had made for themselves, not like it used to.

Steve was quieter too. Diana knew he missed the children, that he had liked having their friends so entwined in their lives. But Diana suspected he was taking his lead from her in not trying to adapt too quickly to the changes in their lives.

He was waiting for her.

Diana had begun to tell him about what she had seen in the camps and the aftermath of the a-bombs and while digging through the rubble during the Blitz. She understood better now why he only spoke of his war in the depths of night, when the pain kept him from sleeping and she could not properly see his face. He listened and he held her and he did not offer false comfort when there was none to be found.

Between the late nights he stayed up with her and the sudden silence brought on by the yawning absence of their friends and the children, Diana often found him napping around the house. It was an unexpected pleasure, the sight of him asleep with a book hanging from his hands in the armchair in their living room. She found herself sitting and watching his chest rise and fall sometimes, and the way the light from the window changed the colour of the hair that hung down into his face.

He always woke when she touched him, to rescue his book before it slipped from his fingers or to slid her hand along his jaw, cupping his face in her hand. He always, always smiled, eyes light, when he opened his eyes and saw her.

Whatever else Diana felt, whatever else she struggled with, her heart was very full of love for him when he looked at her like that.

She found Steve standing pensive over their garden one day, his garden, in truth, for he had spent hours labouring in it with the children. Her heart ached for a moment but it was easy to slip her hands around his waist and put her chin on his shoulder. He covered her hands with his own and smiled distractedly at her.

She waited for him to speak. They had learned, by now, when to push each other and when to be patient.

Finally, he patted her hands and muttered, more to himself than anything: “What the hell am I going to do with all these fucking carrots?”
Diana could not help but laugh. It exploded out of her. They stared at each other for a moment. Then Steve’s lips twitched and they were both howling and crying with laughter, holding on to each other.

“Cake, I'll make more cake,” Steve said, finally.

Diana groaned: “Please, no.”

It set them off again. They could not seem to stop until Diana’s stomach hurt and Steve was gasping and clutching at his chest.

“Oh, it hurts, it hurts,” Steve managed but his eyes were smiling instead of quiet, instead of waiting, for the first time in so long.

Diana kissed him then, sweetly. There was not a force on earth that could have kept her from his smiling lips. His hands found the small of her back and her fingers cupped his face.

They pulled apart just to look at each other.

“I will eat whatever you make with the carrots,” she told him. “Even more fucking carrot cake.”

Steve huffed a laugh but his eyes went so soft. It was an expression she knew well, the one she would always picture when she thought of what true, honest love looked like on the face of a man.

“We will have Etta and Ed over for dinner, when their daughters are visiting, maybe,” Steve said. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Yes,” Diana agreed. “But not right now.”

She kissed him again softly, hungrily, and oh, it was like that sometimes between them, as if everything was new again but also so wonderfully familiar it was an ache, sweet and low in their bodies. As if they were not meant to be apart.

They did not make it out of the garden or fully out of their clothing. Diana loved Steve like that, against the grass, flushed, the smell of green and Earth all around them and Steve loved Diana, her face smiling and sure, against the cloudless blue of his beloved sky.

Neither of them could stand retreating from the world for long. Diana was still sure of herself, impossible to shake from her deepest convictions, no matter how many wounds man’s world sought to inflict. Steve was a man who had found paradise and turned around to walk back into war because he could not stand to live and do nothing while others were dying.

It had been different, after their first war, when there was Steve’s long and arduous recovery to focus on, that they had to focus on. It seemed terrible to Diana sometimes but Steve had improved as much as the medicine of man’s world seemed to allow. Most days, he was fine with his cane so long as he did not walk too far or too fast. He was often exhausted by the end of a busy day but usually only outside irritants made him wheeze and cough anymore.

There were setbacks. A cold would see him bedridden for days upon days, dizzy when he tried to stand. The smog and pollution of cities made him wheeze. A misaligned step could mean his leg giving out beneath him.

They would handle the setbacks as they came. They had experience with it now and though set backs were not as infrequent as Diana would like, they were not as frequent as they had once been. They had a better idea of what to avoid to prevent them and Steve had worked hard at the therapies the doctors recommended that seemed to help.
There was nothing more that could be done than that, it seemed. It suited neither of them to hide away from the world forever.

They went to London with Etta and Ed, when Sameer was cast in a minor role in *Peace in Our Time*. The smog of London was hard on Steve – he could only stay outside for so long and joked that he should have brought a gas mask with him, which neither Diana nor Sameer found amusing – but nothing, nothing, could have kept them from Sameer’s debut on the London stage.

They arrived two weeks early so Steve would have time to recover if he needed it and because the idea of an extended trip appealed to both couples. Etta and Ed got a hotel and disappeared into it – their youngest daughter had kept her position after the war and was using them as frequent babysitters.

Steve and Diana wanted to spend more time with Sameer, Farah and the girls. Sameer and Farah insisted they stay with them – Sameer had even given up smoking so they could. Ann wrote them frequently, as she had promised to, and she was eager to see them again. Diana had packed a trunk of books for her.

They had seen Sameer and Farah and the girls since they moved out, of course, but never for an extended stay. Sameer was at the theatre for long hours in the run up to the opening and Farah all but locked Steve in the kitchen to teach him to cook properly when they first arrived – rationing had been relaxed and Sameer had a deft hand when it came to the black market.

Sofia had become even more of a force of nature as she got older. Excited by the idea of opening night, she corralled her sisters into putting on their own small plays. Yasmine giggled through all of her lines and Nadia much preferred writing their plays to acting in them but Sofia did not seem to notice or care, carrying on with an aplomb that made her father literally stand up and cheer.

Diana thought the noise was good for them, even if London itself had not particularly grown on her. She disliked the days Steve could not join them on their excursions around the city – the pea-souper days, as Farah called them – when the air seemed to choke him and everything smelled and Diana thought the air felt thick and slimy. Steve still seemed impossibly fond of it; he liked cities in a way she did not.

But they both loved being with their friends again. They went to the British museum with the girls, one day. Etta and Ed joined them and Diana could not think of a recent day when she had had so much fun.

Ed and Etta strolled along arm in arm, Ed nodding along as Etta kept up a running, irreverent commentary on everything that kept making Steve laugh. Nadia pulled Steve away from time to time, to show him something she was too shy to point out to the whole group. Farah thought it was adorable and kept saying so to Sameer, who was trying to keep up with Sofia’s demands for his attention, never an easy feat. Yasmine kept running up, throwing her arms around Diana’s waist and hugging her tightly.

Etta pulled out the camera at the end of the afternoon. It was new and only slightly less cumbersome than her old one.

“We’ve so rarely been all together since the end of the war,” Etta said. “I thought we might want a memento.”

“I’ll take it,” Steve offered, as the rest of them began shuffling into place.

“No, no. We’ll get someone else to, it's quite easy to work, really,” Etta said.
“I don’t mind,” Steve told her. “I can take it.”

“The problem with that is then you won’t be in it,” Etta told him. “Which rather defeats the point of a group photo, doesn’t it?”

Steve was beginning to look frustrated and embarrassed. He turned and spoke quietly so the children would not be able to hear him as well. “Etta, you don’t want me in the photo.”

“I think I do,” Etta said, smiling but not budging an inch. “Since it’s my film and camera and I am the one composing it.”

“I know what I look like,” Steve said, more sharply.

“So do I,” Etta said, plainly. “I am not making fun of you or brooking your nonsense, Steven Trevor. Get in the picture.”

For a moment Steve looked angry and hurt. He turned back towards them and for a moment Diana thought he was going to stalk away before he met her eyes. His jaw clenched and he walked toward them as if he were walking toward a firing squad.

Diana put her hand low on his back. Sameer reached up to put an arm around his shoulders, ignoring the way Steve tensed and carrying on as if everything was normal.

“Come on, Etta, s’ils vous plait,” Sameer called as she showed a security guard how to work her camera. “We have champagne waiting at home.”

“Where on earth did you get champagne?” Etta asked, hustling over to join them.

“It is all a matter of knowing the right people et voila,” Sameer said. “Now everyone smile.”

Steve did not smile, though he did not turn away while the picture was taken. After, Diana went to touch his cheek and he grabbed her hand instead.

“Please don’t,” he said, very quiet.

Diana thought he was being stubborn and ridiculous and anyone who looked at him in a way that made his shoulders start to hunch was a fool but there was a rawness in his voice and eyes. There was no anger in his voice, only pain and embarrassment. She knew pressing would only hurt him more.

Diana did not like it when the best way to help was to, as Etta said, “Leave well enough alone.”

But when Steve did not want his scars to be touched and spent three days avoiding mirrors, anything anyone said or did would only make things worse.

She held his hand instead, because they were together and she wanted all the world to know, and kissed his other cheek. She could wait for that line of tension to disappear from between his eyebrows and draw his attention away from his scars.

Etta dragged Farah and Diana dress shopping on the kind of a grim, foggy day that Steve did not dare step foot outside on. Ann had descended on the house that morning and – though she scowled when Diana left, not quite finished with their conversation on the Odyssey in the original Greek – she and Nadia were happy to drag Steve into their argument about Asimov and Heinlein while Yasmine sulked about Bobby not being able to visit too.
Etta had packed several dresses and was not satisfied with any of them. Diana was sure it was going to be a long day of shopping.

“They all make me look like a frumpy old woman,” Etta complained as she stormed the dress shops. “I may be older but I refuse to be frumpy after making do all those years.”

She gave Diana a look. “And we’re finding something for you that isn’t patched.”

Diana crossed her arms. Though they likely could have found ways around the rationing, she and Steve had adhered to it strictly. That did not mean that Etta’s lessons about dressing well had not made an impression on her well before the Second World War.

“The dress I brought for opening night is not patched,” Diana said.

“It must be out of date then,” Etta said. Diana rolled her eyes. “Uh uh uh, I know what kind of tailoring is available at home, dear, and you do not sew yourself. I can cite the talents of every dressmaker in the next two villages over. None of them could be called fashionable.”

“It is out of date,” Farah told them both. Etta smiled triumphantly. Diana sighed. “But it suits you wonderfully.”

Farah’s dress had been arranged for months but Steve had mentioned the last few times Diana and Etta had tried to go shopping together and she come along to mediate or laugh at them, Diana was not sure which. Diana did not mind shopping as much as she once did but it did get tedious being shoved into new dresses and put on display for hours on end.

She tended to wear her clothing until Steve could no longer manage to patch them but everyone had, during the war. Before Diana returned from Japan, when rationing was still stricter, Farah had shown Steve how to follow a pattern properly and he had made her a few new things. She had only recently started going back to the dressmaker in town.

And her taste in clothing and Etta’s did not quite match. Even if there was no reason to expect an attack, Diana still wanted to be able to move. She did not see how she would even be able to sit in the dresses Etta brought her with their enormous skirts.

“They were made for you and your tiny waist,” Etta told her. She was trying to persuade her into satin teal dress with a confounding, uncomfortable structure to it.

“Diana prefers the Grecian style,” Farah commented. “And you can hardly blame her.”

She grinned at Diana from where she was lounging on a chair as if she owned the place in part, Diana suspected, because the saleswoman at the previous store they had visited had turned her nose up at Farah. Diana had cornered Etta by the dressing room when she noticed it. Etta had shoved the dress she had been about to try on at the woman and stalked out with them.

“I can so blame her,” Etta said. She walked out of the change room and stood in front of the mirror, looking at herself critically. “If I had a waist like that I would have shown it off at every opportunity.”

“You look lovely in that,” Diana told her.

Etta smoothed her hands down her sides and turned to the side. The dress was a bright red velvet, with short sleeves a skirt that flared out starting just above her waist.

“It does hide any number of excesses,” Etta said. She did not look entirely happy but she looked less
displeased than usual.

Farah snorted. “That is not excess. That is what children leave behind.”

“Oh you should talk,” Etta grumbled good naturedly. “You're not quite as stick thin as Diana but you've hardly got a tummy like I do.”

“I have a torso like tree trunk,” Farah said dryly. “You wouldn’t dislike your curves so much if you didn’t have any.”

“I think you are both very beautiful,” Diana said because she did. Farah was a steady warmth, smart and sarcastic and caring, with sparkling dark eyes and sharp features and long, thick, shining hair. Etta seemed soft but was so strong, in ways Diana had never thought to be. Her white hair suited her, Diana thought, it was like a beacon, and the wrinkles around her eyes did not make them any less large and bright.

Etta and Farah exchanged a look. Farah smiled at her. “Diana, my darling, you think everyone is beautiful.”

“That is not true,” Diana said because it was most certainly not.

“She does always look disgusted when faced with Generals,” Etta said, with a wicked little grin.

“You think anyone without a hateful soul is beautiful,” Farah amended.

“A most admirable trait,” Etta said. She did a quick look around and when she did not see anyone but them blatantly adjusted her girdle and looked at herself in the mirror again. “But not the most helpful for dress buying.”

“I am aware of how society would judge your appearance,” Diana said. “Even if I do not always understand it. Still. That is a flattering dress on you.”

“It really is lovely, Etta,” Farah said. “The colour suits you.”

“The single advantage of going white,” Etta allowed. “My hair doesn't clash so terribly with some colours anymore.”

The saleswoman returned with another dress and bright smile as Etta turned in the mirror again. “Yes, I think it will do.”

The saleswoman looked delighted. Etta and Farah looked downright predatory as they turned on Diana as one. Anyone else would have shrunk from those looks, Diana thought, even Steve.

“Now we've got the treat of dressing her,” Etta told the saleswoman. “Everything will look stunning and she won't like a thing.”

“I have managed to dress myself for years now,” Diana told them all. “There is nothing wrong with the dress I have.”

“The style is early 30s, I would say. Silk, and it does look beautiful on her, but it’s more a day dress than an evening dress,” Farah told the saleswoman. “She prefers movement to fashion and if she has a style, it's Grecian. If the fabric is itchy, you will be lucky to get it on her at all.”

The saleswoman looked Diana over; Diana stared back at her. The saleswoman smiled slowly.

“I think I have just the thing,” she said.
“It's best to bring a few options to ease her into it,” Etta said.

“I am not a horse being fitted for a saddle,” Diana said.

Etta looked as if she disagreed. Farah laughed. The saleswoman looked like she was gearing up for a challenge. Before she left, she looked at Farah. “Would you like me to find something for you to try, as well?”

“No, thank you,” Farah said. “I did not leave things to the last minute the way my friends did.”

“I have a dress,” Diana repeated. “I am perfectly happy with it.”

“Ignore her,” Etta said. The saleswoman did. Diana glowered at her friends. Etta only smiled back and said to Farah. “I am going to go get out of this. Don’t let her escape.”

“Yes ma’am,” Farah said and laughed again at the expression on Diana’s face. “I am glad Steve convinced me to come. And you are having more fun than you let on.”

Diana raised an eyebrow at the accusation. Farah only raised one back. Diana allowed herself a small smile and said quietly: “It is less satisfying if Etta does not think she has won something. But I really do not need a new dress.”

“So few of us need a new dress. I have other dresses that would serve perfectly well for opening night. I did not need a new one and even if I did I could have made it myself,” Farah said. “That is so rarely the point of dress shopping. I wanted it to be special. The dress I found makes me feel ten years younger and makes me look like I have hips, for all I can hardly breath in it. And it’s a surprise – Sameer won't get a glimpse until the after party.”

“Etta told me once that a corset was fashion not armour,” Diana said. “I have come to believe it is both.”

“Hmm. With you, I think it could be more of a sword than a shield,” Farah told her. “If you wanted it to be.”

Diana considered that. Clothing had been a way to disguise herself for as long as she had lived in man’s world.

“Steve and Sameer know about that, better than most men,” Farah said. “I have heard their stories. And I may not be a spy but I have some experience there as well. I was never considered a beauty, for all that you can find it in anyone, and I had no desire to be married off to the first suitor my parents thought appropriate. So, I made myself more and less as I needed to be.”

Etta came out of the dressing room and the saleswoman arrived within moments of each other and before Diana could reply. The saleswoman had a few dresses with her but she put her hand on the top one. She looked almost excited.

“I brought a few dresses but this just came in a few days ago and, well, I'm not even sure who else could wear it,” she said.

Diana took the hanger and looked at it in askance. The saleswoman shook her head. “You have to see it on.”

Diana sighed. “Very well.”

The dress was black and made of silk and velvet. It was black silk underneath, overlaid with a mostly
sheer fabric, except for the bottom of the dress, which had leaves and flowers merging into a black velvet ring. The pattern was echoed around her waist and the bodice of the dress. The straps over her shoulders were sheer as well, with velvet flowers stitched in, blooming over her shoulders and down the sides of her open back.

It was not, she thought, her style. Not entirely uncomfortable but not allowing for as much free and full movement as the dresses Steve had made or modified for her.

She could see the appeal though.

Etta’s mouth dropped open when she stepped out. Farah raised what Diana took to be a pleased eyebrow. The saleswoman looked positively gleeful.

“It is not bad,” Diana said.

“Not bad!” Etta exclaimed. “Good lord. Oh look at the back! Look at the back!”

Diana turned around obligingly. It did not move as terribly as some things Etta had forced her into.

“You have to get that dress,” Etta told her. “You have to.”

“It looks wonderful on you,” the saleswoman added. “I have a shawl that would...”

“No. No shawls, it would ruin the details on the back,” Farah said. She looked Diana up and down critically and nodded. “I haven’t seen anything like it before. You should buy it.”

“It is a fine dress. It just seems silly to buy a dress when I already like the one I have,” Diana protested. It was, she admitted, mostly for show and because Etta seemed so beside herself.

Farah shrugged one shoulder up at her and made a face that was both coy and smug at once. “Your dress is fine and you can wear it if you like but I am buying this one and there is nothing you can do about it finding its way into your baggage. I have three former spies on my side.”

“Steve will be on my side,” Diana told her automatically.

Farah laughed. “Oh Diana, when he sees you in this dress, he will be on my side about you keeping it.”

“If you think I can’t outsmart that man when it comes to hiding a piece of clothing, you have severely underestimated my skills,” Etta told her. She looked at the saleswoman. “We’re taking mine and we’re taking that one, even if we have to squabble over who is paying for it later.”

“If anyone is paying for it, I am,” Diana told them.

The saleswoman and Farah had disappeared by the time Diana changed out of the dress and came out of the changing room. Etta looked smug when Diana looked at her questioningly.

“They’ve gone to settle the bill,” Etta said innocently. “And make sure they’ve got your measurements right. Farah seems to have memorized them.”

“That is not necessary,” Diana said. She had not believed that expression from Etta for years. “That is decidedly fewer dresses than I must usually try on.”

“That’s always been your doing not mine,” Etta said. “I know when to take a victory and run with it. You’ve usually just exhausted me long before that.”
“You have always been the one to choose the outfits,” Diana reminded her.

“It is hardly my fault that you look good in everything and like nothing,” Etta said. “But I will allow that in this case, a good shop girl was worth her weight in gold. Farah’s made a note of the place. She will be coming back here.”

“I should find them before Farah pays her,” Diana said. Etta looked like she might object. “I will buy it myself.”

Etta looked more satisfied. “I have to settle my own bill. I was only meant to distract you while Farah paid so we were sure you would leave with it.”

“I should not have made friends with so many spies,” Diana said.

“Oh no, that was a terrible idea,” Etta said with a teasing smile.

The saleswoman was happy to exchange Farah’s money for Diana’s and make the final tailoring arrangements for them. Diana treated Etta and Farah to lunch after because she could and she wanted to. She nearly stopped, when they got to the restaurant Farah suggested – it was smoky inside and she automatically worried about how Steve’s lungs would handle it before realizing he was at home with the girls.

They dropped Etta off at her hotel – she had private plans in the evening with Ed. Sameer was already at the theatre by the time they got home and the house was suspiciously quiet. Diana and Farah exchanged looks.

There was no trusting Nadia and Ann together, adding the other girls to the mix spelled catastrophe. Steve indulged them all far too much to put a stop to their schemes.

There was a shriek of laughter from the kitchen. Farah winced and put her hands on her hips. “There is no where they could do more damage,” she muttered.

Diana nodded in agreement. Farah looked at her curiously. “You’re not going to defend Steve?”

“I have experienced those destructive forces before. Steve stood no chance against them,” Diana said seriously.

Farah snorted and pushed the kitchen door open.

Five heads shot up at once and a dusting of white powder showered the floor as Yasmine wheeled around to look at them. Steve and the girls – all four of them – were covered in flour.

“Merde,” Farah muttered under her breath.

“Mama!” Yasmine yelled happily. She was grinning from ear to ear. “We made cookies.”

There did appear to be half a rack of cookies cooling on the counter and crumbs on the lips of every culprit in the kitchen. Sofia was eating the remaining cookie dough out of the bowl with a wooden spoon.

Farah looked caught between dismay and amusement. In the end, she laughed.

“All right, well,” Farah said, surveying them with her hands on her hips and a smile curling the edges of her lips. “I supposed I am saved from making dinner.”
“I did do the prep work for that,” Steve said but he looked completely unrepentant. “Before I was overrun.”

Nadia groaned. “I’m full, mama. Uncle Steve’s cookies are better than they used to be.”

Steve did not look entirely pleased by that remark. Farah took a couple from the cooking rack and tried it, passing the other to Diana. She shrugged. “She’s not wrong.”

“Fewer carrots,” Diana said.

Yasmine giggled. Ann outright laughed. Steve’s expression shifted to mock offence. “I’m not baking for you people anymore.”

A chorus of groans answered him until Farah put an end to it by corralling the girls into cleaning duties.

“The consequence of making a mess is having to clean it up again,” Farah told them when more groans answered her. “You’re old enough now. I’m not doing it for you.”

Ann attempted to start speaking but Farah cut her off with a quick gesture of her hand. “No, Uncle Steve is not going to help you. I’m sure you talked him into this foolishness.”

“I think I’ve just been insulted,” Steve said but his eyes were sparkling.

Diana sidled over to Steve and brushed a bit of flour from his cheek. It hardly made a dent. She laughed at his smile and raised eyebrow.

“There is flour in your hair,” she told him.

Steve nose wrinkled charmingly as he tried to shake it out. Diana ran her hands through it to help and only made it worse. She laughed, it was impossible not to, and kissed him, briefly. He tasted like cookies and milk and when she pulled away there was flour smudging her blouse.

“Did you have fun shopping?” Steve asked, his grin teasing.

“You will see on opening night,” Diana said. She knew well that he only ever encouraged Etta when she got it in her head that Diana needed new clothing.

He seemed to find that more amusing, chuckling as Farah snapped a dish towel at him. “Go clean yourself up before I set the children on the bathroom.”

Yasmine let out a shriek as she dropped a container of flour and sent a plume of it into the air. Ann and Nadia fell all over themselves laughing.

Farah put her hands on her hips and lifted her face to stare at the kitchen ceiling for a moment, then two, then three, in the manner of all parents searching for patience. Diana was sure she had seen her mother do the same.

“Or I could set the hose on them,” Farah muttered, sighing. She pointed without looking at Sofia, who had just grabbed hold of the sugar container. “Sofia, you put that down immediately.”

“We should make our escape,” Diana told him. “You are unlikely to be offered the chance twice.”

“I would say something about fairness but...” There was a crash as Nadia dropped the dishes in the sink rather forcefully and splashed Ann, who swore at her in Latin.
“Ann Davies, don’t you think I don’t know what that means!”

“Let’s go,” Steve said, taking Diana’s hand and letting her pull him into the hallway.

She laughed as the kitchen door swung shut and kissed him again, until there was flour on her cheek as well.

“Any one of them is liable to come out at any moment,” Steve murmured, when Diana pulled back so he could breath. “We’ve grown too used to an empty house.”

“Farah will keep them occupied for some time, I believe,” Diana said. “But perhaps we should take the opportunity to go upstairs.”

The look in his eyes then was not dissimilar to when she came downstairs on opening night. Etta had insisted on doing her makeup and Farah had insisted she let them go downstairs first: “To see the expression on Steve’s face when he sees you.”

Diana would admit that she found the way his eyes went wide for a moment and filled with sudden sharp desire very satisfying. Etta and Farah elbowed each other as if they were school girls and Steve flushed most endearingly. He ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck, well aware they were all watching him.

It made her smile.

“Good choice. Good dress,” Steve said and she walked further into the room. She could tell the moment he got a good look at the back of the dress. He cleared his throat and from Etta’s giggle, Diana knew he had just glared at her.

“I like the, uh, back. It suits you,” Steve said, regaining some good humour in his voice.

“A paper bag would suit her,” Etta said dryly, poking Steve’s side. “And I am fairly sure you would react the same way.”

“Ed nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw you,” Farah reminded her. Diana turned her gaze away from Steve long enough to look over at Etta and see her looking at Ed as if they were newlyweds.

“Well, why not? My Etta is the prettiest woman in England!” Ed said loudly. He had not admitted it but he was beginning to lose his hearing.

“Oh Ed, stop it,” Etta said but she blushed, looking pleased.

“You are, my darling,” Ed told her. He nodded at Diana. “Not that you aren’t also lovely, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Diana said, taking the compliment for what it was. Ed’s world had long since begun and ended with Etta. No one else compared in his eyes.

Steve offered Diana her coat before they piled into the car. He smiled and said quietly: “You look good. I’m glad you let Etta talk you into it.”

“Farah refused to leave the store without it and tried to pay for it when I was changing,” Diana told him.

Steve laughed as she took his arm. “That would do it.”

The play was...disquieting. Diana could not say she liked it, though Sameer was wonderful. Steve
had bruises on his forearm the next morning, from where she had gripped it too tightly during the show; he had not made a sound of complaint at the time, simply covered her hand with his own.

The idea of how hatred could creep into people’s hearts, infect entire countries, it was something he understood too well.

After, there was a party as the company waited for the early reviews. They waited outside the stage door for Sameer. Farah was practically vibrating with excitement.

“It was good,” Farah said. She was pacing. “He was good. I was not worried, Sameer is a good actor, but a play like this is a big break.”

“I cannot say I found it enjoyable to watch,” Diana said; Ed nodded. “But he was very good in it.”

“Ah, but it meant something,” Farah said. “Sometimes that is more important. It is not meant to be enjoyable; it is meant to say something true.”

“Can't argue that it did that,” Steve said, smiling tightly.

“I thought it was brilliant,” Etta said. Farah beamed. Steve looked at her in surprise. “If it hits close to home, well, it's supposed to. If you ask me, a swift kick in the trousers is not entirely amiss these days.”

“Etta!” Ed exclaimed, slightly scandalized.

“It's true,” Etta said. She patted Ed’s hand and did not back down an inch. “You trust me, it's true. We could all use that kind of reminder from time to time.”

Diana saw Steve look at Etta with a dozen questions on his lips. Etta looked straight back at him with a set to her mouth that meant she would never answer them.

Sameer spilled out the stage door before they could exchange more than a glance.

“Mes amis!” he exclaimed, a giddy grin on his face. Farah and Ed were closest to the door and he wrapped his arms around both of them before veering off to kiss Farah soundly.

Etta laughed, clapped and gave a cheer: “Bravo!”

Sameer broke away to take an exaggerated bow. He faltered as he came back up, doing a double take and putting his hand over his heart as if he were going to faint when he caught sight of Diana.

“That...is quite the dress,” he told her.

“Pick your chin off of the floor, husband,” Farah told him good naturedly.

“I don’t know how you expect me to do that,” Sameer said. He winked at Diana, took her hand and kissed it. “You will be the envy of every actress in the room.”

He looked at his wife. “You didn’t want to buy a dress like that?”

Farah laughed. “I would not wear it as well.”

“I think you would have,” Sameer said, eyes not leaving her for a moment.

Farah was less likely to show embarrassment than any person Diana knew and even she flushed dully at the heat in Sameer’s eyes.
“Okay, lovebirds,” Steve said. “Do you want us to drop you off at home instead of the party?”

Sameer laughed, looped his arm around Steve’s neck and kissed his cheek with a great smack. “Let’s go party, Steve. Did you like my play?”

“What? Did you write it now too, Sami?” Steve said but he was grinning from ear to ear. Sameer kissed him again as Steve mock-batted him away. “You were great. Really. It was hard to watch it but you were great, the whole cast was.”

“The last time someone described my performance like that I was still at the Guignol and they were being far less…genuine,” Sameer said. He took a deep satisfied breath. “It is certainly a step up from le Guignol.”

“What is the Guignol?” Diana asked.

Steve laughed; Farah smirked. Ed looked fairly scandalized still.

“I’ll bring the car around, shall I?” He said and disappeared post haste.

“I’m going to let Sami take this one,” Steve said. “You explain le Grand Guignol to Diana.”

“It was the only place they would hire me in Paris,” Sameer said. “It was not, hmm, how to describe le Grand Guignol?”

“Frightful,” Farah offered.

“Horrid,” Etta contributed.

“ Bloody,” Steve added.

“Mais oui,” Sameer agreed cheerfully. “But exciting. It was a theatre of horrors. They prided themselves on how many people they could make faint.”

He smiled. “I played many murderers and villains for them.”

“You know, I might have seen you once,” Etta said.

Sameer looked positively gleeful. “What were you doing at le Guignol?”

“I had a life before I was Steve’s secretary, you know,” Etta sniffed. “And I don’t think my father quite knew what he had gotten tickets for.”

Sameer cackled and kissed both of Etta’s cheeks. “You never cease to surprise me, Etta, darling.”

Ed honked from the end of the street and they all piled into the car, which Diana doubted was made to seat six and certainly did not do so comfortably.

Diana gritted her teeth. She had been issued a driver’s license a few years ago and was increasingly dissatisfied at being a passenger.

“We need to buy our own car,” she whispered in Steve’s ear as Ed swore and took a particularly sharp turn. The roads were wider at home and it appeared Ed preferred that.

Steve smiled, his hand resting lightly atop hers. “I’ve been waiting for you to suggest it since the war ended.”
It was not far to the hotel bar where the party was being held. It may have been easier to walk and Diana certainly would have found it more enjoyable than being crammed in the backseat.

Sameer had the car door opened nearly as soon as they stopped, his spirits beyond buoyant and he held a hand out to help Farah out of the car, then Diana, and then Steve. Steve raised an eyebrow as he took it.

“It's not going to do anything for your reputation to have me on your arm, Sameer,” Steve told him. “I'm not handsome enough.”

Sameer scoffed. “You're a flyboy American hero and look 30 years younger than me, I think I will be fine.”

“You're still better off with your wife, she's certainly prettier than me,” Steve said. His eyes sparkled with mirth. “And maybe Diana if she'll help you make an entrance.”

“I daren't dream of such things,” Sameer said, holding his hand over his heart.

Farah rolled her eyes at Diana but tipped her head toward the door too, raising an eyebrow in query. Diana smiled. Together, each took one of Sameer's arms.

Sameer's expression was priceless but he rallied quickly, kissing Farah’s cheek and holding himself even more gallantly. Steve laughed and clapped Sameer on the back as the strode into the bar.

There was a good-sized crowd inside and Sameer received a cheer when he walked in. The same ritual was repeated whenever a member of the cast or crew came through the door. Everyone's spirits were high, no matter that they were all on tenterhooks waiting for the reviews and the play itself was a dark thing that Diana had been uncomfortable watching. They all seemed to know whatever else others thought of it, it was good and they had done it justice.

Sameer took great pleasure in introducing them to everyone he knew in the room and several people Diana was not sure he did. Sameer introduced Steve as “my pilot friend from the war,” without specifying which and Diana and Etta as “my, ah, former colleagues,” with shrug and a secretive smile and let them draw their own conclusions. Enough of them knew that Sameer had served with British Intelligence, if not exactly how. Enough of them has been employed by them as well.

It was past midnight before the crush of colleagues and friends and other actors seemed to let up, if only for a moment. Someone had brought a chair for Steve, at some point, and Sameer leant on the back of it and exhaled.

He smiled, obviously, overwhelmingly happy.

“I am so glad you are all here,” Sameer said. “I could not imagine tonight without all of you being here.”

For a moment, he seemed close to tears.

Etta put her hand on his arm. “If anyone has any sense, we will be in London quite often in the future. You really were wonderful, Sameer.”

“If I am never in another play, if this is the last performance of my career, I am glad it was the one you saw,” Sameer told her.

“There will be more,” Etta said. “I'm sure of it.”
“Sameer! Come here, there’s someone I want to introduce you to,” someone – the director, Diana thought, yelled from across the room.

Sameer kissed Etta’s cheek. “Un moment, s’ils vous plaît.”

He extended a hand to Farah. “Will you join me, darling?”

Farah smirked and took it. As they waded into the crowd, Etta leaned down to wrap her arms around Steve’s shoulders and hug him tightly. Steve looked pleasantly surprised.

“We should do this more often. We can come to London since we’re older and don’t have jobs or children to keep us busy anymore,” Etta said. “It is nice, being together again.”

“I am not so fond of travel, but this has been worth it,” Ed chimed in gamely. “It’s a good idea, my darling.”

“Perhaps we can convince Charlie to join us next time,” Diana said. His absence that had been hanging on the edge of Diana’s mind all day. She knew he had not wanted to come for an extended stay, like the rest of him, but he was supposed to attend the premier. There had been a seat left empty for him.

“I thought he was supposed to come for today at least,” she continued.

Ed made a face. Etta’s expression did not fall, not exactly, but it became less genuinely happy.

“It is a long way for him to travel,” Ed said.

Something in Steve’s face tightened and went calculating. “Charlie was supposed to come tonight. I don’t know why he didn’t make it. He said he was coming in his last letter. He was bragging about the superior wit of Scottish playwrights.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Etta said. “I did call him to try and coordinate things a few days ago. He said he would still try but wasn’t sure he was up for it. It isn't a short trip and Charlie is getting older.”

She shrugged. Diana looked at Steve.

“You think something is wrong,” Diana said. “Steve, I know what it means when your face does that.”

Steve blinked and the tension in his face lightened considerably with bemused delight. If it had she been so serious, she would have kissed him.

“I do but...” Steve hesitated and sighed. “Charlie is ten years older than any of us. His arthritis has gotten worse. If it’s acting up, the train ride may have just been too much for him for such a short trip.”

“But his letters, I don't know, there hasn't been anything I can point to and say, here is proof that something’s wrong. Something just feels off. I thought it might just be his daughters moving so far away and the arthritis progressing. But I thought he would be here. I thought he would come for Sameer.”

“You and Sameer are closer than they are now,” Etta said carefully.

Steve winced a little and Diana understood why. Charlie was a proud man.

“I know,” Steve said. He sighed. “I'll write to him again, when we get home. See if I can figure out
what's wrong.”

Etta looked satisfied at that. She had taken over directing the smattering of operations they carried out between the wars – most of which Diana and Steve had not been involved in. They were equals now and treated each other as such. In the right setting, though, the others still deferred to Steve as if he was their leader.

It was lucky, Diana thought, that Etta and Steve had never seriously contradicted each other.

Steve squeezed her hand, looking up at her earnestly. “Don't say anything to Sameer, okay? I don't want to spoil his night.”

She kissed him lightly for his honesty and for their shared worry. “I will not allow anything to ruin Sameer’s night.”

“Reviews haven't come out yet,” Etta said dryly. “That might do it yet. Though, I suspect it will technically be morning then.”

“She reviews will be good,” Steve predicted. He smiled sadly. “I don't think it's going to take off though.”

Steve, Diana, Ed and Etta did not make it to the release of the morning reviews. They left around 2 a.m. Sameer was still holding court, surrounded by rapt crowd. He would be among the last to leave, Diana knew.

It was silent when they entered Sameer and Farah’s house. Even Farah’s aunt, who was looking after the children, was asleep. They tried to avoid the creaks in the floor, shushing each other and giggling when they stepped on one.

Steve’s hand was warm on her back as they closed the door behind them. His gaze was very direct. She returned it with a smile.

“I like the dress,” Steve said. “It's distracting.”

“You have seen me in far less than this,” Diana told him.

“It’s not about that, or it is, but not just that,” Steve said. “You just...You just strike me sometimes. Every part of you is so beautiful and sometimes it just strikes me.”

Diana caressed his cheek with her hand. His eyes went soft and lovely when she touched him like that. They always did.

“You make me very happy,” Diana told him. “My beloved.”

Their faces were close, then closer still when he kissed her, slowly, sweetly in a way that reminded her of prayers, of blessings.

She loved him so.

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They bought a car just before they left London. Diana drove – Steve had no intention of making her a passenger, not when she so clearly enjoyed driving and if she went a little too fast, well, he was a pilot, he was used to that.

He liked watching her drive. He liked it whenever she was enjoying herself. She had been quieter,
since she the war ended and she came back from Japan.

Or maybe that wasn't quite right. They had both been quieter – their life had been – in the years since the war ended.

And Diana was getting restless.

Steve couldn't blame her. Diana was not meant for a quiet life in a small English village. There was nothing wrong with it; it just was not what she was meant for.

Neither was he, if he was being honest, the circumstances that had forced him – them – into it notwithstanding.

And that was the rub, she deserved more.

They had gone to the symphony one night when they were in London, with Etta and Ed to see Beethoven's 9th. Steve had spent most of the night watching Diana’s face and only half listening to the music. When the choir came on in the fourth movement and nearly blew the rafters off the place, he almost cried, just looking at her. She was enraptured.

How had none of them taken her to the symphony before?

Steve knew it was because of him. He had had a nurse for years after they brought him home because he had not wanted it to be Diana’s job to look after him. She was meant for something different than that. Not more just different. With as much experience as Steve had being a patient, he thought nurses were just about the most important people in the world and he credited Elsie as much as anyone with his relative recovery.

But Diana had not wanted to leave him, not unless she had to, and Steve had not wanted her to, not at first. Now, though, it felt like he was holding her back.

Diana deserved a thousand symphonies. She deserved to see the Louvre and the Grand Canyon and the Acropolis and Victoria Falls. She deserved to see the world she had left her home to try to save.

Steve would be damned if he did not find a way to give it to her.

He just wasn't sure he could share it.

He had loved being back in London – maybe even more than Diana had – but four days out of twenty he was stuck inside because of the smog. Two of the four Diana had not gone out in favour of staying with him.

He appreciated that, he did, but the idea that he was holding her back made him feel like he couldn’t breathe more than when he actually could not breath.

They got home and the house was quiet again, no matter how much they talked to each other. Diana helped Steve change the garden but the yard felt strange and too big. Etta and Ed came over once a week but it wasn't the same as when the house was full with Farah and the children and Sameer.

Steve made Diana breakfast in the mornings. They sat in their sunny kitchen and passed sections of the paperback back and forth and it wasn't enough.

Diana was restless; so was Steve.

He could do something about one of those things.
“You should see more of the world,” Steve said, over breakfast one morning. Diana looked at him over the top of the newspaper and frowned at him. Not her displeased frown, the one that meant she was not sure what to make of the conversation yet.

“You have only seen places in their worst moments and bits of England,” Steve said. “And you're getting bored with England.”

“I have not seen all of England,” Diana said. “I cannot be bored with what I have not seen.”

“Only a person who has never been to Ohio could say that,” Steve said, smirking.

“You have never explained what that means,” Diana reminded him.

“I think you have to experience it to truly understand,” Steve said. Diana rolled her eyes at him. “That wouldn't be a bad place to start though?”

“Ohio?” Diana asked teasingly.

“No, god, avoid that at all costs,” Steve said. “But we could try seeing the rest of England. And there's Wales and Scotland as well.”

Diana grinned, she looked intrigued. “We did just buy a car.”

“It would be a shame not to put some miles on it,” Steve smiled. England he could manage. He was fairly sure of that. Even at his worst, he thought Diane could prop him up in the backseat and keep going, if she needed to.

“Maybe you and Etta could try Paris or Rome, after that,” Steve said. “Maybe Greece.”

Steve thought Diana should see Greece. How had she been here so many years now and never been to Greece?

Diana was looking at him intently now, a little line between her eyebrows. Steve had gone for casual, apparently he had overdone it.

“I am not sure Ed could be persuaded further than Paris,” Diana said as blandly as he had been. Not a good sign.

“Maybe just you and Etta then,” Steve said. “Ed and I would be fine on our own for a few weeks.”

Diana looked at him with narrowed eyes. She had never been one for talking around an issue. “Why would I go to Paris with Etta and instead of you?”

Steve could have made up a white lie, tried to convince her it was only because he thought the two of them would have fun together. But he didn't lie to her, as a rule, and she would not have believed him if she did.

“I don't know how well I'll travel,” Steve said honestly. “There are a lot of things – places – that I'm just not going to be able to manage. And if something goes wrong with my health, I don't want you to get stuck in a hotel room with me.”

“If I am going to share the world with someone, it will be you,” Diana said, definitively.

Steve appreciated the sentiment, he did. That did not mean it was possible. “I don't want you to be stuck here with me either.”
“I am not stuck here with you,” Diana said. She was annoyed now. Steve would have liked to be angry but he was alive and he shouldn't be and he couldn't be anything but grateful for that. It was what it was and, he had had a long time to think about it, more than he deserved.

“Diana,” he said quietly. “You deserve more.”

Diana scoffed. “I love you.”

“I know. That doesn't have anything to do with it,” Steve said. “I don't think that's going to change whether we can travel together or not. But you're bored, I know you are, and you don't have to be.”

Diana sat back and folded her arms. “You're wrong.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “You're not bored?”

“No!” Diana said and looked, a little, like she hadn't expected to admit that. Or even that she realized it. Then her face went determined again. “You're wrong that you can't travel.”

“I don't think I am,” Steve said, trying to stay reasonable. He was well aware of his limitations. “I couldn't go out for four days in London and that was just because of the weather. I spent a week recovering from that trip and it was easy. The last time my leg went out, I was out of commission for three weeks.”

Steve was not sure what his face had done but Diana’s softened. She leaned forward and took his hand. “We have time, Steve.”

Steve exhaled and his shoulders slumped a little. “We do. I'm not sure that's going to fix this.”

From her expression, Diana very clearly thought he was just being stubborn. “We also have a car.”

Steve blinked. “We do.”

“Then there is no reason we could not start with England,” Diana told him.

Steve had always been tactically minded. He knew when to press on in an offensive and when the opposing force was too entrenched to be moved. He knew when it was time to retreat, for the time being at least.

“All right,” he said and reached for another piece of toast. He had only taken a single bite when he realized Diana was still looking at him, fondly but expectantly.

“Where are we going to go first?” Diana asked.

“I don't know.” Steve replied. He was mostly thinking that they needed more jam. “Where do you want to go first?”

“I do not know. You have been in England longer than me,” Diana said, reasonably.

“I haven't actually seen much outside of London and here and that...tour of the hospitals,” Steve said and Diana grimaced in remembrance. “I spent most of my time in France during the war or, uh, elsewhere, when I was undercover.”

And oh, he was in trouble now, he knew that look in her eyes. She had decided on something.

He should have waited until after breakfast to bring this up.
“Do we have a map?” Diana asked.

“Of what?”


“Probably in the study,” Steve said, trying to think. Yes, they should, it might be a little out of date – from before the Second World War – but they had one.

“I'll get it,” Diana said as she got up.

It was all Steve could do not to laugh at himself. He should have known. “Can I finish my breakfast first?”

“You started this!” Diana called from down the hall.

Steve grinned, finished his piece of toast and started clearing the table. Trying to change Diana’s mind when it was made up required at least one hell of a strong argument and a will as stubborn as hers. Steve wasn't going to bother over something he was entirely willing to be swept along for.

And she looked excited by the idea as she spread the map out over the kitchen table. Steve was helpless in the face of that.

“We're going to need a new map,” Steve commented. The one they had was full of tiny pin pricks from where Steve had kept track of the bombing intel they received during the Blitz.

Diana turned his head toward her and kissed him lightly. She looked fondly exasperated. “We can get new maps. We are not leaving today. I am sure Etta will have suggestions for us.”

“That's probably an understatement,” Steve said.

He looked at the map spread out before them, at Diana fishing a pencil out of their junk drawer, and the feeling of possibility rose up in him so fast he was almost giddy with it.

“Okay,” Steve said. “Where should we start?”

By late afternoon, the map had more pencil marks than pin pricks on it and Steve had started filling up a notebook with routes and plans and lists of things they wanted to see. There was a stack of books on one of the kitchen chairs, dog-eared as they marked the pages that referenced this place or that thing that struck their interest.

They only stopped because Diana's stomach grumbled and Steve drew the proceedings to a pause to get an early dinner started. Diana left to run the errands they had neglected over the course of the day. She returned three hours later with another stack of books – she had stopped in at Ed and Etta’s on her way back from the butcher’s and Ed, it turned out, had a penchant for guidebooks.

“He likes to write in and correct them,” Diana told Steve as he took dinner – waiting on low in the oven for the past hour – out. “See?”

They were marked up heavily in red ink. Steve laughed. “Well, everyone needs a hobby.”

“He is coming over tomorrow to examine our plans,” Diana said with a sly smile. She stole a forkful of potatoes off his plate, popped it into her mouth and covered her hand as she continued speaking. “Etta says she will restrain him.”

“My money is on Etta,” Steve said, setting the plates down on the table and sitting down.
“I do not know, she seemed amused when he was telling me, at length, about his rating system,” Diana told him. She sat down and dug in – they had skipped lunch.

“Rating system?” Steve repeated.

“He has one for cities overall, then also for attractions and accommodations,” Diana said.

“Ed doesn't like to travel,” Steve said, incredulous. “If it weren't for Sameer, he wouldn't set foot in London.”

“I think this may be why,” Diana said, picking up the nearest book and waving it at him.

Steve chuckled as he grabbed it. He opened it to a random page as he took another bite of his dinner. He raised a speculative eyebrow, flipped back to look at the cover of the book and thumbed through a few more pages to places he had been.

“How. He's not wrong,” Steve said.

Diana grinned as he handed the book back to her. She went back to the start and began reading, eating her dinner one-handed. Steve smiled. They should have done this a long time ago.

He insisted on doing the dishes so Diana could keep reading. He joined her in the living room when he was done. He grabbed one a book off the pile for himself and the mail, neglected on their front table since Diana had brought it in that morning.

Diana had her nose buried in one of Ed’s annotated guide books. Steve looked up when something made her snort and shake her head. He smiled at her expression, amused and exasperated at once.

It was tempting to just dive into one himself but he sifted through the mail first. He was waiting for a letter from Chief, which hadn't arrived yet.

He didn't expect the letter from Charlie.

Steve had sent Charlie a letter after they got back from London. It had taken Steve longer than he liked to admit to finish it. He was angry at Charlie for doing that to Sameer – Charlie had said he was coming and Charlie wasn't an idiot, he knew how much it meant to Sameer.

But he was worried about Charlie too. They were all getting older, everyone but him and Diana. Charlie was the oldest, his health wasn't what it used to be, and he had never recovered from the death of his son, not really.

Diana didn't see it the same way, Steve knew that. She didn't look at their friends sometimes and see the years they had with them dwindling away. She hadn't experienced that yet. From what he could tell she hadn't lost any of her people that way, only in the battle he had brought to their shores. Darnell had died of old age but Diana had not mourned him, even in the relieved, conflicted way Steve had.

He didn't know how to prepare her for that, if he even could. She understood it theoretically but Steve knew firsthand how it was different to lose your family to the relentless march of time, to watch them become less and less like you remembered them being, until it was almost a relief to finally bury them.

Steve had learned what that was like a long time ago. He wished Diana never had to.

It had taken him nearly a week to write the damn letter, thinking of that. He had only mailed it a few
days ago. Charlie must have mailed his reply right away.

Steve shook himself. He might be worrying for nothing. Charlie's arthritis might just have been acting up. His wife, Maureen, might have taken ill. There could easily be a benign explanation.

Steve opened the letter and started to read. His heart sank. Charlie swung from accusatory to maudlin to barely making sense and there was just...so much grief spilling out of his words. Steve was glad he had written Charlie, not asked Sameer or Etta to when he struggled with it, because some of the things he said...a part of Steve wondered if he shouldn't be glad Charlie had not attending opening night after all.

Steve read the letter through once. Then again. Then again.

He thought of the map and the plans they had covered it with, just that afternoon.

“Steve?” Diana asked.

Steve blinked and looked up at her. She was watching him closely. Her face was creased in concern.

Part of him wanted to smile for her, say it was nothing, ask her what wisdom Ed had for them.

But he couldn't. It was Charlie.

“I think we are going to have to put this on hold,” Steve said. He folded the letter up neatly again and put it back in its envelop. Diana's eyes followed his movements.

If Steve had his way, she would never, ever read it. None of them would. No one but him.

“I think we need to go to Inverness first,” Steve said. His voice was firm despite the trepidation taking root in his heart. “I think we need to go check on Charlie.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter isn't actually finished. I just hit 25 pages in and I decided to declare victory and go home. Part two is going to be AT LEAST as long and continue basically from where this one left off.

Then there will be another "present" chapter.

Pea soup fog in London was no joke. That shit killed people WITHOUT compromised lungs. See the Peace in Our Time but the other big option was Oklahoma, which, no, sorry. Anyway, I liked the idea of him getting to work with Noel Coward.

Diana's dress, which totally could NOT have been bought at a store. All of them would have more likely had their dresses made, either themselves or with a dressmaker, but I don't care it was fun to write. I spent way too much time looking at vintage dresses for this but I appear to have lost the link to Etta's! ETA: Found Etta's dress!

The Grand Guignol was a theatre that was basically a precursor to horror movies and I kind of love the idea of Sameer acting there in Paris before WWI.
I have given Steve my hatred of Ohio because I give all the characters I wrote my hatred of Ohio. Ohio knows what it did.

Also. Two relatively happy chapters in a row?

That won't do. Prepare for angst.
Outside of Inverness Scotland - 1948

Diana stood at the top of a mountain overlooking a loch. It was beautiful even with the dark clouds
rolling in and threatening another torrent of rain.

It had felt good to climb it, to burn off the excessive energy that hummed under her skin. The view
was stunning. But there was a yawning absence she felt at her side and there were worries that
turned over and over again in her mind.

Charlie had not been as she expected – as she had hoped – he would be.

And Steve was not beside her.

They were not off to a good start.

It had rained the entire drive to Inverness. When they finally arrived, the “cottage” they had rented
for the next month turned out to be a monstrosity of a dwelling, four skinny floors straight up. Steve
had looked at it and laughed.

“Do you want to carry me across the threshold since you’ll be carrying me upstairs every night?” He
asked wryly.

Diana had not been amused. Charlie had helped them arrange the house though, as Steve pointed
out, the pickings may have been slim.

It was a terrible house. The master bedroom was on the third floor. The only washroom on the
second. It was not that Steve could not manage stairs – though too many would start to bother his hip
– but navigating them late at night in the dark with his unsteady gait seemed ill advised. They
crammed their things into the smaller guest room with its smaller bed.

Steve rolled up his sleeves and coaxed warmth into the...less than impressive kitchen. He threw
a bundt cake while Diana unpacked.

“It would be rude to show up for a visit empty handed,” Steve told her, kissing her cheek when she
raised an eyebrow at him. “My mother taught me better than that.”

“We have not taken anything to Sameer or Etta for years,” Diana pointed out.

Steve shrugged. “We lived through rationing with them. It changed things a bit.”

But he changed his clothing before they left as well. He did not put on a full suit, not quite, but his
slacks, starched shirt, sweater and tie were all more formal than he would wear to Etta or Sameer’s
unless the occasion called for it. Diana knew what it looked like to put on armour. Sameer and Etta
had both seen him unshaven in his housecoat recently – when no one, least of all Steve, would
consider him an invalid – the only concession he gave to his long friendship with Charlie was a
sweater instead of a more formal jacket.

It was still raining when they arrived at Charlie's house. The outside appeared as immaculate as
Diana remembered, if more weathered. Charlie's wife Maureen meet them at the door. She looked taken aback when she saw them.

And she looked so much older than Diana remembered. Her hair was cut short and a lacklustre grey instead of the peppered brown that Diana remembered her having. There were deep wrinkles on her face and the joints of her fingers were noticeably swollen with arthritis. What Diana remembered most about her, her ramrod straight back, had begun to hunch.

“Charlie said you wouldn’t change,” Maureen said, drawing her cardigan tighter around himself. “He didn't tell me quite what that meant.”

Steve's smile faltered a little around the edges. Charlie and Maureen had married young. They had already had two little girls and Maureen had been pregnant with Liam, their youngest and only son, when Charlie left for the front in 1914, years before he even met Steve. They had never known her as well as Ed and Farah. Steve was a dedicated letter writer but they had drifted from Charlie. The physical distance as Charlie got older had made it hard no matter how many letters they sent back and forth.

“Just didn't put it together, that's all,” Maureen said. There was a funny twist to her smile but she seemed to remember herself. “Come in, come in. It's set to gale out again any minute now. Oh, you brought cake.”

“I did not bake it, I promise,” Diana said gravelly as they stepped inside. The house was fastidiously tidy but Diana noticed the nicotine stains and cobwebs in the corners of the ceilings, the dust that was collecting unseen along the edges of the walls.

Maureen’s lips twitched into what could be called a smile and she took their coats. “Yes, I remember Charlie saying you weren't much of a cook.”

“Steve is,” Diana said with a bright smile.

“It only seems that way because everything was rationed for so long,” Steve said.

“Well, it's not anymore,” Maureen said, taking the cake from him. “So I'll put on a spot of tea as well, shall I?”

“That would be lovely,” Diana said. “Would you like a hand?”

“No, no. I'll be fine. The living room is just through there,” Maureen said, there was that slightly bitter smile again. She hesitated a moment and Diana thought she might show them to the living room, which was, exactly where it had been the last time they had visited, for her son’s funeral.

“Same as it was the last time you were here, I think,” she said after that awkward beat and disappeared down the hallway into the kitchen.

Diana raised an eyebrow at Steve. Steve sighed and shook his head just slightly before leaning over to kiss her cheek, a wealth spoken without a word. He did not know what to make of it either but expected it more than she had. Diana tangled their fingers together, only letting go when they sat on the chesterfield together.

“Charlie is not here,” she said.

“No,” Steve said.
“Do you think he is coming back soon or that Maureen is being polite?” Diana asked.

Steve grimaced. “I don’t...know her well enough to know but at a guess? Either she expects he will be back soon or she just wants us here. Otherwise she would have told us to come back another time. She’s proper, not a pushover.”

“She is not as I remember her,” Diana admitted. Proper was a good word for her but also intensely competitive at games, particularly cards, and with a sly, sharp sense of humour, particularly when she and Etta had a few drinks.

“We’ve all changed,” Steve said. He looked at her and his smile softened. He took her hand this time. “We just changed together.”

He did not mention the others but Diana could not help but think of them. Time and particularly their experiences during their second war – the Second World War – had changed them all. Ed and Farah had gone through it with them, more or less, but Etta and Sameer had not. It had still forged a closeness in them that Diana could only describe as family.

She thought of Charlie and Maureen that way too...but, she realized, the feeling was not quite the same as the intimacy she shared with the others.

Maureen opened the living room door and pushed a carved wooden tea trolley in. Diana got up quickly to help her.

“I am happy to help carry things,” Diana told her.

“Thank you but it gives me an excuse to use it. My daughter bought it for me for Christmas one year and we don’t have company much,” Maureen said. She looked so proud of it that it made Diana sad for a moment.

“It's lovely,” she said instead, smiling.

Maureen looked up at her and gave Diana her first genuine smile since they had arrived. “Sit, sit. The tea needs a minute more to steep. I can't abide by a weak cup of tea.”

“Steve cannot either,” Diana said. “When he brews himself a single cup, he is liable to simply leave the bag in.”

Maureen looked at him disapprovingly and sniffed. “Well, you are American, aren't you? I supposed you can't help it.”

Steve laughed. “No, despite years of effort on our friend Etta’s part.”

“I remember Etta. Sensible woman, that one,” Maureen said. She started pouring the tea.

“I imagine,” she said casually, “you're wondering where Charlie is.”

“We imagined you would tell us,” Steve said, inclining his head. “Or that he had just stepped out and would be back soon. We didn't know, exactly, when we would be arriving.”

“I sent him to the grocer to pick up some things,” Maureen said. She set the teapot down with a heavy clink between pouring each teacups. Her face had gone distantly polite again. “But he gets persuaded into the pub and then the day is gone.”

She adjusted her cardigan so it was tighter around her waist. “He's rather easily persuaded, these
Maureen looked up at them, a challenge in her eyes. Diana did not grimace through sheer force of will.

Charlie had had problems with alcohol as long as they had known him. He had quit several times and gone back to it several times. Diana knew from what Steve had shared of their letters that after his son had died, he had become particularly reliant on it.

“We’re here for a month,” Steve said steadily. His eyes didn't leave Maureen. “There's always tomorrow, if the pub proved too much of a draw tonight.”

Maureen didn't smile but she met Steve's gaze before turning to Diana and handing her a piece of cake. “We’ll leave a piece for him, anyway. Tell me how you've been, then.”

“Fairly well,” Diana said. “Steve finally consented to planting flowers in the back garden again.”

“Diana has grown rather sick of carrots,” Steve said with a small smile. “Etta got Ed to remove their chicken coop as well. She says she wants to be able to enjoy her garden, now that she's retired.”

“Yes, I can understand that. We kept chickens when I was a child,” Maureen said, her lip curling. “Nasty birds.”

“And how are you?” Diana said. “We saw Margaret in London, when we were there, but only briefly.”

“Oh, well. My arthritis is getting bad, though not as bad as Charlie's, mind, and the doctor says there's nothing he can do to keep me from going blind sooner or later,” she smiled grimly. “If you saw Margaret while you were in London, you have seen her more recently than I. My children don't visit as often as I think they should, what with them living in London and the Continent now.”

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes but then glanced at Steve and put them aside before either of them could say something.

“You still have the limp,” Maureen said. “How are your lungs doing?”

Steve shrugged. “They're the same. We think that’s as good as can be expected and smoking does bother me. But they're better than they used to be.”

“That's all you can ask for, isn't it? War wounds have a way of creeping back in old age. Although I suspect your experience is different,” Maureen said. There was slightest hint of a smile on her lips. “I'll remind Charlie he’s not to smoke either.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. “What's wrong with your vision?”

“It's going grey around the edges for now,” Maureen said. “Not cataracts sadly, they can do something for that. It's all right. I'm old. These things happen.”

Diana frowned. Steve squeezed her hand and spoke before she could. “I'm sorry to hear that. Did you have an opportunity to get another opinion? I spent enough time in hospital to know doctors agree less often than you would think.”

Maureen looked at him hard. Steve's affable expression didn't waver. Diana could see the way her eyes flicked over his scars.
“Yes, I suppose you have,” she said. She sniffed. “Normally, I'm fine with Dr. Benson’s opinion but Margaret did insist on taking me to a specialist in London who agreed. Margaret thinks we should come to London, move in with her family but their children are still so young and I, for one, am wary of intruding on that.”

“It would be nice, though, wouldn’t it?” Diana asked. “Being closer to your grandchildren.”

For all she complained about babysitting, Etta would not have it any other way. She had taken to bringing her two granddaughters over a few mornings each week – Mary was two and an ardent troublemaker, Jenny was six months and fascinated with Diana’s hair when it was down.

Maureen's mouth went tight. “I don't think that's such a good idea.”

The front door banged open and there was a loud thudding noise, like a body falling heavily against the wall. Maureen closed her eyes.

“That'll be Charlie then,” she said flatly.

Diana looked at Steve in alarm. Steve looked back at her and he sighed before his expression went intentionally blank.

“Will he come in here to see you?” Steve asked.

Maureen snorted. “No.”

Steve's mouth thinned. He squeezed Diana's hand. “We'll go say hello then.”

Maureen did not move. “Do as you please.”

Steve stood. For a moment, he seemed less steady than usual but he found his feet before Diana could offer him a hand. She moved in front of him before he could open the door. They could hear Charlie stumbling down the hall and if he was drunk...Steve was already too easy to accidentally unbalance.

Charlie did not look up when they came out into the hall. He was wrestling with his boots, leaning heavily against the wall and soaked to the skin from the rain.

He looked...old. He looked old in a way Diana didn't see when she looked at Etta and Sameer. So much older than he had looked when Diana saw him last, and he had looked like he had aged ten years, the day of Liam’s funeral. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was ruddy and bloated. He struggled with his boots, his hands shaking and twisted with arthritis. The way he moved spoke of pain as well as drunkenness.

Steve's grip on Diana's arm was the only thing that kept her from going to him at once. She did not appreciate the way he stopped her but when she glanced at Steve's face – blandly amiable and very false but a shade paler than usual – she thought he might need her to keep his balance.

“Hello Charlie,” Steve said, summoning up a smile from somewhere.

Charlie stopped, just for a moment, his shoulders hunching as if to fend off blows. He kept struggling with the laces of his boots and did not look at them. The back of his neck had gone a deep red.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Charlie snarled.

Steve's grip on Diana’s arm tightened. She bite her tongue. Steve spoke as if nothing was amiss. “We
made good time on the drive here so we thought we would pop by. We’re here through the rest of the month.”

“I am not bloody stupid,” Charlie said, pulling at his boot. “I didn't ask you to come. You decided that yourselves.”

Charlie yanked harder and his boot came off suddenly. He stumbled into the coat rack, knocking it over and going down with it.

Diana went to help him immediately. She did not even think about it.

“Charlie,” she said, gently, trying to take his arm and help him up.

“Get the fuck off me,” Charlie yelled. He tried to shove her but Diana was Diana. She did not move and the force Charlie used sent him tumbling forward.

Diana only just caught him by the back of his sweater and kept him from falling to the ground. She hauled him back to his feet quickly. He weaved, staring at her blearily but...there was something mean in his eyes.

Diana thought for a moment he would take a swing at her.

He didn't. He staggered away instead, toward Steve, standing impassively in the doorway to the living room.

Diana was two steps behind Charlie. She saw Steve change the way he was standing, bracing himself better against the door frame. He looked at her for just a second before Charlie reached him and it was only that look that kept Diana from pulling Charlie away.

Charlie stopped in front of him and glared. He wagged a finger in Steve's face.

“You shouldn't have come,” Charlie slurred at him. As angry as he was, there was something...bleak in his voice. He grabbed Steve by the shoulder, pulled him closer to his face. “I didn't fucking ask you to come.”

Charlie let Steve go without shoving him. Diana was at his side a second later as Charlie stumbled down the hall. He yanked another door open, disappeared through it and slammed it shut.

Diana turned to Steve. “Are you all right?”

“No harm done,” Steve said. His voice was completely steady. He looked entirely unfazed except that he cupped her cheek in his palm and tried to get a good look at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, earnest.

She frowned at him. Nothing could hurt her physically but how could she be fine when their friend had reacted to them like that. “No.”

Steve's eyes went fiercely, frustratingly protective and sad all at once. “I'm sorry. I think...I think we should go.”

Diana did not entirely like that idea. Steve read her expression.

“I think we might just make things worse tonight,” Steve explained. “We’ll come earlier tomorrow.”

“We need to check on Maureen,” Diana said.
Steve nodded. “Of course.”

Maureen had not moved. Her lips were bloodless and she did not look at them when they came back into the room. Diana thought she might have attempted to smile but it came out as a grimace.

“Well,” Maureen said. “If you're coming back, I think you had better come by earlier tomorrow.”

“Do you need help?” Diana asked.

“Oh no,” Maureen scoffed. “He’ll take another few swigs of gin and fall asleep within the hour.”

Her face was tight and still. “I won't see him before then. Not when he's like this. He snores to high heaven. That's how I know he's here.”

She seemed to shake herself. A hostesses mask plastered over her pallor. “You better go, if you're to beat the next sheet of rain.”

She walked them to the front door. Diana righted the coat rack. They got their coats but Steve paused before they left and touched Maureen’s arm carefully.

“Everyday?” He asked.

Maureen hesitated briefly before giving him a short nod. “He doesn't get to this state until later, most nights. Or if he's going to, he holes himself up in his room and I don't see him.”

It was not yet past 5 pm.

“Does he hit you?” Steve asked, eyes intent. Diana thought she might be sick at the thought.

“If he is...” Diana said and could go no further but took Maureen’s hand in her own. It did not matter that it was Charlie. That could not stand.

Maureen looked surprised, both at the gesture and the words.

“No, he's not violent with me,” she said. She laughed. It was not pleasant. “No, he's usually too falling down drunk for that. The worst was when I put my back out trying to get him to bed. I don't do that anymore. He won't listen so I leave him to it now.”

She looked at Steve hard. “Charlie's always been more bluster than anything. You know that, or so I'm told.”

Steve tensed and inclined his head to her. “We will come by earlier tomorrow.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Maureen said and shut the door tightly behind them.

Steve's shoulders slumped and he rubbed a hand over his forehead. Diana scowled. “I do not like that we are leaving.”

“I know,” Steve said. He took a step away from the door and towards their car anyway. “But it's no good if we're just going to get Charlie into more of a state.”

“We can help,” Diana said, not moving.

“Not tonight,” Steve said. “I have seen Charlie like this before. He won't remember it tomorrow.”

“Maureen can't get him to bed,” Diana said. “I can carry him.”
“He won't let you,” Steve said, his jaw tense. “You'll have to fight him every step of the way. I've been here before, Diana, and he wouldn't even let you help him up tonight. Please. We'll come back tomorrow when we there's not a chance we'll make things worse.”

Diana scowled. There was a flutter of curtains in the window, Maureen watching to see if they were leaving, she suspected. It was more that than Steve's imploring look that made her move.

“You do not need to restrain me or give me social queues,” Diana told him as she walked by him to get into the car.

Steve stared at her as if she were speaking another language. “What?”

Diana did not answer. She got in the driver’s seat and closed the door. After a moment, Steve got in the passenger’s side. He fumbled with his cane for a moment and Diana could read the frustration in every movement.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Steve said evenly, shoving his cane to the side finally.

“You kept squeezing my arm,” Diana said. “I do not need you telling me when not to speak. I am not new to this world anymore.”

Steve blinked at her. He rubbed his hand over his face.

“Jesus, I'm surprised you didn't take my head off, if that's what you thought,” he muttered before looking at her squarely again. “Diana, that's not for you. That's for me.”

Diana stared at him blankly then. “I do not understand.”

“I don't know what I'm doing, not really,” Steve said. “This whole situation...I was a spy. I am good at manipulating people into doing what I want and I've gotten Charlie functioning again for a mission. But this? This has to be genuine. It has to be about Charlie and what's best for him and I am flying blind.”

Steve looked down. “I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have a plan. And you're...a sure thing for me. Solid ground, when I feel like the rug might get yanked out from under me.”

“I am sorry I made you feel like I was trying to hold you back,” Steve said. He looked up at her and there was something intense, that she could not quite read in his eyes. It almost looked like fear. “Don't ever let me do that.”

Diana snorted. “I would not.”

The look in Steve's eyes did not fade. He looked away from her first, swallowing. Diana reached over and squeezed his hand for a moment before starting the car.

“What helped before?” Diana asked. “When it was at its worst?”

Steve was quiet for a moment, his eyes gentle. “You did.”

Steve sighed and shook his head. “But I don’t think that’s going to work this time.”

Diana did not know what to say to that. Charlie had his struggles when she first met him, of course, but she had done nothing but be kind to him and do what she felt was right.

“You made us all think that the war might really end. Hope like that means a lot,” Steve said. “And then it really did end.”
“It did,” Diana said. “But it did not.”

“I know,” Steve said, quietly.

Rain drops hit the windshield. Steve automatically tilted his face up, looking at the sky. Diana watched the light shift over his face, making him look older.

But it was just a drizzle, nothing more.

Diana drove them back to their rental cottage. It seemed cold and small and confining.

Steve took off his coat, undid his tie and looked at her. He smiled sadly.

“It's still early,” he said. “And you look...restless. Didn't one of Ed’s guidebooks say there was a good hiking trail around here?”

“It will likely rain,” Diana said, shrugging her own coat off.

Steve's smile quirked into something more genuine. “Since when do you care about rain?”

“I do not,” Diana said. “You get cold.”

“I wouldn't be able to make it in any weather.” Steve's smile did not falter even at Diana’s frown. “That doesn't mean you shouldn't go.”

Diana’s frowned deepened. She was restless and frustrated at their inability to fix anything. It was not a bad idea to...do something with the unused energy humming under her skin. But it was not satisfying to her that Steve would not be with her.

“It's fine,” Steve said as he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “I'll have dinner ready when you get back.”

Diana did not like it but she went. Steve was not wrong, the need to do something was like an itch under her skin and there was nothing to do at the cottage. But hiking did not make her feel any more useful and it took her away from him.

There was a trail head someone, for the hike Steve suggested. Diana did not bother to find it. She walked, fast and relentless, until she was sure there were no eyes on her and then she leapt.

She did not feel the way Steve did about flying. The sky did not sing in her soul the way it did in his but the crisp air and the smell of waiting storm suited her mood.

She leapt again and again, until the thrumming in her body no longer matched the electricity she could feel in the Earth and the sky, impatient and eager to meet.

Diana stopped then and climbed the rest of the way up the mountain she found herself on as if she could not leap it in an instant. The wind whipped her hair about her face as she reached the top and stood, looking out. The water below her was dark and deep, almost black. For a moment, just a moment, a streak of sunlight found a space between the clouds and covered the loch in silver and gold, carried forth by the ripples from the wind.

It was stunning.

But it felt cold and lonely.

Diana turned away. She was slower, walking back toward the cottage.
She came in the back door, near the kitchen, like in their own home. The house was still not the most inviting but Steve appeared to have coaxed life and heat from the furnace so it was getting warm. There was, as he had said there would be, dinner waiting, stew still warm on the stove and quick bread cooling on the counter top.

Diana ignored it and walked further into the little house. She found Steve in the tiny living room, sitting on the squashed couch by a vent. His sleeves were rolled up and his feet were on the coffee table, the newspaper folded up neatly beside him, reading with his shoes abandoned and thick socks on.

“What are you reading?” She asked.

Steve showed her the title. *Murder on the Orient Express.*

“We have read that one,” Diana said. “Etta was insistent.”

“Mm. She does love her Agatha,” Steve said. “Someone left it under the coach and I didn’t want to go upstairs.”

“Is your hip bothering you?” Diana asked, frowning. Steve had not said so but it was chillier here and sometimes the cold made him ache.

“Not particularly. I was just being lazy,” he closed the book and set it aside. “Did the hike help?”

She came to sit beside him. He put his arm around her and she leaned against his side.

“Yes and no,” Diana said. “It is very beautiful here but I cannot say I enjoyed it much.”

Steve sighed. “Yeah.”

“You suspected what would happen today,” Diana said. She tried to be neutral. She did not manage it. There was still anger lurking in her.

“No. I don't know what I expected,” Steve said. “I just had a bad feeling. You knew that.”

“But you were not surprised,” Diana said.

Steve was quiet for a moment. When Diana looked at him, he was smiling. It reminded her very strongly of Maureen’s smile from that afternoon.

“Diana,” Steve sighed. He looked tired. “No, I wasn't surprised. It's...I'm not...always hopeful. I'm not mostly hopeful. The last things that surprised me were the A-bombs and the Holocaust and even then I...”

“I felt this sense of dread, all through the war, that there was something else coming. Something terrible. I thought it would be a new gas,” Steve shook his head. “And it was but it was worse than even I could have imagined.”

He trailed off. Diana touched his cheek and smoothed her thumb over it. She had not forgotten Steve’s reaction to the atrocities of the either of the wars. She knew the things that had carved themselves into his bones.

“You think of war as a god,” Steve said slowly. “And maybe it is. Maybe this is all the tendrils Ares left behind. But I don’t see it that way.”

“War is a force unto itself. It's a hunger. And it's both starving and gluttonous. Everything feeds it but
nothing can satisfy it. And it takes everything, _everything_ to deny it when that hunger has taken hold,” Steve said. His mouth went firm. “But we do. Or we try to, I think, at least.”

“So, no, it doesn't surprise me that Charlie's...the way he was today. Or that he's drinking again. Charlie drinks. Charlie's in pain and he doesn't have another way to quiet it,” Steve said. “That's why we came. Because something could be wrong.”

Diana kissed him, lightly. “You are very philosophical today.”

“Dinner was done and I've read this book before,” Steve said, smiling faintly. “I had to find something to do with myself.”

It was easy to kiss him again and lean even further into his arms. Diana rested her head on his shoulder. Steve tucked a strand of her hair back into place.

“Are you going to tell me what you think?” Steve asked, after a time.

“I think you are too pessimistic at times,” Diana told him. “But that is part of what drives you forward so frantically sometimes.”

She sighed. “And I am so worried about Charlie.”

It was a heaviness pressing hard against her chest. She did not know what to do except be kind. She was not sure that would be enough this time.

“Me too,” Steve said. “That's why we’re here.”

“We should have been here before,” Diana said.

Steve nodded. “I know.”

It was not in any way satisfying.

“I do not know how to help,” Diana said. “You said I helped before but I did not do anything _for Charlie_. I only did what I would have done whether or not he was there.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “I know. But it gave him hope. It gave us all hope, that the war could end, that there could actually be something for us when it was over.”

“That is not going to help now,” Diana said. “There is no No Man's Land I can cross.”

“You can still be kind,” Steve said. “You underestimate how inspiring you can be to people sometimes. That might not be what Charlie needs this time. I don't know. I wish I did. But it's Charlie and he's hurt and if there is anything I can do, I have to be here, I have to give it.”

Diana laced their fingers together. She brought them up to her lips to kiss them. It did not matter how many years had passed, Steve's loyalty to his men would never waver.

“We,” she corrected.

His eyes went soft. His smile was not so bitter when he looked at her.

“We,” he agreed.

“We need more information,” Diana said. “We need a plan.”
Steve's smile could not help but spread at that. Diana was not the person to say such things in their relationship. Steve was the spy. Diana was more suited to taking decisive action.

“Do not start,” she warned him and Steve actually chuckled.

“Battle exhaustion was not unknown to us on Themyscira,” Diana said. “But by the time I was aware of such things, we had already been hidden and at peace for so long, my education on the subject was theoretical and I will admit it was not what I was most interested in.”

It took Steve a few moments to speak. When he did, his voice was dry as desert bleached bone. “I don't think I would recommend most of the methods I saw them try in the hospitals.”

Diana looked at him in concern. Steve had never outright complained about his treatment during the years he had been confined to various hospitals, except that many of the treatments had been ineffective, often painful, and that most of the doctors had not listened to him. He had said he was lucky, because they were there so often to speak for him and because after Charlie’s sister became his private nurse, they had someone who understood what was happening on their side. But they had not been with him all the time – it would have been impossible.

Steve shook his head. “I was lucky in that respect. I just...saw some of what they tried. Enlisted men weren’t treated the same as officers and that's if they didn't just shoot them for cowardice.”

“And Charlie was never treated at all,” Diana said.

“No,” Steve said. He looked guilty, suddenly. “No, he wasn't. His CO found another reason to discharge him as medically unfit. That far into the war it wasn't hard and it seemed like it was for the best, at the time.”

“So what do we do?” Diana asked. She had been searching for the answers in herself all evening. She had found none. But Steve had more experience with Charlie's war. “How do we help?”

Steve shook his head. “I don't know. You're right, we do need more information. I think first we just have to see how Charlie is doing tomorrow, before he starts drinking. The first step may be getting him to stop drinking and that...”

Steve trailed off. He looked daunted at the prospect.

Neither of them slept well that night. The house creaked and moaned in the wind and it did nothing to help quiet the worries consuming them. The only comfort was the smallness of the bed. They had no choice but to sleep pressed close together. Steve curled around Diana's back, secure between her body and the wall. His breath gusted against her neck and his arm felt reassuringly heavy around her waist. If she left her fingers drift down, she could feel the thread of his pulse at his wrist against her skin.

Still, they both woke earlier than usual. It was raining again or still, perhaps, and the day felt grey and grim.

Diana caught Steve looking in the cupboards at the groceries they had brought and frowning. She put her chin on his shoulder and her arms around his waist.

“They will still have the cake we brought them yesterday,” Diana told him.

Steve smiled ruefully. “I've spent years worrying about how to feed everyone. It's hard to turn off.”

Diana kissed the line of his jaw. “Especially when you feel like it's something you can do.”
Steve sighed. “You know me too well.

“I would be doing the same, if there was something I could do,” Diana told him.

Steve shrugged. “I think you will be more likely to help in a way that matters.”

“You knew him for more of his war,” Diana said. “You saw him through this longer than I did.”

Steve’s lips thinned. “I think that’s part of the problem.”

They arrived just after 10 a.m. The rain had stopped, replaced by waves of fog. The house looked the same, though Diana noticed there was water spilling out of the gutters as if they had not been cleaned out in some time.

Diana felt Steve’s fingers brush against her side faintly as she knocked on the door. He had drawn himself up straighter, again, in a way she knew was uncomfortable for him to maintain for long. She took his hand and squeezed it.

Maureen answered the door again. She did not smile but she did not look as reluctant to see them as yesterday and let them in more quickly.

“He’s out back,” she told them. She took a breath and then: “He had whiskey with his tea but that’s hardly out of the ordinary.”

“We will go say hello,” Diana said. “Will you join us?”

“I doubt that would improve his mood,” she said. Diana felt Steve looking at her. She did not look away from Maureen. “I may join you later, after you’ve had a proper chance to say hello.”

Steve nodded. He had not moved to take his coat off, clearly intent on joining Charlie. “Has he eaten anything?”

Maureen shrugged. “There was porridge on the stove for him this morning. Whether he ate it or not I can’t tell you.”

Steve’s focus shifted to her. “Have you eaten today?”

Maureen looked taken aback. “I’ve not had much appetite but I ate my share. I don’t like letting food go to waste.”

Steve almost smiled. “I’m very familiar with that feeling.”

Maureen almost smiled back. “You won’t be shocked when I serve you your own cake back to you again today then.”

“It tastes better the second day,” Steve said. “It's why I make it.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Maureen said. There was amusement in her voice for a moment and a hint of the fondness Diana had only heard when she was showing off the tea cart her daughter bought her.

In the next moment her face shuttered and she pulled her sweater straighter. “Day’s not getting any younger. You'll find him out back, as I said.”

Steve nodded at her and Diana smiled before they went back out, around the side of the house so they didn’t track their wet shoes though it. Diana went first, as she usually did, warning Steve when the ground was uneven.
Charlie was sitting on a battered old chair, staring down the ravine at the back of the house. The backyard sloped quite steeply but there was enough for a back garden. It looked like someone had tried for one once but had long since let it go wild and overgrown with weeds.

Charlie had a blanket around his shoulders. The cuffs of his pants were unravelling and his shoes were scuffed and untied. There were several abandoned empty bottles clustered around the back legs of the chair but they appeared to have been there for some time, judging by the water, drowned bugs and dirt that had accumulated in them.

Charlie did not look up when they walked out. Steve did not waver, his posture painfully straight.

“Hey Charlie,” Steve said.

Charlie looked up as if he hadn’t heard them approaching. He grinned widely.

“Steven!” Charlie said, a touch too loudly. He stood, staggering a little but leaving the blanket behind and getting up.

He limped – not quite as badly as Steve but noticeably – toward them, squinting despite the sunless day. Diana heard Steve take a breath before he stepped forward, extending his hand.

Charlie ignored it and hugged him, thumping him carefully on the back.

None of the tension left Steve’s posture even as he returned the embrace.

“Ah, it's good to see you,” Charlie said. He pulled back to look at Steve and then hugged him again. “It's been too long.”

“It has,” Steve said. He smiled when Charlie let him go. “I'm sorry we haven't been able to come up before now.”

Charlie waved him off. “None of us had any gas to go anywhere with the rationing.”

He turned his grin to Diana and she smiled back whole heartedly. She had always found Charlie very charming when he tried to be charming for her.

“Diana,” he said and there was some slight difference in the way he pronounced her name. Something kinder. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

“It is good to see you, Charlie,” she said.

When she hugged him, Charlie felt different under her hands. She had become used to the way Steve had changed since they first met and all the different ways he held himself, all the things it could tell her about the way he was feeling, in those moments.

Charlie just felt frailer. Smaller.

He was more hunched than Diana had thought he would be mostly sober. His back was bowed and Diana was sure he was shorter – Sameer would have been taller than him now. He was heavier too, but he carried it oddly, all in his stomach and waist. His hands shook on her back, though he tried to stop them.

“Ah, I’m glad you came,” Charlie said, smiling and patting her shoulder when he let her go. He looked at Steve, still smiling. “We should take advantage of the day. There are some more chairs around the side. I'll grab them.”
He limped off, around the other side of the house.

Diana looked at Steve the moment Charlie stepped out of sight. Steve looked as at a loss as much as she was and made a helpless gesture with his arms.

Charlie was back in moments, struggling to drag two chairs behind him. Diana went to help him. To her relief, he did not try to prevent her from carrying them and setting them down on either side of the one Charlie had been sitting in.

Diana glanced over at Steve before they sat down. It was cool, yes, but not so bad and the air was likely cleaner than it was at home. Certainly better for his lungs than the air in London.

She was not pleased to note the empty tea cup that had been hidden by Charlie’s leg when they first saw him or the mostly full whisky bottle next to it.

The first thing he did once they had sat down was reach for cup it and pour a healthy portion in. To her surprise, he handed it to Steve.

“You’ll forgive me for not having a proper glass,” Charlie said. He smiled at Steve as Steve took the cup. “And I’ve only the one.”

“That's fine. Diana still doesn’t drink,” Steve said.

He did not seem surprised at all when Charlie took up the bottle for himself and raised it for a toast. Steve raised his as well.

“To old friends,” Charlie said.

They clinked, teacup to bottle. If it had been later in the day, if they had not seen Charlie last night, if it had been Sameer or Etta or anyone else, Diana might have found the image amusing.

Instead she worried as Steve took a tiny sip and Charlie took a decent sized pull from the bottle. He exhaled loudly and left it resting against his knee.

“Maureen tells me I made an ass of myself last night,” Charlie said, unprompted. “But she tells me that every night. I didn't plan on it but we weren't expecting you until later and one of Liam’s mates was passing through.”

“I stood him a pint. Might've turned into a few more,” Charlie said. He did not look at either of them. “And I might have gotten into it a wee bit with an English bastard I happened to know never served. Came home in a bit of a temper.”

“Well, we can hardly begrudge you that,” Steve said, amiably.

Diana frowned at him. She wanted to ask Charlie about what Maureen had said, about him drinking every night. She wanted to point out that it was not even 11 a.m. and he was already taking swigs from a whiskey bottle. She wanted to ask him more about the fight, why he had started it, what had been said.

“No, you can't.” Charlie said, nearly toneless but with such a sharp edge to it, Diana was shocked the smile didn't fall off Steve's face.

It did not though. Steve was a spy. He did not show his reaction unless he wanted it to be seen. Diana doubted Charlie recognized the hurt that she saw flash though Steve's blue eyes.
“So,” Charlie continued on, friendly again, looking at her, as if he hadn’t spoken. “How was the drive up? Not too much rain, I hope.”

Diana decided she needed more information before she decided how they proceeded. Her false smiled were not as good as Steve’s. She wondered that Charlie did not notice.

“It was fine,” Diana said. “It only began to rain when we were passing Fort Augustus. I am enjoying the new car.”

“I’ll have to come out front and see her!” Charlie said, though he did not move. “She sounded like a beaut in Steve’s letters.”

Diana suspected to any outsider it would have seemed like a perfectly fine visit. Perhaps a little bland and stilted but they were old friends who had not seen each other in a long while.

Except that Charlie continued to drink throughout the day. Eventually he fetched himself a glass and gave Steve another drink in a proper one – if he had noticed Steve pouring most of the contents of the teacup into the grass as they went inside, he did not say.

Charlie’s own glass was topped off higher and higher the later the day got.

They went inside around lunch time and Maureen joined them briefly, having cooked a pot pie that Charlie ate but did not comment on. She and Charlie did not speak to each other directly, only through Diana and Steve.

Charlie complimented the cake, thinking Diana had made it. He made a joke about apron strings that Diana did not entirely understand but could tell was not complimentary when she told him it had been Steve.

The more Charlie drank the more the way he spoke to Steve became...needling. If it were anyone but Charlie, Diana would have called it mean. The comments were never quite enough for Steve to comment on and always followed with overt friendliness but Diana could see how they stung.

It seemed innocuous at first. Charlie was telling them all the things they should do in the area but everything he mentioned was something Steve would struggle with, if not an activity that was downright impossible for him.

Charlie demurred from anything Steve suggested they could do together, the four of them. He mostly sounded genuinely regretful, though the reasons he gave for refusing were...flimsy at best. If the suggestion was even vaguely related to Liam, though, even simply things they knew Charlie had done with Liam and his daughters before, the refusals were downright hostile.

It came to a head after supper. Charlie was drunk, there was no denying it, but he had passed into a cheerful sort of drunk, more affectionate than he had been all day, even kissing Maureen on the cheek before leading them all into the backroom with its dusty piano in the corner.

He was telling stories, always irreverent and light hearted – and if Steve ended up the butt of half the jokes, he had been an officer at the time and Charlie an enlisted man. There was nothing new about it. Charlie had sat by Steve's beside in the hospital years before and done the same thing, trying to take Steve's mind off the pain as he waited, white knuckled, until he could have another dose of morphine.

In the years since, Diana had seen a similar scene play out many times. Charlie's stories were always the same, though the embellishments became grander. Steve usually gave as good as he got; Sameer too, often as not. Diana could tell he was being more cautious, this time.
Later, she would wonder if Charlie could tell too.

Diana could not say exactly when Charlie's words became biting instead of teasing. Steve did not flinch and he did not rise to the barbs, only tried to steer the conversation back to safer stories, even if they were at his expense.

Diana thought, if anything, that only spurred Charlie on.

“Steven doesn’t know about that, though,” he added to a particularly exaggerated tale of liberating the rum rations a teetotaler officer had been keeping from the company. “He was still a flyboy then. Didn’t get his feet dirty with us poor bastards in the trenches until the Somme.”

Charlie chuckled darkly and refilled his glass. “That was some introduction, hey?”

Diana looked between them in concern. She had heard all of Charlie’s war stories. She could have likely recited them from memory. They were all humorous or boastful. He did not speak of the actual battles he had experienced and never about the tedious horror of the trenches.

Steve’s mouth fell open just slightly, just for a moment, before he recovered himself. “I had a few forced landings just inside the British lines during the Fokker Scare but, yes, that was my first assignment with British Intelligence.”

“Should have stayed in the air,” Charlie said, taking a drink. “Mind, most of the pilots died, once they introduced guns to it instead of just,” he made a circling motion with his hand, “flying around taking pictures and trying to drop bombs. All of your mates in the Flying Corps died, didn’t they?”

“Most of them,” Steve said. “A few made it home.”

“Read awhile back that most of the poor fuckers only made it 11 days before being shot down,” Charlie continued as if Steve hadn’t spoken. “Guess you were safer on the ground after all.”

“Steven never went over the top with us,” Charlie said, putting his hand on Diana's arm as if he was confiding something instead of proclaiming it so loudly. Diana did not doubt Maureen could hear them from the next room. “He was too important, you know. Bloody officers.”

“No, just trench raids,” Steve said dryly, his face gone carefully blank.

“Aye, you did put your work in with that,” Charlie said, taking another gulp from his glass. “How many half dead Germans did you and the boys drag back for interrogation, do you think?”

Diana thought that this was meant for her, that Charlie thought she did not know. That he thought he was inflicting a wound on Steve by telling her.

Even years later, Diana remembered the tense way Steve held himself, from remembrance as much as the pain that kept him awake, as he told her the worst of his sins in the darkness of their bedroom. He had never been able to look at her when he did.

Diana looked at Steve, holding himself so upright and still, and saw only sorrow for Charlie in his gaze. It helped tame the anger that was warring for purchase in her heart.

“I don't know,” Steve said. “I didn't count.”

“Hm. A right few, I expect,” Charlie said. His eyes fixed on Steve for a moment. He took another drink. “For all the fucking good it did us.”
“You stayed on the line though,” he turned to Diana again. “Most officers wouldn’t. Steve and...whatshisname, when you were a Leftenant still?”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Williams,” Steve supplied.


“James spent a lot of time trying to make sure our maps of the German positions were accurate,” Steve said.

“James!” Charlie hooted. Steve’s jaw ticked. Charlie smiled. Diana nudged the whiskey bottle out of sight behind his chair while he was distracted. “Well, James was good enough for an officer, I suppose. Didn’t seem to be actively trying to kill us. But spent a lot of time with his maps in his dug out.”

“Steven,” Charlie continued, waggling his finger as Steve again, “spent a lot of time with the newest cannon fodder. Felt sorry for them I expect.”

“Charlie, come on,” Steve said.

Charlie finished his glass. He looked around for the bottle. It did not seem to bother him when he could not find it. He simply went to the liquor cabinet to find another.

“Charlie...” Diana began.

“We used to take them back to the canteen when we could, the replacements, you remember, Steve?” Charlie said, right over her. “None of the other Old-Timers would have much to do with them but we would take them back to the canteen when we could, if they didn’t die before they had the chance.”

“We used to get the whole place singing, me and Steve,” Charlie laughed. “Steve has a right fair voice, you know. And it never bothered him, teaching the new boys our songs. Singing never meant nothing to him.”

Charlie’s face was flushed. He took his next drink straight from the new bottle. The top of Steve’s ears had gone red, the only indication that he was embarrassed and upset.

Diana stood up. “Charlie, stop.”

Charlie looked at her and grinned. It was almost genuine.

“We should sing for your lassie, don’t you think?” Charlie said, looking from her to Steve.

Steve blinked at the change. “That’s...that’s not a good idea.”

“Ah, come on,” Charlie said, his voice cajoling, suddenly friendly again. “We’ve sung duets a time or two before.”

He smiled at Diana, “He’s a better voice than me. It’s damn near a crime he doesn’t like to sing more.”

“I can’t, Charlie,” Steve said quietly.

“Don’t be bashful now,” Charlie said. “Look, the piano’s not been tuned in...I don’t know how long. You’ll sound better than it, no matter how out of practice you are.”
“No, Charlie, it’s not...” Diana tried.

“Haven’t had much reason to play, lately,” Charlie said. “But she’ll do in a pinch I imagine. Come on, you won’t embarrass yourself more than I will, that’s for certain.”

“Charlie, I can’t,” Steve said, suddenly sharp. Charlie glared at him blearily, his face going ruddier but Steve kept talking before he could say anything more. “I would. I want to. But I can’t sing anymore. It hurts to breathe that deeply and even if I could, my throat is scarred from the gas, it’s like...it’s like choking...”

Charlie stood abruptly and went to the piano. He banged out some notes on the piano, jarring and angry. Just when he should have started singing, he banged the piano lid shut, got up and left. A moment later, they heard the back door slam.

Steve’s face was frozen in a blank mask. He took a breath. Diana went to him and squeezed his shoulder hard.

“I should...” he began, a touch ragged.

“I will go after him,” Diana told him.

“No,” Maureen said, from the doorway. “Leave him be. You won't like what you find, otherwise.”

Steve looked at her. “We're going to have to talk about it at some point.”

She looked at him flatly. “You really want to force that confrontation tonight?”

“It is better not to leave things unfinished,” Diana said.

Maureen looked at her with something like pity. “It won't be finished tonight either way. You might have the strength for it tonight but I doubt that Charlie does and he won't remember it besides.”

“Does he really not remember?” Steve asked. There was no heat in his voice, no anger, just honest inquiry. “Or is it just easier for him to say he doesn’t?”

Maureen stood a little straighter. “I don't rightly know but you'll never get him to admit to it if he's lying.”

Steve nodded, tiredly. “All right.”

Diana saw Maureen hesitate and then, she asked: “Does just talking hurt?”

Steve looked surprised at the question. He shrugged. “No, not usually. When I'm exhausted or sick, maybe. Most days I'm fine, just a little short of breath and tired by the end of it.”

Maureen nodded. “Well. That's good then.”

Steve pressed her hand – only because Diana did not get there first. Maureen blinked and then shook her head, extracting herself carefully.

“I'll see you tomorrow, I suppose,” she said, as much a question as anything.
“We will be here,” Diana promised as Steve nodded in agreement.

Steve slumped down as soon as he got in the car, leaning his head against the glass. Diana paused long enough to reach over and squeeze his hand before turning the car on. They drove back to their rental cottage in silence.

Diana pulled into the driveway, turned the car off and sat there. She made no move to get out and neither did Steve. For a moment, she thought he might have fallen asleep, but she could feel him watching her glare at the cottage through heavy eyelids.

“He is worse with you,” Diana said quietly.

Steve grimaced. “I noticed.”

“Is this why you thought I would be able to help him more than you would?” She asked.

“No,” Steve said. “That's just because you're you.”

“Steve,” Diana seriously.

“I'm not lying,” Steve said, looking at her. Even without the Lasso of Hestia, Diana could tell he was not. “I knew there were things he blamed me for but I didn't realize the extent of it.”

“I want to read the letter he sent to you,” Diana said. “The one that spurred you to action.”

Steve winced. “I burned it.”

Diana stared at him. She imagined he felt the anger in her gaze even as he turned to look at her. “I probably should have let you see it first. I was trying to minimize the damage. It wasn't entirely coherent but he wrote some things that were, well, like today. I'm fairly sure he was drunk when he wrote them.”

“Your memory is impeccable,” Diana said. “I would like to know what he said about you.”

“More of the same, mostly,” Steve said. He took a breath. “The thing is, it wasn't just about me.”

“He is kinder to me than you,” Diana said.

“It wasn't you,” Steve said, looking at her squarely.

He was not lying. It had somehow not occurred to Diana that he would be keeping silent for anyone’s benefit but hers. “Who?”

Steve looked away. “Diana, please.”

“Who?” Diana said. “Etta?”

Steve was quiet.

“A little,” he said finally. “And Sameer. Mostly Sameer.”

Diana hesitated. “It was that bad?”

“You've seen what he can get like when he's drunk,” Steve said. “I didn't want anyone else to get hurt.”
He sighed. “But I should have let you read them first. I just...things like that have a habit of turning up in the wrong places unless you destroy them.”

“I can understand why you would not want anyone, even me, to see what was written about our friends,” Diana exhaled. “But you are going to tell me what he said about you.”

“It really was a bit of a rambling mess,” Steve said but he did not look at her. “But mostly...he blames me. For Liam’s death.”

Diana stared. “Liam died disabling a German tank in North Africa.”

“Liam blew himself up to keep his unit’s position from being overrun. He saved people’s lives and his parents had an empty casket because there wasn't enough left of him to bury,” Steve said, he smiled very faintly. “I did the same, or near enough. Except I came back. Why should I get a second chance and not Charlie’s son?”

Diana stared at him. That did not make any sense to her. Steve glanced at her and it must have shown on her face.

“Grief isn't rational and I can't...I can't imagine what it's like to lose a child. I'm alive when I shouldn't be and Liam is not – it's my fault. Sameer,” Steve's voice hitched a little, like he had not meant to say that. He closed his mouth for a moment, looking at her, and then continued. “Sameer fought in North Africa too, so it's his, never mind that he was undercover in another country at the time.”

“Charlie’s angry and he’s hurting and it's got no place to go. He was already struggling, he has since his war ended and if someone needs to stand in the line of his fire...” Steve’s jaw clenched. “I would rather it be me.”

“That is not fair to you, Steve,” Diana said, quietly, and, because she knew Steve would only shrug that off: “I do not think it does Charlie any good either.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Steve said. “I don't think he more than half believes it himself, which just makes him angrier.”

“He was trying to hurt you, today,” Diana said. “But he was not happy with himself when he managed.”

“I was trying not to let it show,” Steve said.

“You succeeded,” Diana said. “Until the very end.”

“James Williams was a good man,” Steve said, his face set and stubborn. “He was the one who secured Charlie's discharge. I didn't have the authority. He was killed two months later, shot by a sniper while he was trying to dig out men who had been buried alive by a shell.”

“He was your friend?” Diana asked.

“He was a superior officer,” Steve said. “And he was very British about things like that. But I wasn't and I didn't report directly to him so, yeah, in a way, he was my friend.”

“You should tell Charlie that,” Diana said.


Diana did not know what to say to that.

“Hell, he would probably never speak to me again if he found out how much I had to do with it.” Steve's shoulders slumped forward and he stared straight ahead. There was something very bleak in his gaze. “I can't even say he would be wrong to but not for that. At least James stuck to his convictions. If anything, I just made things worse.”

“Steve...” Diana began.

Steve shook his head. “No, don’t. It’s true. I did things in the war that I’m not...I’m not proud of. You know that. Didn’t you ever wonder why Charlie wasn’t active duty?”

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “I did not know what that even meant at the time.”

Steve looked ahead, again, not at her. For a moment, Diana thought he might not speak at all.

“Well, you were re-assigned,” Steve said, smiling crookedly, in remembrance. “He thought I was funny, an American pilot serving with a bunch of Scotsman, and he took me under his wing, in a way. Introduced me to Chief, which probably saved my life.”

All this, Diana knew.

“So I could tell, when something went...wrong with him,” Steve took a breath. “I let it go on longer than I should have, probably, but Charlie...You have to understand, he didn't want to leave. He took at least one Blighty and refused to go to the aid station in case they took him off the line. But I...I stayed on the line a lot of nights I didn’t have to, not sleeping because he would wake up screaming every night and if I was awake I could wake him up before that happened. I knew he wasn't well. And Charlie, he was a popular guy. That was rare for a sniper. Most of them spooked the boys – soldiers are superstitious and some snipers had a feeling like there was something supernatural about them. Charlie wasn't like that but he was still a sniper and when he got shaky it...disturbed the other guys.”

“It got bad enough that I took it to James. He really was a good guy and...” Steve closed his eyes. “Good officers didn't last long on the front. The Colonel I reported to then wasn’t. I wanted to get Charlie out before James got hit. I was worried another CO might...I saw them shoot men for ‘cowardice’ and if Charlie had to go over the top again I didn't know what was going to happen.”

“James was the one who refused to put shell shock on the discharge papers,” Steve said. “There was a stigma and...he was a good guy.”

“This was around the time Darnell took an interest in me,” Steve said. “Because I fucked up and James wasn’t my CO. Darnell swooped in and had me transferred to London so I wouldn’t...be made an example of. Charlie was there. He kept...trying to join up with other regiments and sooner or later someone would have taken him. They were so desperate for bodies.”

“He found me again instead,” Steve laughed darkly and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I bought him a train ticket home. I bought him a goddamn ticket so many times but he wouldn't go home to Maureen and the kids. He wanted to serve. He hated that he had been discharged. He was so angry and then he got bitter about it.”

“I thought he was going to get himself killed, the way he was drinking and picking fights,” Steve sighed. “Every time I left on a mission without him I thought I was going to find him dead in a ditch when I got back.”

“So you started taking him with you,” Diana said.
Steve grimaced. He looked pained and his voice was hoarse. “No, I didn’t.”

“You just said...”

“I know. And all of those things are true but I...it wasn’t like that. There wasn’t anything noble about it and I won’t pretend I was doing it for Charlie,” Steve said. “Darnell thought he was a distraction but then he pulled his records and...Charlie was one hell of a marksman. He never wanted to bring Charlie in officially but he paid him well, better than his pension, that’s for sure. And I knew exactly how bad it was, Charlie’s shell shock, but when I had a mission that needed a sniper I...I kept pulling him back in with me. Anyone else I trusted to do the job was still at the front and I knew...I knew Charlie wouldn’t say no to me.”

“The missions came first. They always came first and if I needed Charlie’s skills for a mission...Darnell paid him and I got him to say yes. It wasn't hard,” Steve said. “At first, I thought what we were doing would make the war end faster.”

Steve laughed at that and shook his head. “Then I just...I kept going. I had to do my part so that maybe it would end one day. I had to do something.”

It was not the worst thing Steve had told Diana he had done, though it hurt more for being a friend than a stranger. She still took his hand and held it in her own. She could not absolve him of his past nor would he accept it if she could.

She could only love him. Even when she did not agree with his actions.

“You say you needed his skills,” Diana said, “But in Veld he could not take a shot.”

Steve shook his head. “That was new. Before it was mostly the nightmares and paranoia and just anger, at everyone. If I had known, I don’t know if I would have...”

Steve grimaced and looked away, down at their joined hands.

“I think Sameer might have known. They spent a lot of time together,” Steve said. “But I didn’t. I had been undercover for a couple months before that. I probably would have...left him behind, if I had known.”

“He could not take a shot when you wanted him to,” Diana said. “But we would have been lost without his eyes several times.”

Steve nodded. “I know. Believe me, I’ve spent a lot time thinking of that.”

“He did fire his gun again, at the end,” Diana said. Steve looked at her in surprise. “You were already gone although the plane hadn’t...”

She faltered, thinking of it. Steve squeezed her hand.

“He was trying to protect Sameer and Chief,” Diana said. “He kept firing until they ran out of ammo.”

“I wish he hadn’t had to,” Steve swallowed. “I should never have taken him on a mission, any mission. He has every right to blame me. He's just doing it for the wrong thing.”

“I am not going to disagree with you,” Diana said because she did not and it would be worse if she lied and Steve saw through it. “But things would have been very different if you had not.”
“I’ve thought about saying something, apologizing,” Steve said. "But Charlie's got a lot of pride and wounding that will just make things worse. I don't know how to make anything better but I'll be damned if I make things worse for him by trying to make them easier for me.”

“No, I do not think telling Charlie you regret his efforts will do him any good,” Diana said. The thought of how Charlie would react to that was not a pleasant one.

“He would never speak to me again,” Steve said quietly.

Diana could not disagree with that either Steve rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

“It's late,” Steve said after a long, silent moment. “And cold. We should go inside.”

Diana did not disagree. She got out of the car and went to Steve’s side. He blinked at her as she took his arm but didn’t say anything. After a moment, he leaned more of his weight on her.

He fell asleep on the couch in the time it took her to go upstairs to the bathroom and come back down. He had not even taken off his coat yet and his head hung uncomfortably. In the half light of the lamp, the bags under his eyes looked so much deeper than when he was awake.

When there was no greater cause demanding pieces of his soul, Steve would tear himself in two trying to protect his friends.

When there was something greater to live and die for, Diana did not think there was anything Steve would not give.

He woke with a start when Diana tried to loosen his tie, inhaling so sharply it made him cough, just for a moment and rub at his throat, but he went with her easily enough when she pulled him up, intent on taking him to bed. It was not late but it had been a trying day.

“It is strange,” Diana said as she pulled him up off the couch. Steve looked at her quizzically. “To think that I will never hear you sing.”

Steve chuckled tiredly and lifted a careless shoulder. “It's not something to write home about, whatever Charlie says.”

“You hum sometimes,” Diana said. “When you're happy and distracted.”

“I did that before too,” Steve told her. “It never meant the same thing to me that it did to Charlie.”

Diana looked at him and thought it did not matter so much that she would never hear Steve sing. But it also occurred to her that sooner or later, preferably sooner, she needed to get him back in a plane.

Diana did not sleep any better than the night before. Steve slept – if nothing else, sheer exhaustion forced him to – but it was restless, unsettled. Diana could tell by the way he shifted, never much and always silently as befitting a spy, that he was having nightmares.

When she slept, what little she did sleep, she dreamt of Antiope in her arms on the beach and Steve’s plane exploding far beyond her reach, of the ghostly grey bodies under layers of rubble and piles of bodies so thin their skins seemed stretched over their bones and of people twisted and disfigured by unimaginable bombs.

She woke up to Steve curled tightly around her back, his voice just loud enough to wake her and so steady and calm it managed to work its way into her heart.
It was still dark outside. She grasped his forearms hard enough to leave bruises as she told him what she had dreamed.

“I'm sorry,” Steve said, his voice heavy with regrets she could not begin to name. Sometimes she felt like he was trying to apologize for all the darkness of humanity. “I'm sorry.”

Diana turned to him. Even in the darkness, he met her gaze directly.

“What were yours?” she asked.

Steve exhaled but he did not deny it. “I dreamt what would have happened if the plane had made it to London.”

It was not a new dream for him but one he had not had for some time. She knew all the variations.

“How far did you get?” she asked.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, tugging slightly. “Well, Farah’s in it now. And...apparently Sameer and Charlie too. Everyone I love but you, really. It's a dream, I know that, but if you were there, if I saw...I don't think I can...”

“Steve.” Diana touched his cheek, where the scarring was the worst. “You stopped it.”

When Steve exhaled she could feel it against her wrist. He turned his face into her palm and kissed it.

“You didn't get much sleep,” Steve said, his arm winding tighter around her waist. “Do you want to try to get some more?”

Diana shifted, pulling Steve more solidly against her. In spite of everything, she could feel Steve smile against her skin.

“Do not try to stay up for me,” Diana told him. “You need more rest than I do.”

They slept in later than Diana would have expected. It was just after noon when they knocked on Charlie and Maureen’s door.

Maureen answered, looking worn and drawn. She stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

“Not today,” she said. “Charlie's not left his bed yet. He's likely not to today.”

Steve recovered his voice before Diana did. “That's fine. We can...”

“No,” Maureen said as firmly as they had ever heard her. She wrapped her coat more tightly around herself and shook her head.

“It's fine if Charlie's not up to much” Steve said. “If we just keep him company. It doesn't matter if...”

Maureen fixed him with such a disapproving stare Steve stopped talking, his mouth closing so abruptly his teeth clicked.

“I know you're trying to help and god love you if you can because it's been years since I could reach him,” Maureen said. “But if you go up there right now, I promise you, he will never see you again. He’s got his pride and he's done it to friends before. I can't tell you how many he's driven away.”

“I...” Steve tried, then stopped. “If you're...”
“I'm sure,” Maureen said, shortly. “I wouldn't be making a fuss if I wasn't.”

“I didn't think...” Steve stopped and reconsidered what he was about to say.

“We will come back tomorrow,” Diana said for him.

Maureen nodded and then, after a moment's indecision, said: “Might be more than a day, when he gets like this.”

Diana tilted her head at her. “Is it better if we do not come for a few days?”

Steve shifted beside her, clearly uncomfortable with the idea, but he did not interrupt her.

Maureen pursed her lips and shook her head. “No, stop by. I don't want to discourage you but I don't want to let you go without warning, neither. I'll let you know if he's unfit for company.”

“Thank you,” Diana said. “Do you need anything?”

Maureen was obviously surprised to be asked. “No, I'm fine.”

“Let us know if you change your mind,” Diana said.

If it had been Etta, Diana would have embraced her. If had been Farah, Diana would have kissed both her cheeks. With Maureen, she did neither. She did not even reach out to squeeze her hand, though Diana would have liked to, because everything about the way Maureen was holding herself discouraged it.

They nodded to each other awkwardly instead, before Maureen reached for the doorknob to go back inside.

“Wait,” Steve said. Maureen paused, frowning. Steve's hands were on his hips, the way he stood when he was unsure but trying to bluff his way through. He took a breath before he spoke. “Did we do this? Are we–Are we making things worse?”

Maureen raised an eyebrow and gave him a look like she pitied him. “Charlie gets this way sometimes. It's been worse since they turned him down even for the home guard and worse than that since, well, since we found out Liam wasn't coming home. It's naught to do with you.”

Steve nodded jerkily. He took another breath and said: “Diana's right. If you need anything, it's no trouble. We would be happy to do...whatever you'd like.”

“It's kind of you to offer but it does me good to get out and into town,” Maureen said. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Diana said as she took Steve's hand and squeezed it. “Tomorrow.”

Maureen went back inside and shut the door behind her. Steve stood still and tense, staring at the door for a moment before looking to her. Diana felt the way Steve looked – heartsick.

They drove back to the cottage in silence and went inside. Diana moved about the house restlessly. Steve sat with a book unread in his lap and looked like he wanted to do the same.

Steve lasted about half an hour before he said: “If you wanted to take another hike or go do something...”

“Do not,” Diana interrupted.
Steve's jaw set in its most stubborn way. “It doesn't make any sense for you to stay cooped up in here all day. I don't mind if…”

“No, it does not,” Diana said, cutting him off again. She plucked the car keys from the table in the front hall. “Let's go, then.”

Still that bullish look. “Diana, I can’t…”

“We are not going hiking,” Diana told him. “We are going to a drive while it is not raining. Around the lochs. We may stop for lunch somewhere.”

“And we will talk about Charlie and what to do,” Diana said. “But you need to do something as much as I do or we will be useful to no one.”

Steve stared at her. Despite himself, he almost grinned a little, then caught himself and stopped.

“All right,” he said. He stood up and got his cane and both of their coats, handing Diana hers. “Where are we going?”

“I have not decided yet,” Diana said as they headed to the car anyway.

They ended up in Fort Augustus. For all that they needed to get out of the cottage, neither of them were in the mood for exploring. Diana found a spot where the slope down to the water wasn’t too steep and parked. They walked to the water, sitting by the edge and tossing ideas – none of them useful – back and forth until it began to rain.

They went back to the cottage and if Diana went out back and chopped wood until a regular person’s arms would ache while Steve made dinner – neither of them said anything about it.

Steve did not dream but he woke up with Diana when she did.

Maureen shook her head at them when they went to the house the next morning.

They wandered around Inverness aimlessly. Diana glared at Steve when he suggested she keep going without him the first time he had to sit down on a bench and take a break.

Maureen said no the next day as well.

They went back in to Inverness. Diana bought presents for the girls and Etta’s grandchildren and Etta herself. Steve bought groceries and spent most of the afternoon and early evening cooking.

Neither of them had nightmares but Steve's sleep was poor, his mind restless, and there were bags under his eyes the next day.

If anything, it made Steve dress even more formally than he had since they arrived. Diana frowned to see it. It was not unusual, Steve was a man who put thought into his appearance, but he had loosened his tie so to say, when it came to his friends.

“Steve,” she said. “What are you doing?”

Steve caught her gaze. He looked down at the tie in his hands and made a face.

“I always dress this way,” Steve said. “Or… I used to, when we spent more time with Charlie. Except when I was recuperating. I thought it might be better if I didn't change things that dramatically.”

“Perhaps,” Diana said. “And it is not so different from how you dress day to day but perhaps he
would benefit from the informality you give to Sameer and Etta.”

Steve sighed. He let his tie slip through his fingers and looked at himself hard in the mirror for a moment before looking away again.

“He’s going to say I’m trying to manipulate him,” Steve said.

It was on the tip of Diana's tongue to reassure him Charlie would not but she stopped herself. Charlie might. He had been a sniper and a spy and more observant than people gave him credit for.

He had, Diana suspected, noticed Steve was more or less dressing up for him in the first place.

Steve rubbed the back of his head and smiled faintly at her, hearing the things she did not say. “Can’t say I haven’t been doing that already though, can I?”

He sat down on the bed and looked at himself in the mirror again before wincing and looking away. “Spies are terrible people. I don’t know why you put up with any of us.”

“You are challenging,” Diana said, as dry as Steve could get sometimes.

He barked a laugh. Then he groaned and set the tie aside.

“All right,” he said, unbuttoning the buttons at his shirt cuffs. “All right. It's worth a try. Maureen might not let us in anyway.”

Maureen did.

It did not make much difference.

Maureen raised an eyebrow at the loaves of bread Steve almost sheepishly offered her. For a moment, there was a hint of amusement at the corners of her mouth.

“I did tell you I didn’t need anything,” Maureen told him.

“Please,” Diana said. “He needed something to do and I cannot eat it all.”

“Very well then,” Maureen said. “Charlie’s in the backroom. He’s not...having such a good day, so don’t be surprised but he came out himself and he didn’t object to the idea so...”

She grimaced a little and shook her head. “If you waited for the just the good days you would hardly see him at all.”

Steve frowned but nodded. He was slow in taking off his coat and Diana wondered if Maureen would see it as a reluctance to see Charlie instead of a desire to talk to her more.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Steve said. “When did it start to get so bad again?”

“Wasn’t just Liam’s death, if that’s what you’re asking,” Maureen said. “It’s come and gone since the war. The first one.”

“After he finally came home,” she looked at Steve sideways and Steve winced a little. It had taken Charlie years to go home, even after the war ended, even with his children growing up without him. He had used Steve as an excuse for part of that until Charlie’s sister finally shamed him into going back. “Well, he never really liked people knowing when he was going through a rough patch. I suspect you just didn’t hear from him for a little longer than usual.”
Diana noticed the way Steve’s face went neutral at that, absorbing it as if a blow.

To her surprise, Maureen seemed to notice as well.

“Charlie’s good at hiding things when he wants to. The children never knew how bad it got and they lived with him. I suspect you didn’t have much chance, having your own troubles and living as far away as you did,” Maureen told them.

She took Steve’s coat from him so he would stop fiddling with it and hung it up herself before looking at them squarely. “Got harder after the children left, moved away or, well. He got too old to work even at odd jobs so there was nothing for him to do but sit and drink and dwell on things. And he’s in pain a lot now, the arthritis, well, the doctor said Charlie's case was...challenging, I think the word was. It’s in his spine, even.”

“That’s the war,” Steve said. “It made...everything that old age was going to do to you happen quicker and worse. I saw it a lot when I was hospital. Men who just...got old faster than they should have.”

“Mm, the Dr. Benson said as much when Charlie would still go see him,” Maureen said. She nodded towards the hallway. “I can’t tell you how long he’ll last on any given day and certainly not on a bad one. If you want to see him, you should while you can.”

“Thank you,” Diana said.

Maureen looked surprised at that but nodded again. “Like I said, he’s in the back room.”

It was the same room they had last visited with him, the piano still dusty except for the smears where Charlie had thrown it open. Charlie was even sitting in the same chair, a half empty bottle at his feet. It was just the same except the room smelled so strongly of smoke, it made Diana pause.

Steve did not, of course, because if he took his own health half as seriously as he should, Diana would have known something was truly wrong with him.

She could not blame him for it this time. Charlie looked worse, much worse than three days change should have wrought. He looked like he had not eaten in that time, only drank. His skin looked grey and sallow and his eyes were bloodshot, the bags under them deep and bruised.

Someone had opened a window, at least, and Steve had the sense to sit as close to it as he could for all that it took him further from Charlie. Diana did not think Charlie noticed. He barely looked at them when they came into the room.

Diana sat closer, exchanging a look with Steve.

“Hey Charlie,” Diana said quietly. “How are you today?”

Charlie shrugged and looked at her blearily. “Maureen said you were coming. Didn’t believe her.”

“Of course we did, Charlie,” Diana said and she smiled for him because it would do him no good to see how he was breaking her heart. “Of course we came to see you.”

Charlie looked at her like he didn’t believe it and tried to call up the dregs of a smile. “Never did think either of you had a lick of sense.”

Steve chuckled and if it was forced, Charlie was not in a state to notice. “That’s hardly fair. All of my worst plans involved you.”
“Aye, but you went along with them,” Charlie said.

But after that, when he would usually launch into a story, he fell silent, his eyes distant. Steve did not falter.

“Like that time,” he said, leaning forward a little. “You convinced me to steal a horse.”

It was strange, Diana thought, to hear a story Charlie always told coming from Steve, whose role in the telling was usually to insist, vehemently, that it wasn’t like that. He told it in Charlie’s style, though, and even coaxed a chuckle out of him, now and again, even if Charlie still drank steadily through it.

Diana took his other hand, when it seemed like Charlie would not object. He did not and for a moment it seemed like together they might be able to tether him to them, at least for a little while.

It lasted half an hour, through the end of one story and the beginning of another, before Charlie let go of Diana’s hand and searched through the pocket of his ragged sweater to pull out a pack of cigarettes.

Steve paused but only for a moment.

“So then Chief says,” Steve paused again as Charlie lit the match. Diana thought, for a moment, he would say something. “You remember what he said, Charlie?”

“Mm,” Charlie grunted but said nothing more.

He lit his cigarette and absently started smoking. Steve shifted slightly. Diana could tell just by looking at him that he would not say a word about it. Not until he started to choke.


Charlie looked at her, blinking in confusion. He looked like he truly did not know what she was talking about.

“Your cigarette,” Diana said, trying to be gentle.

Charlie stared at it for a moment before understand flickered over his face. He stubbed the cigarette out.

“Thanks,” Steve said, his voice was hoarse but he wasn't coughing, not yet, sitting as he was with the window open.

Charlie looked like he was going to say something for a moment. Then his mouth shut even tighter. He got up abruptly.

“S’cuse me,” he mumbled tonelessly and left the room.

Steve’s whole body tensed. Still, he took a breath and said: “He took his cigarettes. He might just be going to have one.”

Neither of them believed it. Neither of them moved for ten minutes until Maureen came to get them.

“That’s longer than I’ve seen him last with a lot of folks on days like this,” Maureen told them as they got their coats.

Diana could not tell if she was lying to be polite or not.
“You’re sure he won’t come back?” Steve asked. There was something almost pleading in his voice that Diana hated to hear.

Maureen looked at them both with sympathy, more than with pity this time, Diana thought. “I doubt it. He didn’t go out back. He went back upstairs and shut himself up in his room. I’ll try to get him to eat later. Maybe some of your bread.”

Steve nodded numbly. “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

Maureen looked at them carefully for a moment then, to Diana’s shock, she hugged them briefly, first Steve, then Diana. She stepped back just as abruptly, smoothing her sweater down.

“Right,” she said. “See you tomorrow then.”

They left the house. Steve paused when they got to the car. He stood very still, his hands out, pressed against the metal of the passenger door.

He was, Diana knew, absolutely livid.

She also knew that it was not aimed at her.

“If it wouldn’t just...” Steve broke off. He looked away. “I would punch something if it wouldn’t just make everything fucking worse.”

“Charlie would not have reacted any better if you had a coughing fit,” Diana told him. “I am not apologizing.”

“Why would you apologize? It’s not your fault my body is so goddamn...” he broke off again. “It’s bad enough I’m...I can’t help if I can’t stay in the same room as him.”

“It is not your fault, either,” Diana reminded him a touch more gently.

“I remember making the decision to get into that fucking plane,” Steve said. He pressed the heels of his hands palms against his eyes for a moment and shook his head. “Fuck. Fuck.”

He visibly pulled himself together, an embarrassed red flush on his cheeks as he jerkily pulled the car door open. Diana got in quickly after him.

“Steve,” she began. “You...”

“Please,” Steve said hoarsely. He looked at her. “If I lose it here and Charlie notices, somehow, I will never forgive myself.”

Diana drove them home. She let Steve have his silence until they pulled up to the dreaded cottage.

She was not entirely surprised when he broke it first.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. He looked at her and gestured vaguely behind them. “I shouldn’t have...lost my temper, back there.”

“You used to all the time,” Diana told him. Steve looked at her. “You hate your limitations. Why wouldn’t you? I do not blame you for finding it frustrating.”

Steve shrugged uncomfortably. “I try not to let it get to me.”

“That’s good because I think it would be hard for you to live with if you did,” Diana said. “But that
does not mean you must grin and bear it all the time."

“And you know that,” Diana continued. “But it is fine. You are lucky enough to have me to remind
you.”

Steve laughed in surprise, though there was no real joy in it.

“Thanks for that,” he said, his voice very dry. As if he did not mean every word of it.

“I do not think I can experience what you do,” Diana said, softer now, because she thought he could
stand it again. “But I understand how it hurts you. I would be no less angry in the face of that.”

Steve pursed his lips and looked away. “Being helpless is a hell of a thing.”

“You are not,” Diana said. She sighed. “Or...no less than I am, in the face of this.”

Steve looked at her and nodded slowly. He was not quite convinced but he was considering it.

“Thanks for not letting me do something stupid to make it worse.”

“It is the most challenging battle I have ever faced,” Diana said, trying to keep her tone as
unassuming as possible.

Steve just rolled his eyes at her. He looked at the cottage in front of them and the hint of a smile slide
off his face.

“If I stay in that house all day, I’m going to go crazy,” Steve said flatly. “Let’s...let’s go for a walk or
something.”

“We can do that,” Diana said. “We should look for a hotel while we do.”

Steve huffed and smiled a little before getting out of the car. “It’s not that bad.”

“It is too cramped and the layout is terrible,” Diana said as she joined him. “It is no good for us.”

“Well, yeah,” Steve said. “Not everywhere can be home.”

It was not a terrible day out. It was overcast but it had not rained yet not even during the night. It was
cool enough that it was necessary for Steve to wear his coat but after several minutes he unbuttoned
it.

They walked toward the water because it was where Diana always headed when she did not have a
destination in mind and Steve was content to follow her. They were staying far enough out of town
that there was mostly farmland or forest around them and the road was not busy, though Diana still
put herself between Steve and the possibility of a passing car.

They walked in silence for a time, just the crunch of their footfalls and a few errant birds, singing.

“Do you think Maureen was telling the truth?” Diana asked after a time. Steve looked at her
quizzically. “When she said it was longer than Charlie usually spent with people on days that are bad
for him.”

Steve made a face. “I’m not sure. My read of it is that she was telling the truth but I think
she’s...hedging a little bit too.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think most people bother trying to see Charlie unless he’s having a good day.
And I don’t think he lets them.”
“It bothers me,” Diana said. “That we missed this.”

Steve took as deep a breath as he could and exhaled slowly. “I keep going over things in my mind. From when we used to come up and visit more frequently or they came down to see us. I don’t think I realized how long ago they stopped coming to visit us.”

“They stopped when it became easier for you to travel. It makes sense, since they had children and we did not. But it meant they did not see Etta and Sameer much, anymore. I think Charlie has only met Farah a handful of times,” Diana said. Steve looked at her a question on his lips. “I did not mark it then. Since we have arrived, it’s what I think about when I cannot sleep.”

“You should wake me,” Steve said.

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “If I was upset, I would. You need more sleep than I do, Steve.”

“Another downside,” Steve murmured, his mouth slanting unhappily.

“The advantage of being a demi-god,” Diana corrected. “You know that. The longest I have gone without it is a month. None of your people can claim that and even I was not my best at the end of it.”

“I don’t think I knew that,” Steve said. “When was this?”

“At the camps,” Diana said, her voice only wobbling a little. “And...just after we found you.”

Steve was quiet for a moment. He slowed his already slow pace further and switched his cane to his other hand so he could take her hand. “There’s not much I remember from then. I just knew that whenever I opened my eyes you would be there.”

She leaned close enough that she could brush a kiss against his cheek. “Etta finally forced me to go and rest before they moved you to another hospital. Etta and Charlie. And I cannot help but feel guilty for not seeing it when Charlie was struggling.”

“I know. I can’t...dwell on the things I might have missed when I was still in hospital,” Steve said. “Or even just after I came home. There are too many gaps. Too much is fuzzy. But later...It’s just little things, you know? Something odd in a letter and the way he would snap, sometimes, if you told certain stories. He used to call me and just rant about the memoirs that started getting published in the 20s. He thought they didn’t get things right.”

Steve paused. “Those always made him drink. Even when his kids were young. And he tried so hard not to drink when the kids were young. But I didn’t bring it up after those nights because, hell, I don’t know. I don’t read those memoirs because they bother me. I told him not to read them and didn’t really think about it after that.”

“Sometimes, at the strangest times, he would get up to go and have a cigarette, and I did not think it was that strange, at the time,” Diana said. “They all went outside because it was not good for you. But he rarely went with the others. He always seemed to be going on his own. And sometimes his face would just look...”

“I do not know how to describe it,” Diana said. “Lost. Sad. Not entirely present.”

“I know it,” Steve said grimly.

“But if he saw me looking he was always so ready with a story or a joke,” Diana said. “I let it go. I should not have.”
Steve thought for a moment. “I think Sameer said something to him once. Do you remember when they stopped speaking? For maybe six months?”

“Yes, Sameer was miserable,” Diana said. “It was...1931? 1932?”

“He wouldn’t tell me what it was about, just that he would fix it,” Steve said. “Sameer never could stand it when Charlie was mad at him.”

“I have not thought of that in a long time,” Diana said.

“It could be something else entirely,” Steve hedged. “But...in a lot of ways Sameer knew Charlie better than I did, especially near the end of the war. I had gotten too tunnel visioned. And if he tried to approach him on his own...I could see that going badly.”

“I’ll call him,” Steve said. “Next time we’re near a pay phone. I’ll write him tonight but I’d rather talk to him about it.”

“We can go into town later,” Diana said.

Steve nodded. They walked in silence for a little while.

“I don’t know how much good it does to try and figure out when we should have known,” Steve said. “We still don’t know what to do to help now.”

He looked at her. “What do your people do for – what did you call it? Battle exhaustion?”

“Yes, there would have been some Amazons who suffered from it after the war with men. But that was hundreds of years before I was born and I...confess I may not have paid as much attention to it when it was referenced in my studies,” Diana said. “I wanted to be a warrior not a healer and it seemed...very distant from what our life was like on Themyscira.”

“I can only imagine a couple thousand years of peace would help,” Steve said, sighing. “Do you remember anything about how your people treat it?”

“I know there were plants Epione and the healers grew that could be part of treatment. It was emphasized how they should have the support of the community,” Diana said. “There would be a primary healer involved, someone they could talk to. A lot of it involved talking through what still caused them pain.”

“Officers with shell shock got a lot of talking with doctors as treatment,” Steve said. “And a lot of rest.”

“Did it work?” Diana asked.

“Sometimes?” Steve said. “They sent them back to active duty sometimes, during the war. And some of the ones who were released while I was in the hospital seemed okay? I wasn’t able to pay as much attention as I wish I had now.”

“Maureen said he was no longer seeing their family doctor,” Diana reminded him.

“Maybe that's something we can work on as a first step,” Steve said. “We should try to talk to Maureen about it. Tomorrow.”

Steve squinted down the road, toward the water. They would not make it to the end, Diana knew. Steve was already reaching his limit if they were going to walk back as well.
“I just wish he would say something that wasn’t small talk or so rehearsed he could tell it in his sleep,” Steve said.

“Or an attack,” Diana said.

“No, after today I would take that, I think,” Steve said. “If it would help. If he would actually talk about things instead of winding himself so tight he has to leave. He could attack me all he wants.”

“I do not like that idea,” Diana said.

“I wouldn’t either, if it were you,” Steve said. He took another look down the road. He did not sigh but there was something wistful in his face. “We should head back.”

He offered Diana his arm when they turned around and she took it. He smiled faintly. “You know it’s easier to use my cane if I’m on the other side of you.”

“If a car hits me, the car loses,” Diana told him.

Steve laughed outright. Diana thought it might be the most genuine smile he had had since they arrived.

“That’s a good point,” Steve said. “I can’t argue with that.”

They were almost back to the cottage when it happened, so close they could see it, Diana wrinkling her nose in distaste and Steve chuckling at her.

Diana could not tell if the ground was uneven or if Steve’s shoe slipped on an errant stone. It could have been either. It could have been neither. Often enough there seemed to be no clear reason for it.

Steve took a step and something about it landed wrong, a little thing to anyone else, at worst provoking a twinge and a curse.

Steve’s leg gave out from under him. It happened so quickly he did not make a sound before he started to fall. Diana only just managed to catch him, his face going dead white.

There was a moment as she was catching him that Diana’s heart seized so frantically in her chest she thought it might burst the way it had on the airfield the night she defeated Ares. The night Steve had died and somehow come back to them.

But, by now, parts of this had become familiar enough to feel routine.

Diana lowered Steve to the ground. There was no other option, his leg would not support his weight and she needed a better grip on him so she could carry him back to the house. Steve made a gasping sound and stiffened, clutching convulsively at her as sweat broke over his forehead.

“Should I carry you back to the house or stay still?” Diana asked.

Sometimes when this happened, Steve was in so much pain he could not speak, sometimes he fainted, but Diana always tried to ask. Sometimes moving him immediately just made things worse, no matter how much every instinct screamed at her to get him to safety as swiftly as possible.

“House,” Steve rasped.

“It’s your hip?” Diana asked. It always was. She was not sure what she would do if Steve said it was something new.
Steve nodded. He closed his eyes, trying to brace himself. Diana tried to keep him as still and stable as she could when she lifted him but he still made a pained noise.

It was lucky the road they were on was little used. Diana did not think she would have paused even if it were full of spectators. She got him back to the cottage and upstairs to bed in seconds.

She left him on the bed as she dug through the items he had left in his suitcase. Farah had seen Steve in the aftermath of his hip being aggravated many times but she had only seen it go out completely once. It had prompted her to tell Sameer, with all his black market contacts. Since then, they had British army issue morphine syrettes.

Steve did not like to use them much but sometimes waiting an hour for the morphine pills to work was untenable. Diana found the box beneath a pile of dirty socks.

Steve had not moved when she returned to his side. He was shuddering on the bed. He opened his eyes just briefly, to see it was her, and then closed them again. There were tear tracks at the corners of his eyes, trailing down into his hair and his fists were clenched white in the bed sheets.

Diana double checked the dosage and injected him with one syrette – Sameer did his best by them. She felt Steve’s fingers curl around the edge of her blouse and replaced it with her hand. It did not matter to her that he squeezed hard enough to leave bruises on anyone else.

The syrettes were faster than the tablets but not instantaneous. It felt like hours instead of minutes before Diana could see some of the tension leaving his body. She could not imagine what it felt like to Steve.

Finally, it eased enough that he could let go of the sheets and the grip on her hand loosened.

Diana leaned over and stroked his hair, she could not have ignored the desire to comfort him even if she wanted to. Pain still lined Steve's face but the sharpest edge of it was dulling.

“I need to go get ice,” Diana told him. He blinked his eyes open to look at her. She could tell his grasp of what was happening was...loose, between the sudden shock of pain and the drug starting to take hold. “Steve. I will be right back. All right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said hoarsely. “Go.”

She made sure he was propped up properly – his lungs were already compromised and the morphine could make it worse – and left, down stairs to the refrigerator. They only had ice because Steve had done so much cooking yesterday and had not quite trusted the ancient refrigerator to keep it cool without the extra help.

Diana prepared the ice packs quickly and calmly, making several for later as well. The first time this had happened after Steve had gotten out of the hospital, her hands shook with fear as they rushed him back. The first time it had happened and they hadn't taken him to the hospital, she had hardly left his side for a week, not sleeping, because she was so worried.

It did not happen overly often – maybe twice or three times a year and rarely this badly – but it was enough that treating it had become routine.

Diana did not like that it had become normal but they had not found another way. Not yet.

Diana thought Steve might be asleep when she came back. He usually tried to when the morphine first started to work. It was better to sleep through the sharpness of that pain. He opened his eyes, though, when she started undoing his shirt buttons.
"For a moment, he only stared at her and she could not tell whether he was really seeing her or not."

"This is what I'm afraid of." Steve murmured.

Diana stilled. "Steve?"

"Hmm?" Steve mumbled.

His pupils had already contracted, his face slack and faintly confused. Diana pushed his hair back and kissed him on the forehead.

There was no use in attempting a conversation now. He was already adrift.

"Go to sleep, beloved," she told him.

She got him undressed. His hip was already starting to swell, hardly noticeable unless you knew the signs but painful enough that he would not be able to walk until it went down. Icing it helped, the first few days, until the swelling stopped. Then heat, to deal with the lingering stiffness and pain.

Steve twitched a little when Diana first put the ice on but didn’t wake. He slept for the better part of the early afternoon. Diana kept time on his father’s watch, twenty minutes on and an hour off for the ice, and she kept the rest of him wrapped in blankets to ward off shock.

She sat against the headboard, her legs stretched out in front of her. Steve's head was next to her waist, just touching her side and she could reach out easily to run her fingers through his hair.

When he began to drift back towards wakefulness, not quite there but not quite asleep either, she pulled a book from tattered selection on the shelf. *The Three Musketeers* was more his fare than hers; that was why she chose it. Steve, she knew, had always like adventure stories. It was a comfort.

The pain roused him more fully as the afternoon dragged on. Diana knew it was creeping back in when Steve turned his face against her side and let out a shuddering sigh. She threaded her fingers through his hair and checked the watch.

"You can have a pill in 30 minutes," Diana told him. She left it unvoiced that it would take nearly an hour after that for him to feel it.

Steve nodded. "Okay."

He did not move. Diana kept reading. She had not forgotten what he had said – could not forget it – but it would be cruel to make him speak now.

Another fifteen minutes went by. Diana set the book aside. She ran her fingers through Steve's hair.

"You should eat something before you take another dose," she said. "How are you feeling?"

The morphine always made Steve nauseous and he never wanted to eat much when he was in pain like this.

"Not too bad," Steve said, his voice quiet and strained. "Don't want to risk it."

"Throwing up?" Diana asked.

Steve nodded, a tiny movement against her side and repeated: "Don’t want to risk it."

"Just toast then," Diana said. "And tea."
“Okay,” Steve said.

Diana carefully eased herself away from him. She could tell Steve wanted to curl up tight against the pain that was starting to throb back in his hip as soon as she was no longer there for him to bolster himself against. He didn’t. He kept still. He knew not to aggravate anything.

Diana helped him eat the plain toast because they did not want to prop him up any more than he already was and make his hip flex more than necessary. Steve washed the morphine pill down with tea and took the ice from Diana. It gave him something to do, while they waited for his painkiller to kick in. Diana picked up the book again and stroked his hair and tried not to sneak too many glances at his father’s watch.

It felt like it took much longer than an hour for the lines that had gathered around his mouth and on his forehead to ease.

The tablets were not as high a dose as the syrettes. They still made him drowsy and nauseous and sometimes itchy but they were not as likely to knock him out.

Diana had paused to turn a page when Steve said, hoarsely: “I hate this.”

Diana was surprised he brought it up himself. Steve's usual tactic when physically in pain was to go silent.

She put the book aside. For a moment, she considered sliding down the bed and curling around him as best she could but it felt such a sham of how they usually slept together that she could not bring herself to.

She went back to stroking his hair instead. Steve was not looking at her and the touch was a comfort for them both.

“I know,” Diana said.

Steve was silent for a few moments. Diana waited.

“Don't be mad at me,” he said, finally. “But tomorrow if you can...if you can help me to my wheelchair...we need to go see Charlie.”

It was only because Diana was so well acquainted with Steve's stubbornness that she did not stop her movements in surprise.

“Do not be angry with me,” she replied. “Absolutely not.”

Stubbornness warred with upset on his face. It did not surprise Diana when the upset won and Steve’s face creased in worry. It was why he went so quiet when he was hurt. It was how he guarded himself when he was at his most vulnerable.

“We can’t...” he started. Then stopped. “Charlie’ll think...Charlie can’t think we abandoned him. He can’t...”

“I will go see Charlie,” Diana told him. “You are not going anywhere for a few days. You know that.”

“It would hurt but I could...I could manage. In the wheelchair. If I had to,” Steve said. He flinched even at the thought of it.
“No,” Diana said. She had seen him do it before but after falls, not when his hip simply gave out on him. “I will go see Charlie tomorrow just as we have been. When the swelling goes down and if it does not cause you excessive pain, we will get out the wheelchair. Not before. I will not help you injure yourself further.”

“I hate this,” Steve repeated quietly. He swallowed and closed his eyes briefly. They both knew he could not do it on his own, not now. “If...If Charlie hates me, if he needs to...”

“Steve!” Diana said, appalled.

“No, listen,” Steve said. He looked at her. “If it...helps him. To have someone to blame. If he wants to...hate me, but listen to you. Let you help. I don’t like it but I would...he can. If that’s what he needs. I can be that, if I have to.”

He looked so earnest about it, Diana felt sick. She also thought the idea was absolutely preposterous.

“I do not think that will do either of you any good,” Diana told him. “I think it will hurt him even more, in the long run.”

“I just...” Steve said. “I don’t know what to do to help.”

“We will find a way,” Diana said. “I do not think that is it.”

“Hope not,” Steve mumbled. He leaned into her touch a little and closed his eyes, face still creased in worry. “Promise me you’ll go tomorrow. Please.”

“I will,” Diana said, solemnly. “And the next and the next, until we can go together again.”

Diana stroked his hair for a moment, let him gather himself, before asking. “Is that what you are afraid of?”

Steve’s eyes opened, just a crack and his face went still. Diana very nearly stopped touching him. She did not think she had ever seen him so blatantly considering whether or not to lie to her.

“No,” he said, finally. “No. Yes, I’m...I’m so worried about Charlie I don’t know what to do but I...it’s not...I’m afraid of...”

He stopped, his jaw clenching. “It’s more selfish than that.”

Steve was silent for so long, Diana thought he would refuse to say anything further. Then she felt his fingers curl in her blouse again as he thought she would leave him when he wanted her to stay. He turned his head back to meet her gaze.

“I don't...want to be a burden for you,” Steve said haltingly.

Diana expected as much. It still made her angry when he said it aloud. “You are not.”

“Diana...” Steve almost smiled. Diana never thought she would hate one of his smiles. “I am. There are...so many things that I will never be able to do. There is always a chance that I am going to end up like this and you...”

“You deserve the world. Or to see it at least,” Steve said. He looked at her the way he did sometimes, as if he could not believe she was real. “God, no one deserves that more than you. And you are not going get to if you're always with me. I'm not...I can't...”

There was no question that he meant it and she knew he was not proposing they end their
relationship. Only that she leave him behind, which was preposterous on its own. She might have been angry, if it those things had not been true.

She thought he was being very stupid. She understood why he felt that way and she could not entirely fault him for it – she did not know how she would react if she had been injured as he had, chronically in pain and limited in his mobility.

But he was still wrong.

“Why not?” Diana said.

“Because this could happen. Will happen. Again,” Steve said, frustration creeping into his voice. “And you'll have to take care of me.”

“I am always going to take care of you,” Diana said.

“You shouldn't have to!” Steve said. He looked exhausted even having to say it. “I don't want you to have to.”

“I do not have to to begin with. I choose to,” Diana said. “I love you. And you speak as if you do not take care of me. That is foolish.”

Steve looked at her as if she had grown another head. “I hardly take care of you.”

“The meals in the fridge disagree,” Diana told him. “As do the stitches mending my clothing and all the nights you have stayed up and shared the worst of the world haunting me.”

“It's not the same,” Steve said.

“It does not have to be the same,” Diana said. “It is worth as much to me.”

Steve snorted.

“You can disbelieve me all you like,” Diana said. “It is true and I am patient.”

“You are not,” Steve said.

“I can be,” Diana told him. “In this, I can and will outlast your stubbornness.”

Steve looked at her as if he did not believe her, as if he could not. He was also exhausted and near tears. It was the morphine and the pain, she knew, but it did not make it any easier to see.

“Foolish man,” Diana told him and kissed his forehead, then his lips very lightly. “You will see.”

Steve leaned into her touch in reply. She did not think he had exhausted his arguments, only himself. She held him carefully, so carefully, until he seemed less likely to fracture under the weight of his doubts and burdens.

“Do you want me to read to you more?” Diana asked, eventually.

Steve nodded slowly. “That was...new.”

“I learned it from you,” Diana said. There were uncounted nights when she had been unable to sleep and unready to speak of why and Steve had stayed up with her, reading. It helped.

Steve looked faintly embarrassed. “I also need...to go the the bathroom.”
“Do you think you can stand being carried to the bathroom?” Diana asked.

It would be better for him to use a bedpan and they both knew it but Diana would not take the choice from him. Not now. If he needed that for his dignity, she would not take it from him.

Steve wavered, then sighed and shook his head no.

Diana said nothing as she helped him with a makeshift bedpan. There was enough of an embarrassed flush high on Steve's pale cheeks as it was without acknowledging it. She cleaned up swiftly and gave him back the ice pack to put on hip. Action could be a comfort in the face of feeling so helpless.

She settled back on the bed beside him and opened the book, leaving one hand free to slid into his hair and cradle his head.

“Athos had invented the phrase, family affair. A family affair was not subject to the investigation of the cardinal; a family affair concerned nobody. People might employ themselves in a family affair before all the world. Therefore Athos had invented the phrase, family affair.”

Steve did not sleep well. He would drop off and then jolt awake from a spike of pain, disoriented. It was nearly dawn before the morphine and exhaustion finally took hold and made him rest.

He was still sleeping in the late morning when Diana got ready to leave for Charlie’s. She hated to wake him but it would be worse if he woke and she just was not there.

She sat beside him on the bed and cupped his cheek in her palm. “Steve. Steve, wake up for me.”

It took several minutes. Diana refused to wake him roughly or too abruptly when he was like this, not unless she had to. Finally, Steve’s face scrunched up and he turned into her touch, eyelashes fluttering as he struggled towards wakefulness.

“Diana?” Steve said, quietly. He sounded foggy and a little confused. “What’s wrong? What’d you need?”

Diana smiled at him for all the reasons that she loved him. “I am going to see Charlie soon.”

Steve's face creased in regret and worry. “Tell him...tell him...that I haven’t...it’s not that I don’t...” He paused and then shook his head. “Can’t think.”

“You just woke up,” Diana told him. “I would expect nothing less.”

Despite his bleariness, Steve gave her such an aggrieved look she could not help but laugh and kiss him. It only mollified him slightly.

“I left you some books,” Diana said. They were in extremely easy reach and as simple as she could find – the morphine made it hard for him to concentrate. “The pills are here as well and water.”

Steve glanced at them, face unreadable to anyone but her. She understood the mixture of gratitude and annoyance, why his face burned, even as he said thank you, when she helped him with the bedpan again.

It was never easy to leave him; it was always harder when he was hurt. But Diana was no less devoted to her duties to the world or to their friends as she was to him. They would not love each other so if they did not share that first.

Still, it helped that Steve fell asleep again before she left.
Maureen blinked at Diana when she answered the door and found her there alone. She looked surprised. Then her face soured.

“Given up then, has he?” Maureen said.

Diana was taken aback and fiercely angry for a moment. But then... Maureen did not know Steve, not nearly as well as their other friends did. And from what Diana could tell, she had no reason to believe otherwise. She tried to temper her impulse to defend him.

“No,” Diana said. “No. He had a bad fall yesterday. He will be confined to bed for several days, perhaps a week.”

Maureen did not look like she quite believed it. “But...you’re here.”

“Yes,” Diana raised an eyebrow. “We are worried about Charlie. We both are. That has not changed with Steve’s injury. He was...very upset that he would not be able to come.”

“To say goodbye?” Maureen asked. Diana looked at her, baffled. “I imagine you’re heading home, since he’s hurt.”

Diana frowned. “No. We are still planning to stay another three weeks.”

Maureen stared at her, her mouth pulled so tight it seemed to draw in lines of pain and age. She looked at Diana, hard, for a long moment. Diana could not remember the last time she felt so much like she was being judged.

“Well, I suppose that’s something,” Maureen said. She sniffed and Diana could not tell what it meant. “It’s for naught today, anyway. Charlie had gone when I woke up this morning. Don’t know where he is or when he’ll be back. Too early for it to be the pub. He does this, sometimes.”

It was very hard not to be frustrated.

“Thank you,” Diana said. “I will come back tomorrow. Steve will too, when he is able.”

Maureen gave her an unreadable look again. She did not, as Diana had expected, as she had the other days, immediately go inside and close the door.

“Do you – you and Steve – need anything?” Maureen asked. Diana must have looked puzzled because Maureen shifted and raised her chin, as if she was unsure of herself but trying to hide it.

“Thank you,” Diana said. “I can take care of Steve. We are used to this.”

Maureen looked unconvinced but there was a stubbornness to it now. “I’m sure you can. Couldn’t help you there anyway. You said you didn’t cook and he’s bedridden. I’ll make you a casserole for tomorrow.”

Diana did not cook usually – Steve was better at it and he enjoyed it more. Diana found it boring; that did not mean she could not cook.

But in that moment, she would not have turned the gesture down for anything in the world.

“Thank you,” Diana said. She did not stifle the impulse to reach out and grasp Maureen’s hand. “That would be most helpful.”

Maureen looked nonplussed but she patted Diana’s hand before stepping back. “I’ll let you go.”
She stepped back inside and seemed to debate with herself for a moment before she closed the door. She asked: “He’s got something for the pain, your Steve? Or is he suffering?”

“Yes,” Diana said. “We have morphine for when this happens.”

“At least it’s not the drink,” Maureen looked at Diana, her mouth screwed up again. “But he’s not one to take it...often, is he?”

“No, he hates it,” Diana said. “It is a battle for him to take it for as long as he needs to.”

“That’s good, I suppose,” Maureen said. “It’s the pain that kills you or the cure for it, in the end, you know.”

She looked as shocked at her words as Diana was. She nodded a goodbye in the next moment and politely but firmly shut the door.

Diana took a breath and looked around. She felt unsettled, like she was leaving something unfinished that she should not neglect.

Maureen had said it was too early for the pub to be open. Diana went anyway. She went to every one she could find in Inverness. Charlie was not there. She searched the back roads near Charlie’s house, for a while, but she did not know where to look and found nothing.

It felt like a failure going back to the cottage.

Steve was awake. A book was open but face down beside him. His head was tilted back and his eyes were closed with his forearm pressed against them.

The second day was better than the first for the pain but Steve always seemed to experience side effects with the morphine. Nausea appeared to be winning this time.

“Do you want me to make you some ginger tea?” Diana asked.

“Yes,” Steve said, his voice shaky. “No. Tell me how Charlie is first?”

Diana sighed and sat beside him on the bed. She took his other hand. “He was not there.”

“Not up for company?” Steve asked.

“No, not at home at all,” Diana repeated.

“Fuck,” Steve said.

“Maureen said he was gone before she woke today,” Diana said. “That he does this sometimes. I looked for him, for a time, but could not find him.”

Steve squeezed her hand. Diana leaned forward to kiss his temple. “I will make you that tea and then I can read for you some more.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve said. “You could...”

“Steve,” Diana told him. “Stop.”

He swallowed. He could not spare the words to argue with her, not against the waves of nausea. “Okay.”
It was a long night. Steve was miserable – in pain and sick and worried – and Diana was restless. She helped him shift, carefully, propping him up with pillows so he did not have aggravate his hip, and got him to eat a little. She curled around him more tightly than was probably comfortable for either of them when they tried to sleep.

The third day was better and worse. Steve was just happy to start using the bathroom again, even if it meant they had to keep intermittently icing his hip.

Charlie was...

Charlie was home, at least, when Diana got there. But he barely acknowledged her past monosyllabic answers. Diana found herself telling him of Themyscira simply for something to say and because it sparked something near to interest in him, at least. She understood how he and Steve could so often fall back on stories they had told each other a hundred times before.

It was maddening. And it was all she could do not to snap when he started to smoke and then made his way through three consecutive cigarettes.

Maureen came in and scowled when he was almost through the last one.

“Put that out,” she scolded as she opened the window with a bang. “You want to smoke, you can go outside. Steve can't have it. You know that.”

Charlie stared at the cigarette for a moment as if he had not even realized what he was doing. But then his face hardened.

“Steve,” he said very clearly. “Is not here.”

“I told you he had a fall,” Maureen said. “Keep that up and he’ll not be here for longer, I suspect.”

Charlie blew out a stream of smoke very deliberately in her direction. Diana strongly suspected it was more in reaction to Maureen than Steve but it still pained her. Maureen just shook her head at him and left.

When he lit a fourth, as present and purposeful as he had been the entire time she was there, Diana stood.

“I should be going,” she said.

For the first time since...since Veld, there was something mean in Charlie's eye when he looked at her. He sneered: “Because Steve needs ya?”

“I suspect so,” Diana said. “Since he is unable to stand and get to the bathroom on his own.”

It was not something she intended to say. Steve was as private as he could be about things like that and he had always tried to shield Charlie from the worst of it, even when Steve was in the hospital, even when he was angry and hurt and lashing out at his friends. He had wanted to protect Charlie.

Diana was not sure she regretted it but she was not sure she would have said it again, if given a second chance.

Charlie looked bewildered, as if he were not sure how to react. Then it turned to anger.

“Best be off then,” Charlie said, he took a long swig from his bottle. “Wouldn't want to keep him waiting.”
“I will see you tomorrow,” Diana said.

As she walked out the door, into the hallway, she heard Charlie yell after her: “I didn't ask you to come!”

Diana did not turn back. She would not do any good at the moment.

“Wait!” Maureen called as Diana reached the front door. She bustled down the hallway from the kitchen, a casserole dish in hand and a bag around her arm.

Diana stopped, astonished. She had forgotten.

“I'm not the cook I once was,” Maureen said, with a sour twist to her mouth that was as likely to be about her husband as her cooking. “But it shouldn't be so bad. You've only to heat it up and it should last you a few days.”

She handed Diana the dish and then the bag. She patted the bag as she gave it her.

“Oatcakes,” Maureen said. She flushed very dully. “You've come to Scotland. Be a shame to leave without trying an oatcake.”

Diana swallowed. She put the dish and the bag down and hugged Maureen. It was more ginger than with Etta and Farah but no less genuine.

“I...Oh,” Maureen said. She did nothing for a moment, then tentatively hugged back, patting Diana’s back. “This is too much fuss. It's nothing really.”

“It is very kind,” Diana told her. She let go because it was clear Maureen was not entirely comfortable and picked up the dish again. “Thank you.”

“Well. You're welcome,” Maureen said.

“I will see you tomorrow,” Diana told her.

“You know,” Maureen said, hesitant. “I would not blame you, if you preferred to stay with your Steve while he’s hurt.”

Diana shook her head. “I will be back tomorrow.”

It had just started to rain when she got back to the cottage. She put the casserole in the fridge – she found she did not have much appetite however much she appreciated the gesture. The oatcakes she took upstairs.

Steve was reading, propped up where she had left him in bed. He looked up when she entered the room. His face smoothed out for just a moment at the sight of her before he read her expression and a furrow appeared on his brow.

It seemed stupid to ask how he was feeling so Diana did not. Instead, she asked: “How is the nausea?”

“Not...terrible right now,” he said slowly. “How was...”

“You took your pill?” She interrupted.

Steve made a face. “Yes.”
“On time?”

“Yes,” Steve said. He had not looked away from her and he did not now. “How’s Charlie?”

“Not well,” Diana said. She came and sat next to him on the bed. Steve put his book aside. “He was angry with me when I left.”

Steve was quiet, considering his words. “Charlie loves you, Diana.”

“That does not stop him from being hurtful or angry,” Diana said. “Not right now. You are as aware of that as I am.”

“You want to tell me what happened?” Steve asked.

Diana thought she understood better why Steve had burned Charlie’s letter. She would tell him, most likely, but... “Perhaps later.”

Steve raised an eyebrow but didn’t push. “Want me to read to you?”

Diana tilted her head at him. That was not something Steve volunteered to do while he was on morphine. Steve shrugged at her.

“You’ll have to bear with me,” Steve said. “I either dozed off or just...stared at a page for about half an hour earlier. And I’ve read this book before.”

Diana leaned forward. Agatha Christie again. She should have left it downstairs. She blamed Etta entirely.

“I will not complain,” Diana said and kissed his cheek.

She pulled out the bag Maureen had sent her off with as Steve flipped back to the start of the book. Steve raised an eyebrow at her.

“Maureen cooked for us,” Diana said. She took a bite. It was good if a little bland. Despite everything, Steve still read her expression in an instant.

“Try it with jam,” Steve suggested.

“You have had them before?” Diana asked.

“Oatcakes? Yeah,” Steve said. His eyes went distant, sad and fond. “Charlie got them in care packages. He shared with me and a couple of the other guys who didn’t have family.”

Diana’s heart ached for Charlie and Maureen and even Steve. She took another out of the bag. “Do you think you can keep it down?”

Steve looked doubtful but he took it. “I’ll go slow and see.”

He opened the book again, nibbling at the edges of the oatcake before he began.

“It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches...”

Steve woke early the next morning, the pain gnawing through the morphine daze at the edges of his pill cycle. It left him looking drawn and tired, even after the next dose kicked in. Diana was hoping
before she left she could get him to eat something more substantial than toast or oatcakes before the nausea came back.

The knock at the door surprised her.

Opening it to find Charlie shocked her.

He looked profoundly uncomfortable but suspicious too. He avoided looking her in the eye.

"Come to see Steve," Charlie said.

Diana hated the meanness in his eyes, as if he thought he was going to catch Steve in some lie. But there was something so tired and sad there too...

She would never have closed the door on Charlie. Seeing that made her open it a little wider and let him in.

“He is upstairs,” Diana told him.

Charlie looked up the annoyingly narrowed staircase and frowned, suddenly balking. Diana forged ahead for him, starting up the stairs, looking back and saying: “Come on.”

Charlie's face went stiff but he did not back down from such a blatant challenge. He followed closely behind her. As much as Diana would have liked to warn Steve, perhaps it was best that Charlie got the unvarnished truth of things.

At least they had changed Steve into a clean pair of pajamas last night.

“Steve,” Diana called, the bedroom door was half open and she pushed it the rest of the way. “Charlie's here.”

Steve had been sitting with his head tilted back and his eyes closed – either too queasy to read or having too much trouble focussing on the text. He lifted his head to look at her when she came in and his eyes went wide when he saw Charlie.

Charlie stopped dead and stared.

Diana understood it. Steve was still too pale and there were bruises under his eyes from the restless nights. There were still lines around his mouth and eyes that only pain and sorrow showed and he held himself differently, somehow, smaller and less sure of himself.

When he saw Charlie he tried to sit up a little more, to straighten and make himself more the way he thought Charlie needed him to be. But the movement was too fast and he could only manage it for a moment before he had to relax back, wincing.

“Don't...” Charlie said, taking a step forward and then stopping.

They stared at each other awkwardly.

Diana was about to step in when Steve smiled, just a little and painfully uncertain.


“Well,” Charlie said and whatever he had come here to prove was gone, replaced by a different kind of false bravado. “Missed ya, didn't I? You're only here for so long.”
Steve could not have looked happier if Charlie had handed him the sun. “We’ll come back. Promise. But I’m glad you came.”

Charlie grinned, just for a moment, before his face fell back into indecision and he shifted awkwardly.

“Come sit down,” Steve said. He looked a little sheepish. “Sorry it's cramped. I...wouldn't be able to stay downstairs for long.”

There were three options in the little room. The bed itself, a dresser Diana thought was too high for Charlie to get onto, and a chest at the end of the bed. Charlie nudged the chest out and sat there, facing Steve. It would not, Diana thought, be comfortable for long.

“Wouldn't want to jostle you,” Charlie said, looking bashful. “What with...uh, what have you done to yourself?”

“My hip. It just...went,” Steve said.

“You slip or something?” Charlie asked. He looked worried. He looked like he wanted there to be an explanation. “Maureen said something about a fall.”

“I did fall. But because my hip gave out. Not the other way around,” Steve shook his head. “Maybe there was a dip in the road I didn't see or something but I don't really know. It just happens sometimes.”

“Thought, uh,” Charlie said. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I thought this didn't happen any more.”

Steve shrugged. “It’s better than it used to be but, yeah, it still happens.”

Diana caught Steve's eye for a moment and tilted her head in the direction of the door. When Steve did not object, she crept out. It seemed wise to leave them to it.

She would admit that she snuck by the door several times to make sure everything was all right. She checked after ten minutes:

“I don't...really remember what it’s like to not be in pain,” Steve was saying and Diana hated the acceptance in his voice for all there was nothing they could do about it.

“There's better days. A lot of them now. But it's still there, this...ache I can’t shake. It’s always just...a matter of how bad it is,” Steve laughed. “And how tired I am. I'm exhausted at the end of the day, a lot.”

Charlie was quiet for a long moment then, through the crack in the door, Diana saw him raise his hand slowly. Like Maureen, the joints were swollen with arthritis. Charlie's were worse, though, and his hand trembled. He shook it out, wincing but it became no steadier.

“Goes like that now,” Charlie said, commiserating. “Can't do anything for it. Got it just about everywhere. Hands are annoying. Can't do as much. But it's my knees and my back that get to me. Doc can’t do anything for it. Maybe for the knees but there’s no replacing a spine.”

“Aw hell, Charlie,” Steve said. “There’s nothing?”

“Nothing they can do for you either,” Charlie said.
“Yeah, but I’m...hell, who knows,” Steve said.

“Aye, but I’m old,” Charlie said, a resentful look on his face.

His head tilted by chance in Diana’s direction and she slipped away silently. If Charlie was talking, if he was really talking, she was going to give to leave them undisturbed for as long as possible.

It was not for as long as she would have liked. Steve had not eaten and he would need to take his next pill soon – if he did on a completely empty stomach he risked dry heaving. She paused only briefly before heating some of Maureen’s casserole for herself and Charlie, hoping, perhaps, the normality of it, of having lunch together, would persuade him to stay.

Steve went just a bit paler when she carried it in and looked relieved when he saw she had toast for him. His face looked pinched around his eyes. He was in more pain than he was showing and more nauseous too, judging by his reaction to the food.

Charlie had put his feet up on the bed and put them down abruptly at Diana’s arrival. He looked surprised and a bit chagrined to be handed a plate but it seemed to make him remember his hunger and he dug in quickly.

He was distracted enough that Diana could run her fingers along Steve’s arm lightly, a question: *Are you okay?*

And Steve could meet her eyes for a moment, give a tiny shrug, a small nod: *No, but I don’t need saving.*

Without Charlie noticing.

Diana perched on the top of the dresser – it creaked ominously and she was glad Charlie had not attempted it – and ate with them, mostly to keep an eye on Steve in case the toast did not go down well. Charlie’s talk was lighter when she was with them. She waited until Steve met her eyes again and gave her another nod – the toast would stay down, the dose he took after wasn’t bothering his stomach too much – before gathering up the plates and using that as an excuse to leave.

“You don’t,” Charlie said and then hesitated when she looked at him. “You don’t have a mite to drink, do you?”

“No,” Steve answered, voice gentle. “Diana still doesn’t drink and...and it makes me sick to my stomach when I'm taking the morphine pills.”

“Ah,” Charlie said, he smiled, trying to play it off. “You never did tell me why you don't drink.”

There was something desperate in Charlie’s eyes so Diana went along with the ruse.

She made a face. “The alcohol of man’s world is weak and tastes horrid. I do not bother with it.”

Charlie laughed as much from relief as anything. But as she paused and waited outside the door, the laughter died and she heard him say, very quietly to Steve.

“I get the shakes if I go without too long,” Charlie said.

Steve was silent for a moment. When he spoke, there was no judgement in his voice. There was no inflection at all.

“Did that happen last time you quit too?”
Diana heard the chest creak as Charlie sat up fast. "How'd you...?"

"I overheard you and Chief in the hospital," Steve said. "I wasn't...at the end of some of the...longer days sometimes I couldn't...it was hard to muster the energy to react, even if I wanted to."

Charlie did not speak for so long Diana thought he might get up and leave. She had taken another step away when he spoke again.

"He locked me in a room for a week and kept the liquor from me, Chief did," Charlie said. "I asked him too. I had to dry out. I wasn't of use to anyone and you...I needed to be."

"You know we would help you, Charlie," Steve said.

"Couldn't do it again," Charlie said firmly. "I...tried. Years ago now. After...After Margaret had her first. I'm too old. I think it would kill me."

He leaned back again, the chest creaking. "Sides, I've no need to be useful now. The girls never visit and the world doesn't want much to do with old soldiers anymore. We didn't even fight in the right goddamn war for them."

Diana had to leave. She would have marched back inside otherwise. She did not know how Steve stood it. Charlie was breaking her heart.

He left around 6, all in a rush, his goodbye to her quick and embarrassed. When Diana glanced at them, Charlie's hands were shaking and he would not accept her offer of a ride home.

Steve looked bone-weary when she went upstairs. He did not open his eyes when she came into the room, only tilted his head onto her shoulder when she settled on the bed beside her and took her hand.

"We both tried to blackmail each other into going back to the doctor," Steve said.

"You are both very stubborn old men," Diana told him.

Steve laughed without any joy. She squeezed his hand and he opened his eyes too look at her.

"You need to eat something before your next dose," Diana told him.

"It's going to make me vomit," Steve warned.

"If you do not, you will start retching," Diana said.

"That's a great choice, right there," Steve said dryly. He turned his head again and pressed his face against her shoulder. "Vomiting or dry heaving."

Diana rubbed the back of his neck. She could feel how chapped his lips were through the fabric of her blouse. "You need to drink more water tomorrow."

"I know," Steve said. "He just...I just couldn't..."

"I know," Diana told him. She kissed the top of his head. "I understand."

"I'll tell you what I can," Steve said. "Whatever wasn't a confidence. But I...I'm so tired. I don't think I can..."

Diana interrupted him by kissing his forehead. Steve's jaw ticked in the way that meant he was trying
not to cry.

He did vomit, after his evening dose and then dry heaved after his night one. When Charlie arrived the next day, Steve was exhausted and looked worse than he had the day before.

Steve forced himself awake for Charlie but not even an hour later, Charlie was back downstairs, looking panicked.

“Steve fell asleep,” Charlie said, his voice hushed as if he thought they would wake him from downstairs.

“It is a side effect of the morphine,” Diana told him. It was not quite a lie. Diane did not like to lie. It was a side effect but she doubted it was entirely the cause in this instance.

“You're sure?” Charlie asked. “I didn't want...I didn't mean to...”

“No, Charlie,” Diana said. He looked so upset that she reached out and touched his arm. “It upset his stomach last night and he did not sleep well, that’s all. It makes him sleepy anyway. You must remember that.”

“Fell asleep in the middle of eating that slop they gave him at the hospital once,” Charlie said, trying to grin. It did not work.

“It is just bad timing,” Diana said, squeezing his arm. She did not look away from him. Steve had told her once that people never believed you were lying if you looked them in the eye when you did. “Nothing more.”

Charlie nodded. He did not look entirely convinced but he looked less guilty. “I'll come by tomorrow.”

“You can stay, if you would like,” Diana offered. It would be better for Steve if he did not, she thought, but worse for Charlie. Diana knew Steve would choose the same thing she did.

Charlie shook his head though. “No. I...I'll see you tomorrow.”

Steve was doing better the next day; Charlie was worse. Steve insisted in cutting his morphine doses in half; Charlie had clearly been drinking when he arrived.

It was frustrating. Charlie was still so obviously trying. She heard him snap at Steve, several times, but then apologize and sit back down. The visit was short but when he left, he did not storm out. He looked deeply unhappy and desperate to go but he said goodbye and told them he would see them tomorrow.

Charlie did not come the next day. When Diana went to see him, Maureen turned her away.

Steve insisted on going over the next morning. It was sooner than he should be up for so long. Even getting him dressed left him looking paler. Diana normally would have kept him in bed even if she had to physically pin him there but...it felt like something fragile was at stake, something that could be lost.

Maureen was shocked to see them, stunned when Diana lifted Steve up her front steps, wheelchair and all. She recovered as they got to the door.

“Charlie’s not...” She began and then paused, uncertain. She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t know. He might see Steve.”
“I’ll take the chance,” Steve said, face grim.

His wheelchair – newer and smaller than the one Charlie would have been used to – barely fit through the skinny hallways. When they got to the stairs leading up to the bedroom, Steve looked up and grimaced.

Then he looked at Diana, reached for his cane and said: “Don’t kill me.”

“You say that as if I did not expect as much,” Diana said. She pushed the wheelchair back and picked him up carefully. He raised an eyebrow at her. “There is no reason I cannot take you most of the way.”

Charlie’s bedroom was right at the top of the stairs and the door was ajar. If they did not want Charlie to see her, she had to let him take the last few on his own.


“Call for me and I will be there in a heartbeat,” Diana told him. “I hope...I hope he lets you in.”

She did not let go of Steve for several seconds once she had put him down on the stair, making sure he was steady. It was only three steps to the top but even after the first one she saw the way he grit his teeth and leaned heavily on his cane.

It took too long and at the top he stopped to wipe his forehead but it was Steve. He pressed on and disappeared through the bedroom door.

Diana waited. She heard the quiet murmur of Steve’s voice but could not make out the words. There was rustling and then:

“Steve?”

Charlie’s voice was so thick and exhausted it brought tears to her eyes. She went down the stairs until she could not hear any more quickly. It felt wrong, knowing Charlie did not know she was there, knowing he did not want to be seen at all.

Maureen met her at the bottom of the stairs. They waited but there was only the quiet murmur of voices upstairs.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Maureen said, turning and walking back to the kitchen.

Diana did not want to follow her. She wanted to stay where she was. She wanted to be welcome in the hushed conversations Steve and Charlie kept having. But it was more important that they were having them and if she could not help there...Charlie was not the only person who had suffered.

“We enjoyed the oatcakes,” Diana said as Maureen poured them both a cup of tea, sitting at the kitchen table. It surprised her how bright and well-kept it was; it reminded her of the way Steve kept theirs. “Steve especially. The pills he is on upset his stomach but he could eat your oatcakes.”

“Well,” Maureen said. She did not look like she knew what to do with that information. “Well. I'm glad.”

She took a sip of her tea. She did not look at Diana. “Seems like you've done Charlie a touch of good after all. Can't remember the last time I got him to speak to me when he was like this.”

Diana put her teacup down and reached across the table to touch her hand. Maureen stiffened at the
gesture, not completely comfortable with it.

“I hope he begins to again one day,” Diana said. “I cannot understand why he does not.”

Maureen put her teacup down. “That's a ship that has long since sailed.”

“It could come again,” Diana suggested, hopeful.

Maureen looked for a moment, her expression caught between between pity and anger. Pity won out.

“You're sweet to hope for it,” Maureen said finally. “But it's not like you and your Steve, looking at
each other like the rest of the world might as well not exist. Charlie's not looked at me like that since
before his own war.”

“You seemed happy when we visited before,” Diana visited.

“We weren't unhappy, not always, but that's not...” Maureen's mouth went tight and flat and she
looked at Diana like she was being intentionally cruel for a moment.

Something made Maureen decide she wasn't. She hunched forward a little more over her teacup, her
voice quiet. “You know, I'm the only one who remembers what Charlie was like before he went to
war. For all your Steve is likely his oldest friend these days, I'm the only one who remembers what
he was like before. Anyone else that knew him then is long dead.”

“He was sweet, you can't know anything but hints of it but...” there was a quiet look wistfulness to
her expression that Diana had not seen from her before. “He used to bring me bouquets of wild
flowers when he was first trying to court me, day after day, until I think he picked one meadow plum
clean, the silly thing, and when I said yes to him, he had to hide his face in his hanky he was
blubbering so much. When the girls were just babes, he would get up with me every night to sing to
us while I feed them. His boasts were always grander than his deeds but I didn't care because he was
so sweet with me and the children.”

“And then he went off to war and he never came back,” Maureen said. She fiddled with her teacup,
turning it slowly in the saucer. “The man I married never made it home to me. I don't know exactly
when Charlie buried him in those trenches. Seems like he had to, to survive. But I must have read his
letters a thousand times trying to figure it out, trying to find out when I lost him.”

“And then the war ended and he didn't,” Maureen paused, the anger back. “He didn't come home. I
knew he was alive from the money he sent and fair few men left wives and children behind who
didn't do that neither. But Charlie didn't even meet his son ‘till he was nearly six. Didn't have him
home for good ‘till he was nearly eight.”

“It's a hard thing,” Maureen said. “But I...We tried to make something new of it when Charlie finally
did come home. Wasn't anything else for it. The children hardly remembered him but he worked
hard to win them over and we, well, I missed the man I married but we made a good go of it, my
husband and I, even after the children were grown and gone.”

“He was never my Charlie the way he had been and I won't say there weren't bad bouts but I loved
him well enough. And then to lose him again when...when Liam...” Her voice choked for a moment
but Maureen closed her eyes before Diana could do more than squeeze her hand and got herself
under control.

“My husband never came back after that. I lost him then, every trace. And now he forgets. He
forgets I'm here. He forgets that Liam wasn't only his son. Liam was mine. He was my...” Maureen's
face was tight and drawn. Her expression entirely closed off.
“He was my baby,” Maureen said, steady, if watery. “And Charlie, his grief is his own. Just his own. He would never grieve with me.”

“But Liam was my son too,” Maureen said. “I lost them both with one damn letter.”

Diana got up and walked around the table. Maureen held herself painfully stiffly. Diana did not try to hug her, no matter how much she thought she needed it. She sat beside her and took her hand again instead.

“I am sorry,” Diana told her, her own voice heavy with tears. “I am so sorry.”

Maureen's bottom lip trembled for just a moment before she pressed her lips together hard. She shook her head. “You weren't to know.”

“It does not matter. I am your friend and you suffered, you are suffering, and I am sorry for it,” Diana said. “It is not what you deserve.”

Maureen stared at her for a second and then laughed, taking her handkerchief out of her pocket and wiping her face with it. Diana thought the laughter was to keep from crying.

“Well,” Maureen said. “Well. Thank you for that.”

She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief again before folding it up neatly. “I do miss him, you know. My husband. Even if he wasn't the boy who brought me flowers anymore. And if you can help him find his way, even a little, then god love you. But I don't think he'll come back to me as anything more than a familiar stranger in our home.”

“Why?” Diana asked, her heart aching. “Why are you so sure there is no hope for it?”

“Because he blames me,” Maureen said. “Liam's gone and Charlie blames me for all the years I had with him that he didn't. He's jealous of it, as if I were the one who kept him away. For all the time I got that he could never have.”

“He blames me because if he couldn't he would have to blame himself,” Maureen said. She shook her head. “And he wouldn't be able to live with that guilt, I don't think. It would kill him.”

“Diane,” Steve called from the top of the stairs, interrupting them.

Diana hesitated. She held Maureen's hand all the tighter for a moment.

Maureen patted it with her other hand once and then pulled away. She nodded her head in his direction. “Go on then.”

It was kindly said but still Diana hesitated. “You should come and visit with us when Charlie does.”

Maureen shook her head. “Charlie would not go if I went along. No. I've made my peace. He needs you more than I do. I've friends of my own in town, you know. I get by fine.”

She nodded in the direction of the stairs again. “Go on. Your Steve looked like he shouldn't have been out of bed yet. Helps no one if he slips on the stairs.”

Steve had not tried to get down the stairs himself, Diana was happy to see. He had waited for her, trusted that she would only delay if it was important. He looked at her carefully but did not ask, not yet.

“Charlie's had all the company he can stand for today,” Steve told her, a whisper in her ear as she
carried him down the stairs. “But I think it was good we came.”

When they got downstairs, Maureen had pulled Steve’s wheelchair back so Diana could get him into it easily. All traces of the conversation they had just had were wiped from her face though she frowned at Diana, spotting the way sweat was dotting Steve's temples.

He still found a smile for Maureen. “Thank you.”

Maureen shook her head. “I can't think of a thing you should be thanking me for.”

“If nothing else, it was nice to eat something other than dry toast,” Steve said. “So thank you for the oatcakes.”

“That was nothing,” Maureen said. She looked bemused but touched to be thanked for it. “They’re easy enough. I'll make you some more.”

Diana waited until they were in the car to tell Steve what Maureen had said to her. Not all of it, just enough for him to understand. He looked terribly sad but unsurprised.

“Charlie was a different man when you met him then when I met him,” Steve said grimly. “He had already been through two years of war when I met him. And...it's not so rare a story. Lots of guys went home and...nothing was the same. Even for the lucky ones.”

Diana maneuvered Steve to sleep between her and the wall that night because if she could help nothing and no one else in the world, she could keep him safe. Steve let her and lay awake for a long time, running his fingers idly up and down Diana's bare arm.

Finally, she sighed and Steve's hand closed around her wrist, a question and an offer at once. They maneuvered so he was in her arms, his cheek resting against her collarbone, his fingers curled against her skin and her arms around him.

“Is this what you meant when you told me that it was not very often people loved each other until death?” Diana asked. “And you did not know why they married?”

“Yes,” Steve replied into the darkness and her skin.

There was a piece of paper in a church somewhere that named them husband and wife though they had not undergone any of Steve’s people's traditions. It had allowed Diana to keep Steve with her, keep him safe, help him heal, when he would have otherwise been taken from her. They had exchanged no rings or vows but when Steve could give her nothing else, not even another moment with him, he had given her his father's watch.

“I could die tomorrow,” Steve said quietly. She felt him move his head so he was looking up at her. “And it wouldn't stop me from loving you, Diana. Nothing would.”

She looked down at him and pushed the hair back from his forehead. She could just make out his blue eyes.

“When there is nothing left of me, not even a memory,” Diana told him. “I will still love you.”

Steve kissed her, sweetly. It was easier to sleep then, with him heavy and safe in her arms.

Diana wanted so badly for it to change things. For all the hurt and the pain and the honesty they were forcing between them to make it better.
It did and it did not.

There were still days when Charlie could not get out of bed and would not see either of them, not even Steve. He still snapped at them and was so often angry. His mood would still swing wildly. And there was no parting him from the bottle.

He did seem less hostile, even on the worst days and near the end of the trip there was such a run of good ones – Charlie suggested going out a few times and seemed to take great pride in showing them around, although Diana did notice he seemed to avoid taking them near any of the pubs Maureen had told them he frequented – they extended their trip an extra week.

But better was not well and Diana worried that when they left everything would go back to how it was, no matter that they made plans for Charlie to come visit them at Christmas or that Steve had extracted a promise from Charlie that he would go back to his doctor in return for a promise from Steve to find a new one.

Diana hugged him very hard before they left.

“Oof,” Charlie complained but hugged her back. “You’re cracking my ribs again.”

“You must have something to remember me by,” Diana told him.

Charlie laughed and smiled at her when she pulled back. He leaned forward quickly, unexpectedly, and kissed her cheek.

He straightened and moved forward to Steve before she could react. For a moment, Charlie looked unsure – Steve had only been using his cane more than the wheelchair for a week and things had still been strange between them, at times.

He hugged Steve, gingerly, in the end.

“Steven,” Charlie said and then he couldn’t find any more words.

“We’ll see you soon, Charlie,” Steve said. “I promise.”

Charlie wasn’t smiling anymore. Diana could not read the look on his face but it unsettled her.

Charlie nodded. He let Steve go.

Maureen had not come out to say goodbye. She had left it for Charlie to have just for himself but Diana saw her at the window. When she saw Diana smiling at her, she waved.

They got in the car. Charlie walked out to the end of the driveway and waved at them until they were out of sight.

“It is only a day’s drive, less for me,” Diana said. “But I do not like how far away it feels.”

“Me either,” Steve said.

They drove home.

--

Diana was upstairs unpacking when the call came.

Steve would remember that later. They had just returned from a trip to Bath with Etta and Ed.
Nothing had gone wrong – it had been fun, it had been next to perfect – except their car had broken down about two miles out of town. Ed had called the local garage for them and given them a ride the rest of the way home. Steve’s biggest worry had been calling long distance from the hotel – he had been calling Charlie twice a week since they had come home, nearly two months ago – but it hadn’t been a problem. He had talked to him yesterday; they had made plans for when Charlie visited after Christmas, talked about the possibility of visiting London to see Charlie’s daughter and Sameer.

They had left the unpacking for after dinner. Diana had finished sorting out their dirty laundry while Steve did the dishes. She was putting the suitcases away upstairs and Steve was drying his hands.

The phone rang. It was in the front hall, on a table, with a chair beside it. Steve’s hands weren’t completely dry when he picked it up.

“Hello?” he said.

There was silence for just a beat too long. Steve had opened his mouth to repeat himself when he heard: “Steve?”

“Maureen,” Steve said. He didn’t even try to keep the affection from his voice. He spoke to Charlie frequently; Maureen never called. “Hello! It’s nice you hear from you. How are you?”

There was another silence. Then a sigh.

“There’s no kind way to do this,” Maureen said. “Diana’s there with you, I hope.”


“No. That’s what I’ve called to tell you,” Maureen said. She sighed again, her voice strained. “Charlie...Charlie died earlier today, Steve.”

It took a moment for Steve to understand. When he did, the only thing that kept him standing was the little table in front of him with the phone on it. He felt like something was lodged in his throat and his heart suddenly sounded too loud in his ears.

He did not know how long it took him to speak again. Maureen didn’t say anything. Just waited for him.

“Do you...Can we...” Steve shut his mouth, rubbed his hand over it and tried again. “Diana can be there...quickly. Do you need–?”

“No. Thank you. No,” Maureen said and Steve could hear the hoarseness in her voice, now that he was listening. “My Margaret’s only just arrived. She brought me back from the hospital.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Maureen said. There was a pause. Her voice went quiet and pleading like Steve had never heard it before. “Please, I can’t deal with any grief but my own and my daughters’ yet.”

Steve shut his eyes. “Of course. I’m...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...I’m sorry. If—if there’s anything—”

“I’ll let you know,” Maureen said.

Steve swallowed. He should let her go. He knew. He shouldn’t ask.

“How did he die?” Steve asked.
There was another silence. A long one.

“He had a revolver,” Maureen said. Steve closed his eyes. He felt dizzy; his own breathing harsh in his ears. “Margaret says it was his service pistol. Didn’t know he had kept that but he kept everything from the war.”

“He went out back late this morning. I don’t know if he had been drinking but...it was early. He can’t have had much,” Maureen said. “He went out back, down into the ravine a ways and, well...”

She didn’t say it. Steve couldn’t speak.

“I found him out back after I...heard the shot,” Maureen said. “The doctor...said it would have been quick, how he did it. That he wouldn’t have suffered.”

Steve swallowed. His mouth felt dry. “I’m sorry that you had to...I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Maureen said. Neither of them spoke. “Funeral’s in a week. I expect you’ll want to come.”

“Of course,” Steve said. The thought of the funeral, of what it would mean, of Charlie racketed around in his brain. His eyes flew open and his heart was in his throat both from misery and sudden, complete panic. “I can...Let me tell the others, Etta and...and Sameer. Please.”

The silence between them felt fraught. Steve couldn’t tell if he was imagining it or not. Maureen...There was so much they didn’t know about each other and so much she could have resented.

“Well. It’ll keep me from having to,” Maureen said finally. Steve closed his eyes again, this time from relief. He felt wetness seeping from the corners. “Diana’s there with you, you said?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “Did you want to–”

“No, no. I just wanted to make sure...” Maureen stopped. Steve thought he heard her stifle a sob. His heart ached and he felt the relentless impulse to do something. “Are you sure we can’t–”

“No,” Maureen said. She sniffed once and then sounded completely in control again. “No. I’ll call you. With details for the funeral. You take care.”

“Okay,” Steve said dumbly. “You...Maureen...”

Steve could not think of a single useful or comforting thing to say. “I am sorry. I am so sorry.”

“Thank you,” Maureen said. “I’ll see you next week.”

Steve did not know if he said goodbye or just hung up. He sat down. He had to sit down.

“Steve?”

Diana was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking at him in concern. In the next instant, she was crouched in front of him, taking his hand.

Diana didn’t know. He had to tell her.

“Steve? Are you all right?” Diana asked. “Is it your hip?”
“No,” Steve said. He swiped at his eyes and took a breath. He had to tell her. He had to tell her and Etta andSameer. He wiped his eyes again and took a breath.

“My hip is fine,” Steve said. He wanted to be surprised at how level his voice was but he knew himself too well for that. “No. That was Maureen.”

Diana was holding his hand. He covered hers with his other hand as well. “I’m sorry, Diana. I don’t know how to do this. That was Maureen. Charlie...Charlie died earlier this afternoon.”

Diana stared at him like he was speaking a language that she did not understand.

“What?” she said.

“Charlie died earlier today,” Steve repeated. He squeezed her hand very tightly.

“I don’t understand,” Diana said. She was looking at him like she didn’t believe him. “How? You spoke to him yesterday!”

And wasn’t that a dagger between the ribs. Steve did not want to tell her. Diana...she shouldn’t have to...

Diana grabbed his wrist. She could always tell when Steve was trying to hide something from her.

“No, Steve,” she said, she commanded. “Tell me.”

Steve’s jaw clenched. “I don’t...I don’t want to.”

She looked angry. Not at him, Steve could tell, but at the world. The world that did not deserve her. And he was just going to make it worse. He wished that he could have kept this, any of the ugliness of it from her.

“Tell me,” she said again, gentle but unwavering.

He swallowed again and nodded slowly. His forearm tensed under her grip, as if to pull away, but he did not. He took a breath. He did not look away.

“Charlie shot himself earlier today,” Steve said.

Diana froze. Steve was only going to be able to do this to her once. His own voice sounded strange in his ears and every word felt like it was going to choke him. “Maureen said he had a revolver. He went out back and he...he killed himself. The doctor said he...that it would have been quick.”

Diana was silent. Steve watched her face. He knew her face.

She didn’t believe him. More than that. She thought he was lying to her. But she knew he didn’t lie to her so she didn’t want to say it.

That...Steve did not know what to feel about that, not exactly. He couldn’t blame her for it, though. He didn’t want to believe it himself.

And he didn’t want to do what he needed to do next.

“The funeral is next week. Maureen is going to call us with details,” Steve said. Diana didn’t say anything. Steve took a breath, steeled himself, and pressed on. “She called us first. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Diana. This isn’t...fair to you. But we have to go to London. Now.”
Diana stared at him. “What?”

Steve licked his lips. He wished he could stop. He wished it could be someone else. That it didn’t have to be them – him. That he could give Diana time to process...this when she so clearly wasn’t, when she was looking at him like she was waiting for him to tell her he was making it up.

But he couldn’t. They had to go to London.

He had to tell Sameer.

Steve closed his eyes against the thought. “Maureen called us first. I asked her...I have to go to London and tell Sameer.”

Diana’s mouth opened, then closed. She looked so confused. The anger was still there too, simmering below the surface. “Sameer has a phone.”

Steve shook his head. “It can’t be a call. It has to be in person. Please, Diana, trust me.”

Diana stared for a moment like she wasn’t sure she did, then nodded slowly. She didn’t understand. She didn’t understand any of it.

Steve would have to explain later. There was no one else to tell Sameer. There was no reason to worry about it, Charlie and Sameer had had no friends in common but Steve. But the thought still made it feel like someone was gripping Steve’s heart and squeezing.

And Charlie...

Steve couldn’t think of Charlie.

Diana stood. She looked around for the keys for a moment before remembering. She looked at him and part of her looked so lost Steve wanted to cry.

The rest had a mission. Because Steve had told her it was important.

“Etta and Ed will lend us their car if we ask,” Diana said.

Steve nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Diana frowned. “I am not taking you unless you are in your wheelchair.”

Steve wasn’t entirely sure what to make of that. He hadn’t needed to use his wheelchair since they were in Scotland and it wasn’t far to Etta and Ed’s. If would be faster than if he walked, of course, but he could do it.

Only...Steve swallowed. When Diana felt like there was nothing she could do to help, when a situation was so completely out of her control, she put her energy into keeping him safe.

“Okay,” Steve said, as agreeably as he could manage. Something about her stance softened, just a little. But she disappeared while Steve was getting his coat – he thought to drag the wheelchair out of the closet – and when Steve got to the hallway she was just getting it out and he could tell that she had her armour on under her clothing.

He didn’t know what to think of that. He didn’t know how to make her understand that the fight was over.

They had lost.
Charlie had...

He couldn’t think of Charlie. He wouldn’t be able to keep going if he thought of Charlie and Sameer needed him, even if he didn’t know it yet, and Diana was going to need him as soon the news caught up with her. And he wasn’t helping. They should stop and he should find some way of...of...he didn’t know. Getting her to actually believe it and dealing with the fall out.

But the idea of Sameer not knowing made him feel sick. The idea that Sameer could find out from someone else, someone who didn’t know, made him move.

They made it to Etta and Ed’s faster than Steve would have thought possible. It startled him and worried him and it was just dumb luck that they didn’t run into any of their neighbours on the way because it wasn’t that late.

He ignored it and kept going. He just had to keep going.

Diana held onto his arm as he knocked on Etta’s door. More than that, she was holding him up, just a little, even though he didn’t need it. He put his hand over hers, trying to tell her he was okay.

He didn’t know if she heard him

Etta opened the door. Her first reaction was to smile, seeing them. But Etta had always been a better operative than people gave her credit for and she realized in a moment something was wrong.

“Come in, come in,” she said, instead of a greeting and ushered them through the door. She closed it quite firmly behind her when they were inside and asked immediately. “What is it?”

Steve found himself unable to speak. This was what he had come here to do, in part, but somehow he thought the words would get easier the second time he said them.

They hadn’t.

“We need to borrow your car,” Steve said, instead. “We need to go to London.”

Etta looked at him sharply and whatever she saw in his face made her nod, agreeing even before she asked another question. “All right. Can you tell me what for?”

Diana’s hand tightened on his arm. Steve could feel bruises being left behind.

“Steven!” Ed boomed, appearing in the hallway and brightening immediately. Steve...Steve loved Ed, loved the way he wore his heart on his sleeve and couldn’t read a room to save a life and loved Etta and their girls like the world depended on it and was just a good man, through and through.

Something about the way he said Steve’s name, though, the happiness of it, made Steve want to punch him even as his throat closed up with the tears he was fighting back.

“It’s not a social visit, darling,” Etta said quickly. “They need to get to London. Now, where did you put the keys?”

“In the basket, like always,” Ed said. He looked so confused. Steve hardly registered feeling guilty, it was just too much.

He just had to do it.

“We came to tell you too. Maureen called,” Steve said. Ed, he noticed, put a hand on Etta’s elbow as if to brace her. “There’s no easy way to say this. I’m sorry I can’t do a better job of it. Charlie died
this afternoon.”

Etta covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes very wide.

“Oh,” Ed sighed. He did not look as surprised as Etta looked or as Steve felt, though his eyes were sad. “Poor lad. By his own hand, was it?”

Etta made a choking noise and Diana’s hand tightened so much on Steve’s arm he flinched. Her silence was already unnerving him. But Ed didn’t waver, not the hand helping to hold Etta up or the steady way he looked at Steve. Steve stared at him, unable to figure out the connections he wasn’t making.

“Yes,” Steve said.

“My brother was the same,” Ed said. “Fifteen years on and he could never shake the trenches. Charlie had the same look to him sometimes.”

Steve swallowed. He remembered going to that funeral but at the time nothing had been said. The cause of death had just gone unspoken.

“Did he suffer?” Ed asked.

“No,” Steve answered.

“That’s good then,” Ed said and left the rest unsaid in his eyes. He blinked and shook his head. “You need the car?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I don’t want to...” Steve said. He didn’t want to say these things and run. He didn’t want to but...he felt his jaw clench. “It can’t wait. I’ll...I’ll explain later but it can’t just be a phone call.”

Etta wiped her eyes and sniffled but there was something exasperated in her face when she looked at him. “Goodness, Steve. You don’t need to. I was never as blind as you thought I was.”

Steve blinked but Etta was already retrieving the keys. Ed looked at her, suddenly baffled.

“Darling?” he asked.

“Never you mind,” Etta told Ed, coming back and handing the keys to Steve.

She pressed her hand to his face and Steve had to close his eyes and swallow back all the things he wanted to thank her for. “You two drive safe now. We’ll be here when you get back. And...take care of him.”

“I will,” Steve promised. He pressed her hand against his cheek for a moment and she hugged him, not quite as tightly as she used to and he hugged back, wishing that he could stay, before he pulled back and turned to Diana.

Diana had gone as pale as Steve had ever seen her and Steve knew, he just knew, that she had seen what he did sometimes. Their friends were getting old, and the day was coming when they would lose them.

Steve didn’t think Diana had felt it in the way that it struck him, sometimes. Not until now.

He hated how old Etta looked – smaller somehow than she was, with Ed’s hands resting on both her shoulders – as they left.
He wished Diana had said something.

She automatically tried to take the keys from him as they walked to the car. Steve pulled them back.

“Let me drive,” he said.


“Diana,” Steve said. There was bite in his voice but he clawed it back and tried to be gentle. “You’re so angry your hands are shaking. Let me drive.”

Diana looked at her hands as if she hadn’t noticed. Then she shook her head and clenched them into fists. “You will hurt your hip.”

Steve did not call her on the untruth – he had no issue driving, she always drove because she enjoyed it. He looked at her and didn’t feel anything but sorrow. If he thought it would help, he would have suggested she stayed with Etta and Ed. But they needed each other. They always did.

It was his fault that what he needed to do had abruptly run up against what was best for her. Again.

“We can switch later,” Steve said instead.

Diana didn’t say anything but she didn’t try to take the keys from him. Instead, she pulled the passenger door open so forcefully Steve was worried she might yank it off entirely.

They did not speak until they were halfway to London. Steve tried but Diana wouldn’t even look at him and after a few attempts, he stopped. He felt guilty for it but he was just...his head had started to pound and he felt bone weary already.

And they had miles to go yet.

He didn’t even notice when she stopped looking out the window and started studying him again. When she spoke, it surprised him so much he thought he was going to drive off the road.

“I do not understand why we have to go to London tonight,” Diana said.

Steve jerked but kept the car steady enough that Diana didn’t comment on it. When he glanced over, she was watching him intently. The anger, at least, was gone from her eyes, replaced with confusion. There was sadness there too but distant.

She still didn’t – couldn’t – believe him. That Charlie would...

Steve didn’t take it personally. The world shouldn’t be this way. This shouldn’t have happened. They should have been able to do something to help.

Charlie shouldn’t have...

Steve swallowed. He forced himself to answer. “Sameer needs to know.”

“You found out from a phone call,” Diana said. There was something bitter in her voice. He could almost taste it in his mouth.

Steve shook his head. Diana didn’t know. Sameer had never said anything so neither had Steve.

He was too good with other people’s secrets, sometimes.
“You don’t understand,” Steve said, gently, trying to hide how desperate and afraid and sick he felt. “Sami loves – he loved – Charlie.”

“I know,” Diana said. “We all love Charlie. He...”

“No,” Steve interrupted. “Diana, listen to me. Sameer loved Charlie. You know, when I told you...when I was surprised that Sameer married Farah because he likes women, he always did, but I had only ever see him fall in love with men before.”

“And...he was hung up on Charlie for an awfully long time, I thought Sameer might not get over that,” Steve said.

Diana was staring at him and it wasn’t that she didn’t believe him but she couldn’t decide how to react.

“I only knew because...” Steve wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose. His head ached and they had hours of driving left. “It’s a long story. But I knew Sameer’s preferences and the way he was around Charlie sometimes...it wasn’t much of a leap for me. But Charlie didn’t know. Charlie never knew. Sameer didn’t want him too.”

“Why?” Diana asked and for the first time in a long time, Steve couldn’t get a read on her tone of voice.

“Sameer wasn’t sure how he would react,” Steve said. “He was sure Charlie wouldn’t feel the same. Charlie...didn’t know about Sameer’s affairs.”

“You told me that, when you told me about it and why Sameer kept it quiet,” Diana said. She still looked angry at the thought of why Sameer kept it quiet. “You did not tell me he was in love with Charlie then.”

“Sameer didn’t care if you knew because of the way things are on Themyscira but what he felt for Charlie...” Steve sighed. “He only talked about it a few times with me and I think Farah knows but...it was hard for him. I didn’t feel right betraying that confidence, especially when I thought...”

Steve swallowed. “I thought it was never going to matter.”

Steve didn’t look at Diana, he looked at the road in front of him. Sameer and Farah were happy. They loved each other and any arrangements they may or may not have had were their business, not his, not anyone’s.

Diana put her hand on his leg. Steve glanced at her but he couldn’t read her expression in the fading daylight, not with everything else that was running through his mind.

“Pull over,” Diana told him.

Steve frowned. “Diana...”

“You said we would switch part way,” Diana said and then: “We will get there faster if I drive.”

Steve pulled over. The crossed in front of the car, the headlights illuminating them for a moment as they passed each other. Diana stopped in front of him, and framed his face in her hands, looking intently at him for a long moment. Steve couldn’t help it, he reached for her and pulled her closer, into his arms.

She was tense, in the way she had been since...since he told her, since she had looked at him like she
thought he was lying to her not because she thought he was lying but because she just couldn’t accept...

Goddamnit, Charlie.

Diana still held him back, still buried her face against the side of his neck for a moment. She felt so warm and solid and strong in his arms and the way she held him was so sure. There was that, at least.

Steve pulled away reluctantly and Diana let him go. He wanted to stay there. He wanted just worry about her, about making things right for her.

When he got to the passenger side door, he noticed the handle was dented with the imprints of her fingers.

They had to get to London though. He got back in the car.

Diana paused for just a moment as she got in the driver’s seat, looking at the road in front of them.

“You’re a good friend,” Steve,” Diana told him.

Steve felt like he had been punched in the gut with all of the heft of everything that disproved that. “No, I’m not.”

“You are,” Diana shook her head. She never lied to him. “You do your duty to the world and that gets in the way but you are a good friend.”

There was nothing Steve could say to that. So he didn’t.

“You don’t believe me,” Diana said, glancing at him.

Steve shook his head. He still couldn’t speak. They had to get to London. He couldn’t afford to.

Diana didn’t say anything more. She pulled the car back onto the road and pressed her foot to the gas.

They got to London in record time. Almost too quickly. Steve wanted more time before he was at Sameer’s door. He wasn't ready for this. He wasn't ready.

Diana was at his back, even though he had rushed her here when she needed more time. Even though she was still grappling with Charlie having...

Steve knocked on the door. He hoped, maybe Farah would–

Sameer answered the door.

“Steve! Diana!” He looked shocked to see them but happy, his face lighting up in a confused grin. “What are you doing here? Come in!”

“I thought you were just back from Bath,” Sameer was saying as he tried to take their coats. Diana let him have hers automatically. “You've just missed the girls. It's a school night. They'll be cross with you.”

Steve handed over his coat. Sameer was picking up on how subdued they were. He grasped Steve’s arm gently.

“Hey,” Sameer said, his tone consoling. “What's wrong?”
“Is Farah here?” Steve asked.

“Yes, should I get her?” Sameer looked worried now. “Are you all right? Diana?”

“Steve is fine, Sameer,” Diana said. She put her hand on his back as she spoke. “We both are.”

“It cannot be that bad then,” Sameer joked. Whatever he saw on Steve's face made his own face fall. “Steve?”

“Get Farah,” Steve said. “And...it’s better if the kids can't hear us, if they wake up.”

Sameer swallowed. “In the living room then. Farah is just upstairs, I'll get her.”

They went into the living room and waited. Diana sat on the couch. Steve stood, he would have dearly loved to pace but Diana looked like she was about to force him to sit in another moment as it was.

The door opened and Farah and Sameer joined them. Farah made a beeline for Diana and took her hand. Sameer stared at Steve.

“What's this about?” Sameer asked, all the previous joviality gone from his voice. “Steve?”

Steve took a breath and did Sameer the service of looking him in the eye. “It's about Charlie.”

Sameer’s frown deepened. “What's he done to himself then? Is he all right? Did you need us to come up to Scotland with you? Is that why you didn't head straight up?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Farah pale and hunch forward, already understanding. Sameer would have too, Steve thought, if it was anyone else.

“Charlie...He passed away this afternoon, Sami,” Steve said. “I'm sorry.”

Sameer went very still. He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it. Steve stepped forward to, he wasn't sure, offer comfort, but Sameer stepped back, looking at him with eyes that had suddenly gone dark.

“How?” He said, voice flat.

Steve hesitated. “The doctor said that it was quick. He didn't suffer, Sami. Leave it at that.”

Sameer glared at him. “How did he...how did he die, Steve?”

“Sami, he's gone,” Steve said, trying to keep his voice gentle. “It...does it matter?”

“You know it does,” Sameer said, looking at Steve as if it was Steve’s fault, as if Steve was betraying him. “Tell me.”

“Maureen said Charlie had a pistol. She thought it might have been his service revolver. He went out back and...” Steve trailed off, looking at Sameer. Sameer raised his chin. He was going to make Steve say it.

Steve grit his teeth. This was what he had come for. “He went out back and he shot himself. He killed himself.”

On the couch, Farah buried her face in her hands. Diana put her arms around her, curling over her back and not looking at Steve once, her jaw clenching.
Sameer stared at him without saying anything for one moment, two.

He turned and walked out of the room.

Steve went after him.

Sameer only made it to his closet of a study, mostly full of Farah’s sewing and Nadia’s books and Sofia’s costumes. He stood with his back to Steve, hunched as if to ward off a blow.

Steve stepped closer. He put a hand on Sameer's back. Sameer flinched.

Steve's greatest asset in the war had always been his ability to keep going, to turn around and walk back into the fight no matter what he had seen or done or what had been done to him. It hurt and it hurt and it hurt and he kept going.

It was other people's suffering that undid him.

“Sami,” Steve said, hardly anything more than a whisper.

Sameer jerked away from him and then back towards him just as abruptly. He grabbed hold of Steve's shirt with both fists and if it were anyone else, Steve would have worried about them taking a swing at him.

But not Sameer. Never. He would have as soon as thought it of Diana.

Steve would have let him, if he wanted to.

Charlie was the first friend Steve had made in the trenches, who had gone through those horrors with him. Chief had been there a hundred times when Steve was a breath away from giving up, was the only person other than Diana who had made him question himself when they disagreed. Etta had known what he needed before he did more times than he could count.

But Sameer was his best friend. He was his brother.

That had only grown, since the war.

Sameer was his best friend. The only person more important was Diana.

Steve saw the moment when something broke in Sameer's eyes. He only saw it for a second before Sameer dropped his forehead to Steve's chest and started to sob.

Steve wrapped his arms around Sameer, as tightly as he could, one around his back and one pressed against the back of his head. Sameer shuddered and sobbed. His hands clenched tight in Steve's shirt.

“I'm sorry,” Steve said. “God, Sameer. I'm so sorry.”

Sameer made a sound that was something between a laugh and a sob and it broke Steve's heart when he thought it couldn't fracture anymore tonight. He didn't know how long they stood there, Sameer crying into Steve's shirt.

Sameer pulled back first – Steve would have stood there until Sameer didn't need him anymore or his leg gave out and they both knew it.

“Sit, you should sit,” Sameer said, steering Steve to the only chair in the room. Steve sat so Sameer wouldn't fuss.
Sameer wiped his face with his handkerchief and then blew his nose in it. He leaned back against his squat desk, covered in things that belonged to his family and shook his head.

“Oh,” Sameer said, and he laughed a little, even as he wiped at his eyes again. “That damn old fool.”

Steve didn't say anything. He couldn't bear to agree and he was too angry to disagree.

Sameer shook his head and squinted at Steve. “You came all the way to London because of a...an unrequited love of mine from forty years ago?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “It's Charlie. I was right to.”

Sameer looked at him with such fondness and such sadness that Steve could hardly stand it. Then he wiped his face again and blinked hard against the tears that he seemed unable to stop.

“I thought...” Sameer began and then stopped. He looked down at his hands. “I knew Charlie would...go. Before us. I just thought...If he was going to...to go like this, I thought it would have been before. I thought...I know, you told me how bad it's been for him lately but I thought...if he was going to do it, it would have been before.”

Steve sighed and nodded. “After Liam. He would...talk to me about a lot, by the end of that last visit. But never Liam.”

“Or when he lost his job in the 30s,” Sameer said. He shrugged at Steve's questioning look. “He never did well when he had nothing to do. And he never listened to me as much as I wanted him to.”

“I...thought for a while we might never speak again, after that,” Sameer said. “I couldn't help him. He wouldn't let me anymore. Our friendship was never the same after that.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't more help then,” Steve said. “That you bore the brunt of it.”

Sameer shrugged, uncomfortable. “He didn't want you to know how bad the drinking got then. He thought...you would have offered him money and...Charlie was a proud man. I...honoured his wishes.”

Steve swallowed. “Yeah.”

They were quiet for a moment before Steve said: “I thought...during the war, after his discharge. I thought he was going to get himself killed. I thought he was trying to, sometimes, whenever I was away on a mission without him. You...kept him from that, I think.”

“I kept him out of fights when I could but...near the end, it wasn't easy,” Sameer said. “I almost said something to you when you showed up with Diana, before our last mission. I knew he was getting worse. I knew he was having trouble, that he...wasn’t taking the shots he needed to.”

“It would have killed him to be left behind, though, and you were so focussed you couldn't see it,” Sameer said. “I couldn't do it.”

“And then that night in Veld,” Sameer said, nearly smiling. “We will all so happy. And then he started singing and...you had told me, he used to sing, but I had never heard him sing before. I thought my heart would burst.”

For a moment, Sameer looked very wistful, remembering it. Then he groaned, scrubbing at his eyes again. “And then he wouldn’t stop.”
Steve laughed, he couldn't help it. “He was such a terrible singer. God.”

“I've never wished for something more and been so sorry when I got it. He really was just awful,” Sameer agree, chuckling despite himself. There was an exasperated tenderness in his eyes again. It was what had tipped Steve off in the first place. “He had...a myriad of faults. But he is--was a good man.”

“He was,” Steve agreed. “I'm sorry it wasn't what you wanted it to be.”

Sameer shook his head. “I'm not. I could never even tell him. The possibility did not even exist for him. No, I have had enough loves to know not every one is meant to be. He was my friend. That was enough. I just...I wish we hadn't let go of each other so much, these last few years. He...did not make it easy, sometimes.”

“No,” Steve said. The last time Steve had talked to Charlie, they had made tentative plans to come to London because he hadn't seen Sameer since 1942.

That was just...it was just yesterday...

“You drove all the way here just to tell me?” Sameer said again, his voice quiet.

Steve nodded. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t alone. That you didn’t find out over the phone and then...I just thought it would be better in person.”

Sameer looked at him shrewdly. “You found out over the phone?”

Steve shrugged. “I was never in love with Charlie.”

Sameer gave him a look.

“Boss,” he said, and he hadn’t called Steve that in years. “You have never stopped feeling responsible for us.”

Sameer grinned, just for a moment, before he faltered and Steve could tell from the look in his eyes he was thinking of Charlie. They couldn’t have had this conversation if Charlie was in the room.

There were so many things that went unsaid. Steve had been there for a month and still, there were so many things he should have said.

“Yeah, well,” Steve started and then just decided to hell with it. “You’re my family. I’m supposed to.”

Sameer looked like he was going to cry again. Steve ignored his exhaustion and hauled himself up again to hug him. Sameer wasn’t so tense this time and after a moment his head dropped to Steve’s shoulder. And if Steve’s shirt was damp from Sameer’s tears when he pulled away, neither of them said anything.

“Ah, Steve. If only you hadn't thrown up on me so much during our first mission together, I might have fallen in love with you,” Sameer said. “And you are so wholly made for Diana I don’t think I could have even found it in me to pine for you. It would have solved everything.”

“Thanks, I think,” Steve said, silently offering Sameer his handkerchief this time. “We should go back out, if you’re okay with it. Farah will be worried.”

Sameer wiped his face. “If she is not waiting outside the door, I will be shocked.”
She wasn’t. Steve had known she wouldn’t be, not when he had been the one to go after Sameer, but when they walked back into the living room, she was on her feet in an instant. She crossed the room to Sameer and when he didn’t back away she embraced him. Sameer exhaled, pulling her to him more tightly and breathing in deeply.

Diana...wasn’t there.

Steve felt bewildered and adrift at her absence.

“She went upstairs to change the sheets in the guest room,” Farah said and Steve snapped his head up so quickly it throbbed angrily at him. She was still standing as close to Sameer as possible, their hands clasped painfully tightly. Steve managed not to wince but Farah’s sharp eyes still narrowed at him. “You’re not driving home tonight. We’ll talk...We’ll talk about how we’re getting to the funeral tomorrow.”

Sameer couldn’t stop from flinching. Steve reached out for him automatically, putting his hand on Sameer’s arm. Sameer looked at him, took a breath and nodded. Farah put a hand on Steve’s cheek.

“I’ve got him,” Farah said. “It’s all right.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. Farah gave him a look that told him just how stupid she thought he was to say it as her hand fell away.

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Farah said instead.

Steve left Sameer with her. He would be okay. Steve knew Farah would take care of him.

The stairs seemed an almost insurmountable hurdle. Steve would never admit it but he spent a good minute staring up them, hoping Diana would appear at the top but unwilling to call her. He would wake the girls or upset Sameer or...anyway, he wasn’t hurt, just tired.

It took him longer than he would have liked to admit to get to the top and he felt a little out of breath when he did. That was okay though. That was normal. That was what happened when he was this exhausted. It had been a long, trying day.

Diana looked up at him when he pushed the guestroom door open. She looked like she had just finished remaking the bed and she had changed into a pair of pajamas she must have left behind the last time they visited.

Steve had to hold on to the doorknob for a moment, fighting dismay. She had left her armour on underneath. Steve could always tell.

“Steve,” Diana said.

They stared at each other from across the room. Steve steeled himself, forced his exhaustion back, just for awhile longer. He shut the door behind him.

Then he looked back up at her.

“Diana,” he said, carefully keeping his voice gentle. “Are you going to wear your armour to bed?”

Diana glared at him before and jerkily pulled another blanket into place. She didn’t respond.

“I know you’re having trouble accepting it,” Steve said. “But...there’s nothing...there’s nothing we can do. Charlie’s gone.”
The blanket ripped in Diana’s hands. She let it drop to the side and folded her arms over her chest. She didn’t look at him.

Steve...didn’t know what else to do. He was too tired to think of something else. He crossed the room instead and reached under her shirt, pulled out the rope he knew he would find there.

Diana was too surprised to stop him as he bound it three times around his wrist.

He hadn’t done it in decades but he knew even if she doubted him, she wouldn’t doubt the truth the lasso forced out of him.

It was warm but it didn’t burn. Steve wasn’t lying. Diana just...she couldn’t...

“Charlie's dead,” Steve said heard himself say. His heart was thudding too loudly in his ears again and his voice sounded strange. “Charlie killed himself. I’m sorry, Diana. I know you don't believe it. I know you don’t want to. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I dragged you to London so fast. I don’t think it’s really hit you yet but I had to be the one to tell Sami. I’m sorry I made that choice. It wouldn’t have been fair if I had just called...I couldn’t just call but Charlie was your friend too and I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair to you.”

Steve’s face felt hot and he was looking at her so intently, trying to read her face. “Charlie killed himself. Diana, I can’t tell if you don’t believe me or can’t believe it so I’m just waiting for the dam to break because you’re so angry you keep breaking things and I don’t know what to do about it. It’s killing me too and I don’t want it eating you up from the inside and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t know what to do other than this but I’m...I’m real tired and Charlie killed himself and I can’t think about it but I can’t stop thinking about it and I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I wish the world had been better for you. I wish...I wish it had been better for him but it’s not. It wasn’t and he’s gone. He’s gone. He...”

“Stop,” Diana croaked.

Steve’s mouth snapped shut. It burned to stop talking that quickly, the lasso trying to get him to say more, but there were tears streaming down Diana’s face and she finally, finally looked like she was there again. Steve could stand a little burning if it meant he wouldn’t say anything that could hurt her more.

Diana had the presence of mind not to yank the rope from his wrist, to undo it gently, instead, even though her fingers were trembling. The lasso left nothing behind, no marks or blisters, but she smoothed her fingers over the skin of his wrist as if it had.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, so quietly, when she did not move away, standing so close it took more effort to keep from touching than it did to lean toward each other. He cupped her cheek with his hand, brushing the tears away with his thumb.

“Diana,” he said, their faces close. “I’m so sorry.”

Diana shook her head. “I do not understand it. I do not understand. How could he...?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. His other hand found her hair and tangled in it even as she grasped his shirt like Sameer had. “I don’t know. He was in pain for an awfully long time.”

Diana choked on a sob. She tried to stifle it but couldn’t. Her hands were too tight on his shirt, tearing the fabric. She was angry too. But Steve knew she would never hurt him.

“We would have helped him,” Diana said. “If he had just told us what to do. We went to help. We
wanted to help.”

“I know,” Steve said. His eyes stung with exhaustion and with the tears he was holding back. “I know. I don’t think...I think maybe...I think maybe that we couldn’t.”

Diana choked again and there was something incandescent about her rage now, overwhelming her sorrow. Some dim part of Steve realized that anyone else would be afraid of it but all he could think was to pull her closer, until her face was buried against his neck and his hands were tangled in her hair and bracing her back and if she was holding him off the floor and she was pressing bruises into his shoulders he didn’t care.

“What is the point of all this if I cannot even save my friends?” Diana snarled.

“Diana. You do. Every day,” Steve said. “You saved Charlie in Veld and on the airfield. You saved him and he got 40 years and to see his children grow up. And they got to know him.”

“Maybe...maybe you can’t save everyone all the time but you try and you try even though it hurts,” Steve said. “You do so much good in the world, Diana. You’ve got to believe that makes a difference, even if you can’t save everyone every time.”

Diana sobbed. She cried into his shoulder and then she pulled back, pressing their foreheads together, tears still running down her cheeks. Steve hardly noticed that his feet were on the ground again. All his focus was on her.

“I wish the world was better for you,” Steve said. He touched her cheek, her hair again and inhaled shakily. “You make it so much better for us.”

Diana shook her head. “I can’t believe he would...”

“I know,” Steve said.

“We should have...” Diana said but she could not finish that either.

“I know,” Steve said.

She cupped his face in her hands and looked up him uncomfortably closely. Steve let her. He would always let her.

“Do you think you can take your armour off now?” Steve asked. “And come to bed with me?”

Diana nodded. Steve meant to help her with her armour but when she let him go, he weaved where he stood and had to blink black spots out of his vision for a second.

He found himself on the bed in the next moment. Diana was glaring at him for an entirely new reason.

“I’m okay,” Steve said, he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes for a minute, trying to get his head to clear. Diana snorted. “I am. It’s just...it’s been a long day.”

The drive home from Bath and waiting with the car for the tow truck to arrive seemed like a lifetime ago now.

Diana undid the buttons of his shirt instead of letting him do it himself. It was going to be downright comical when he had to borrow one from Sameer tomorrow.

“You forgot to leave pajamas here,” Diana told him, once she had gotten him undressed to her
satisfaction.

“I was supposed to?” Steve asked.

Diana, he was happy to see, found that at least a little amusing. “Yes. I can ask Sameer if...”

“No, it’s fine. Just...don’t let the kids in tomorrow morning,” Steve said. He still had his underwear on but he couldn’t stand the thought of them having to see his scars.

Diana nodded. She turned his face towards her and kissed him, very gently. He touched her cheek once more because he couldn’t keep himself from it.

Steve waited for Diana as she took her armour off and slid into bed beside him in her pajamas. They curled together and she pressed her head against his chest, where he imagined she could hear his heart beating. He hoped she wouldn’t dream. He was so tired he thought he wouldn’t wake if she did.

They stayed in London another day before going home. Etta had been there while they were away and stocked the fridge with groceries so they wouldn’t have to. Steve invited them over for lunch and they ended up staying through dinner. It felt better, not being alone or even just the two of them.

The funeral was on a Tuesday.

They picked Sameer and Etta up at the train station the day before and they drove up together in their newly repaired car. Ed and Etta followed behind.

It started to rain as soon as they hit Scotland.

They had talked about going to see Maureen and Charlie's daughters the night before the funeral but the rain was so torrential it delayed them. They didn't get into the hotel Ed had booked until too late.

There was nothing to do but wait until morning.

Steve dressed slowly, that morning. Diana was wearing a plain black dress. Steve was wearing his dress uniform and putting it on was...it was strange.

He had dug it out of the back of a closet when they got back from London and spent the weekend carefully cleaning and mending it. He had only taken out the jacket once since the war ended, just after he returned to Britain, transferred from a Belgian hospital to a British one.

Field Marshall Haig had wanted to bring Steve up on charges when it became clear what he had done. Darnell had fought a minor bureaucratic war on his behalf but the final victory was obtained only through the interference of the American High Command. For all that Steve had joined up with the British and served with them throughout the war, it has been politically expedient to technically transfer him to the AEF when the Americans joined the war.

And his country had decided to make him a hero.

Etta had hastily found the jacket of his dress uniform when it was decided that General John J. Pershing would be presenting him with a medal and putting an end to the discussion of a court martial. It would not do, after all, for the British to try a Medal of Honor winner who was not, technically, under their jurisdiction.

It should have been presented by the President but they hadn't expected him to live long enough to make it back to the States. General Pershing had fastened it around his neck instead.
Steve didn't remember much except not having the breath to speak but managing a shaky salute for the General and the smug look Darnell had had on his face because he had known he had won.

Steve mostly remembered spending the night coughing blood onto his pillow, curled tight on his side with no escape from the pain, vaguely aware of the argument Diana kept having with the doctors so she could stay with him.

He hadn't worn any of it since then. It had all been packed away. Steve would not throw it out but wearing it...He didn't know what he felt about wearing it. He had never much cared for it anyway. It made him stand out too much and now it just made the scars all the more noticeable.

He put it on, all of it, for Charlie.

Diana wrinkled her nose when he was done. Steve could tell she didn't like it much. She stood close to him before they went downstairs and smoothed her thumb over the corner of his mouth, where it was twisted and felt tight sometimes.

He wondered what she saw there.

Sameer looked like he was seeing a ghost, when they met them in the lobby. He did not speak for a long moment and neither did Steve.

“I will never forgive you if you wear a uniform to my funeral,” Sameer said finally.

“I wouldn't dare,” Steve’s mouth quirked and he could have smiled if not for... “Charlie was a soldier.”

“Mm. I thought about burning mine after the war,” Sameer said, looking down at his own uniform. Farah’s deft hand was obvious to Steve in the alterations. “But I'm glad I...”

His voice faltered. He stopped talking abruptly.

“You served longer than any of us,” Steve said.

“I never wanted to,” Sameer said. “It's not what I wanted.”

“It is hardly all you are,” Diana said. “You will be honoured for what you are, what you have chosen. We will see to that.”

Sameer blinked and looked away. Steve folded his fingers into hers as he reached out and squeezed Sameer’s arm.

“Where's Farah?” he asked. “We have to get going.”

It rained during the funeral. Diana kept a firm, steadying hand on his arm to keep him from slipping. Steve thought – he had hoped – the church would be fuller. It couldn't be much more than half full. But at least some of the men Liam served with were there and Steve thought that would have been what was most important to Charlie anyway.

The service was short and there was an undercurrent to it that Steve didn't understand until he heard an older woman remarking to her husband about the tragic circumstances and how in her day they wouldn't have had a service for Charlie at all. Steve was glad Diana didn't hear it. He wasn't sure she would have been able to hold back.

Charlie might have appreciated a brawl at his funeral but Steve doubted Maureen would.
They buried Charlie next to the empty grave they had put up for his son. It wasn't enough. It had to be enough.

Charlie’s son-in-laws served as pallbearers, rounded out by a childhood friend of Liam’s and the men he had served with. Steve and Sameer hadn’t been asked – Charlie’s daughters were worried about Sameer’s age and Steve’s ability, Maureen had said, when she called Steve to tell him when and where the funeral would be.

It was for the best, in the end. It had stopped raining by the time the service ended but Steve had to turn away for a moment at the graveside because it was such a grey day and all the rain meant the mud was inescapable and it was Charlie and the idea of burying him, burying another friend in the mud...there was a moment when Steve couldn’t just couldn’t handle it.

Sameer gripped his hand tightly, understanding, even if he had never huddled together with them at the Somme, half drowned and never dry and just waiting to see who would die next.

Steve got himself under control. Diana frowned but didn't say anything when he leaned a bit more heavily on her.

They went back to Maureen and Charlie’s after the funeral. Sameer was in his element. He was still a charmer, he always had been, and he knew just what stories to tell about Charlie to make everyone smile. Steve stood back and watched him, watched the room. He couldn’t begin to count how many times Sameer had charmed a room for him while he skulked around the edges, stealing information or made a more targeted attempt at charm himself.

Charlie used to be perched somewhere, watching their backs.

Diana adjusted her hold on his arm. “You should sit.”

“I will when I need to,” Steve said, looking at her. He thought to anyone else she would have looked as perfect as she always did. But she was a little uncomfortable, he thought. “It’s a long drive home. And...I’m finding this strange.”

Diana nodded and sighed. “I keep expecting Charlie to come downstairs.”

Steve kept expecting to see him through the windows, sitting drunk in the backyard. He...didn’t want to think about the last time Charlie had stood there, what he had walked away to do. Steve didn’t say so, though. He only nodded.

“Maureen has already started packing up the house,” Diana told him. “Not here but upstairs. It...feels very strange to see it.”

“It makes sense for her to move in with Margaret,” Steve said. “It’s a big house for her to be in alone.”

“She did not look like she believed me when I said we would come to visit her,” Diana said. Her hand slid down to his, and she held it in both of hers. “You could go sit with Sameer.”

Steve looked at Sameer. Farah was with him now and he was gesturing, not wildly, but in a way that invited the listener into the story even though they hadn't been a part of it before.

He smiled.

“No, not everyone here knows about...our situation,” Steve said. “And Sameer...”
Sameer had just made one of Liam’s friends laugh so hard he choked on his beer. Steve grinned.

“I’m fine here,” he said, looking at Diana. “Really.”

Diana’s face was warm and soft when she looked at him. He was no better, he knew, when he was looking at her. She kissed him, just lightly.

“Maureen has some things for you,” Diana told him, her voice...careful. “Some things of Charlie’s.”

Steve didn’t know how he felt about that. “I...okay.”

“I said we would find her before we leave,” Diana said.

Steve nodded mechanically. “Okay.”

Diana’s hold of his hand tightened.

It turned out to be a trunk. Maureen looked as sheepish about it as Steve had ever seen her when her son-in-law carried it out of the house and put it down beside their car.

“I was just going to throw out the trunk,” Maureen told him. “It was just...convenient. The books Charlie wanted you to have are inside.”

Steve forced himself not to wince. It seemed annoyingly fitting that Charlie was going to haunt him with war memoirs from beyond the grave.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

“I found a couple photos of you or...well. People I don’t recognize. From then,” Maureen said. “I put them in with the books. If I find anymore, I’ll mail them to you.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve said, and he did. “If your girls ever want copies, I’m happy to let them know who is in the pictures, if I can.”

“I’ll let them know,” Maureen nodded shortly.

“And we will come see you in London,” Diana said. To Steve’s slight surprised, Maureen not only let Diana hug her but hugged back.

“I’ll look forward to that, after the move,” Maureen said. “It’s a beast of a thing to get done but. It has to be done.”

Maureen looked at him, half wary half expectantly. Steve stepped forward and hugged her too.

“We won’t come unless you want us to,” Steve said very quietly. Maureen was her own person and he would not have blamed her if she never wanted to see them again.

“I’ll see you in London then,” Maureen replied. She hugged him back, very briefly and then stepped away. “You take care of yourselves.”

“You too,” Steve said, he tilted his head and smiled just a little. “If you need help moving...”

“That’s what son-in-laws are for,” Maureen told him, a hint of humour in her eyes.

Steve looked back, as they were driving away. He vividly remembered Charlie standing in the road, watching them go, the last time they had driven away from the house. He couldn’t imagine they
would ever see it again. He didn’t know if he wanted the image of Charlie standing forlorn in the road to be his last memory of the place.

Maureen was standing in the driveway still, her daughters bracketing her on either side. When Margaret spotted him looking back, she raised her hand and waved.

They drove home.

Life went on.

Steve put the trunk in the study, pushed to the side, and left it there. He wasn’t ready to look at the pictures or sift through books he knew he didn’t want to read but wouldn’t be able to throw out.

Etta and Ed ended up babysitting all four of their grandchildren over Christmas because their daughter was working and their daughter-in-law needed a sudden appendectomy. Steve and Diana happily had them over when Etta and Ed needed a break. They hosted Christmas dinner for Etta and Ed’s family that year, trying to make it a little less stressful, and the house felt full again, if only briefly.

Sameer was cast in another play in London. It closed nearly as quickly as it opened but it was something. Maureen wasn’t entirely settled at her daughter’s house but she met them for tea, one afternoon, while they were there.

Steve ignored the trunk in the corner of the study. And if he found himself staring at it sometimes...It wasn’t that hard to ignore, really, even after the grandchildren went back to their parents and the house got too quiet again.

Life went on.

He was looking for their Christmas cards – Diana had tidied them into a drawer to keep Jenny from shredding them, it was her favourite activity at the moment. They weren’t in the study, Diana hadn’t had time to stick them in there. He thought maybe they had been in the kitchen when she grabbed them and...

He pulled open their kitchen junk drawer and stopped. He just...stopped.

The maps were in there, from when they had planned their trip around the U.K. The notebook Diana had started writing plans in. From before the letter came, before Charlie...

Steve closed the drawer abruptly.

He walked away. He found the Christmas cards in drawer in the living room. He cleared his throat and wiped his face.

He kept going.

He tried to keep going. But he kept thinking about it.

He didn’t sleep well that night. Or the next. Or the next.

Then he couldn’t sleep at all.

Diana noticed. Of course Diana noticed. She just...thought his leg was bothering him again and he didn’t correct her.

But he couldn’t sleep. Even after Diana fell asleep. Even laying in her arms, even as tired as he
always was at the end of the day.

He couldn’t sleep.

Steve slid out of Diana’s arms, a little surprised when she wrinkled her nose but didn’t wake.

He...couldn’t figure out if he wanted her to or not. He crept downstairs before he could decide. He went into the kitchen.

It was quiet and a bit cold. He remembered sitting there and eating breakfast with Diana, the sudden excitement when he thought, yes, they could do this, he could share this with her.

Steve opened the drawer and pulled out the maps and the notebook. He didn’t know where the guidebooks were with Ed’s neat corrections written in the margins. He didn’t remember if he had tidied them away or Diana had, in their rush to visit Charlie, to find out what was wrong.

And Charlie had...

Steve started to spread the map out – the first one, the one where they had pencilled in their route so it blotted out the bombing intel.

He couldn’t finish unfolding it. He sat down heavily into the kitchen chair and buried his face in his hands.

“Steve,” Diana said from behind him, just a moment before her hands rested on his shoulders. It didn’t surprise him.

“Sorry,” Steve said, before he could stop himself. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Steve,” Diana said again, a wealth of meaning in his name, just his name, and first and foremost love.

Steve shook his head and sniffled and wiped at the tears he could no longer stop. He looked at the map again.

“It’s a good plan,” Steve said. He felt sick to his stomach just thinking about it now. How could they...? As if Charlie hadn’t...? It would be all he would be able to think about. He gasped. “I can’t...Diana...I can’t...”

He didn’t know how to put it into words how much he never wanted to see that map again. Diana pressed her cheek against his back and wrapped her arms around him.

“So we will go other places,” Diana told him, simply. It made it worse and better at once, that it could be simple. It had felt like such an important thing, before.

Steve ran his hand over his face. His stared at the map in front of him.

Diana kissed his shoulder and rubbed her hand in slow circles over his stomach to soothe.

“Come to bed,” she told him.

“I can't sleep,” he said.

“Come back to bed with me anyway.”

Steve took her hand and kissed the knuckles of her fingers. She helped him up and they shuffled
down the hall together, not because he needed the help but because the thought of letting go of each other was unthinkable.

Diana curled around Steve’s back. They lay there for a long time in the dark and the quiet. He wiped at his face several times but couldn’t seem to stop crying. He wasn’t sure when he started to shake only that Diana held him more tightly when he did.

“Sorry,” Steve mumbled. “I don’t know why...all of a sudden I just can’t...”

“You had to be there for Sameer and for me,” Diana said, gently. “I think you have neglected your own grief for ours, beloved.”

Steve shook his head because he did, he knew, he knew he could get fixated on something until nothing else mattered.

But that wasn’t it.

He had looked at their plans, their plans for a trip, their plans for a life together, and...and Charlie wasn’t a part of that anymore. It hurt, it made him feel sick, that Charlie would never be a part of that again.

But he knew that it wasn’t the end. That Charlie was only the first. It was an ache in the pit of his stomach, a feeling of dread he couldn't shake sometimes. He could usually ignore it but sometimes it just struck him. He wasn’t aging and they were and he was going to lose them.

He had not said anything, not even to Diana, because until Charlie she did not seem to see it the same way he did and he wasn’t going to be the one to make her. Not when it made him feel like this, like he had lost something before Sameer and Etta and Ed and Farah were even gone. He didn’t want to talk about it at all, he wanted to ignore it, but Diana had never needed the lasso to get honesty from him, for good or ill.

“They’re all going to die,” Steve said and he choked on the words “They’re all going to die and I can’t...I can’t stand it sometimes when I see how much greyer Sameer’s hair has gone and how Etta moves more slowly. I don’t want to think about it. But sometimes I just...”

Steve took a ragged breath and scrubbed at his eyes. “I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm...I've done this before, I don't know why I can't...”

“Steve,” Diana said and curled tighter around him until he didn’t feel like he was so close to flying apart.

She waited until he had cried himself out. It didn’t talk long. He didn’t have the breath for it for long. But it helped that Diana held him and kissed his temple and stroked his hair and waited until he could hear her over his own grief.

“You love so deeply, when you choose to love,” Diana said, quiet, in the dark. “You like to think you can guard against it but you fell in love with me in a matter of days, you ran towards death so your friends would not have to and you...you treat your friends children and grandchildren like they were your own. Even though you know now – you have known – that you will lose them.”

Diana’s voice wobbled at the end and Steve...Steve couldn’t stand that. He turned in her arms so he could hold her too and pressed his face against her collarbone. Diana’s hand dropped to his hair again.

“Your grief is mine, beloved,” Diana said. “I know you...felt it before I did.”
“I didn’t want you to feel it at all,” Steve murmured. “I try not to let it eat at me but sometimes...and Charlie...”

He swallowed and closed his eyes. “I’ll never be able to look at that map, think of those plans, without...thinking of the phone call that came after.”

Diana was silent for a long time. Then she slid down the bed and took his face in her hands. She was looking straight at him when he opened his eyes.

“Then we will go other places,” Diana said. “And see other things. And we will take them with us for as long as we can.”

The look in her eyes was so fierce Steve didn’t know how anyone could do anything but believe in her.

She didn’t make him answer. She just pulled him close again and wiped away his tears and let him grieve as long as he needed to.

Steve didn’t remember falling asleep that night. He remembered waking up feeling like he had a hangover to Diana’s touch and the smell of pancakes. He had no idea how she had managed to sneak out of bed for long enough to make them without waking him but there they were, on a tray, the first thing he had ever made her for breakfast.

It took them more than a week before they wanted to be apart for more than minutes. Steve wasn’t sure he liked what it said about him that the first thing he did when Diana went out without him – Etta had demanded a shopping day – was go down to the study and stare at the trunk Charlie left him.

It was the only thing Charlie had left for any of them.

Steve was sure it would be the war memoirs Charlie used to call and rant about – they might not even be from Charlie. Maureen might just have wanted to get rid of them without throwing them out. She said that there were pictures too – probably of a lot of men who had died over forty years ago. All the things she didn’t want to remember.

And Steve was okay, if that was it. Someone needed to remember. Steve could do that.

But...he just had a feeling.

It made him wait until Diana was out. If it was just books and old photographs, he could just look and close the trunk and wait until she got home to deal with it.

Steve undid the latches and opened the lid with a trepidation that felt silly seconds later. It was mostly books, a few scattered pictures. Just what it should have been.

Steve picked up and shuffled through a few of the photos. There was one of Charlie and Sameer and Chief that he thought he would give to Sameer. None of him, at first glance but a few of men whose names he knew. More that he didn’t. He thought...he might try to find out, in case Charlie’s daughters or grandchildren ever wanted to know the names of the men their father fought with.

He put the photographs aside and took a quick look at the books. He frowned after a moment. A lot of them looked like naval memoirs. He didn’t remember Charlie being that interested in naval stories, being an army man. And the time period wasn’t right. None of them were from the First World War. They were all older.
Some were much older.

Steve rummaged through them for a moment and pulled out one that was very old. It was leather bound and looked like an old diary. He opened it and skimmed through a few pages. It was definitely a diary. The diary of a ship’s surgeon, from what Steve could tell. It was the original, he thought, handwritten in ink and hard to read.

Steve looked back in the trunk. On second glance, he thought all the books looked they were naval accounts. There were at least three more that he could see that looked like the one he held in his hand, like someone’s diary.

Steve frowned. He didn’t understand.

“What the hell, Charlie,” Steve muttered.

He flipped open the diary he was holding again, just to see what he could get from a random page. It opened where a piece of lined paper had been stuck inside, like a book mark.

Steve read Charlie’s slanted scrawl easily.

_Talk to Steve._

_Themiscara!_

Steve’s mouth fell open and he stared, his heart in his shoes. He looked at the writing on the page Charlie had bookmarked. It was faded, some words indecipherable but Steve could make out:

_Heavy fog all a word was missing. Broke briefly to reveal an island in the sun. Saw no inhabitants. But the sense of another few words gone not working. Captain feared sirens. We turned away. Another hour of unnatural fog before we broke free back into the storm._

There were no coordinates for the entry but Steve checked the entry before and after. Both put the ship in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean.

It was nowhere near where Steve had been when the instruments on his plane stopped working and he found himself engulfed in fog.

Or where the compass had said they were when they left, which was nowhere near where near his last coordinates. He had assumed it had been broken and picked up a new one in London.

Steve looked at the note Charlie left again, his heart pounding. The pencil marks were faded and Charlie’s writing was recognizably slanted but it was neat, precise. Nothing like the shaky, sometimes indecipherable scrawl it had been in his last letters to Steve.

The note had to be a couple years old at least.

Steve closed the book and stared at the trunk. There were at least a dozen books in there.

Charlie had never said anything.

Charlie had never said anything about it at all.

Steve sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

What was he going to tell Diana?
This is a monster of a chapter and clocked in at 108 pages. They wouldn't stop talking. So, it's later than I planned for it to be.

I would REALLY love feedback on it because it was so much work.

ETA: I forgot the OC cheat sheet. Because it's that kind of story and I am so, so sorry.

Maureen is Charlie's wife. Margaret is their daughter. Liam is their son who died in WWII.

Farah is Sameer's wife. Their daughters are Nadia, Yasmin and Sofia.

Ed is Etta's husband. Jenny is their granddaughter. I think everyone else is unnamed and referenced by their relationship.

I'm sorry about Charlie guys. My research is focussed on post WWI veterans movements and for all we're commemorating them right now because of all the 100th anniversaries, we really fucked them over after the war. Even after WWII vets were treated better (relatively), lots of countries were STILL fucking over their WWI vets. I wanted to reflect some of that, and a different home front perspective here.

Treatment for shell shock wasn't necessarily bad - but mostly if you were an officer. Enlisted men had some super shitty things done to them.

I don't know if everyone is going to like the unrequited Sameer stuff but the theatre scene in the UK pre- and post-WWI was fairly queer. Espionage attracted it's fair share of non-heterosexual people. Basically, there's a lot of gay stuff that happened during WWI and I wanted to reflect that. And Sameer brags about how he likes women but, man, he's the one to immediately tell Charlie it's okay after he can't take a shot, he comes up and stands by the piano when Charlie starts to sing, he's in the same bar as Charlie when Steve goes to get them and he helps Charlie up in the aftermath of the airport.

In other words, you can pry bisexual Sameer out of my cold dead hands. (Also, I identify as bisexual/queer so I like having characters that reflect me.)

Steve's reaction to the physical objects from what they were planning before Charlie died is mostly based on how I couldn't look at Pride and Prejudice for 10 years after my grandma died because she had lent me her copy and I was re-reading it when she died.

The next chapter will have some medical explanation for what the fuck is wrong with Steve instead of them just guessing. Not all the answers. But some.

Also, I am going to write the story of Sameer and Steve's first mission at some point. The working title is Steve and Sameer's Not-So-Excellent Adventure. When I post it, it will be something more appropriate.
Early 1980s

Diana came home to the smell of something burning and cool Spring air blowing through the open windows of the apartment.

“Steve?” She called and strode inside without taking her coat off or her shoes.

No answer. She checked the kitchen quickly. The burned remains of dinner were on the counter and the oven was off. The kitchen windows were still shut, though. Diana opened them before moving on.

The windows in the next room were open but Steve was not there. He was not in the study either; Diana closed it quickly when he was not inside. They stored things in there that the smoke could damage.

She spotted him through their balcony doorway as she walked into their bedroom. He was sitting outside on their bedroom balcony, looking very cranky but unharmed.

Steve looked up as Diana walked into the bedroom and went to stand, likely to come inside, until she gave him such a look that it kept him where he was. She joined him on the balcony instead.

He looked up at her, rueful and clearly annoyed with himself even as she put her arm around his shoulders and he leaned his head against her waist. “Sorry about the mess.”

His voice was painfully hoarse and he was a little pale but his colour wasn’t terrible.

“It did not look so bad,” Diana told him. “I opened more windows.”

“I got distracted and burned the hell out of dinner,” Steve told her before she even asked. She perched on the edge of his chair and ran her fingers through his hair. “Got it out and turned the oven off before I started coughing. Got the windows open before the alarm went off. But then I had to sit down then.”

Diana kissed his forehead. “Dizziness?”

“A little, yeah,” Steve replied. “And I knew the coughing was only going to make things worse.”

“Thank you for coming out here,” Diana told him. “I prefer not to find you passed out on the floor.”

“I’ll clean up once it’s aired out,” Steve said. “I can—”
“You can sit here and rest and drink the water I'm going to get you,” Diana told him. “And I will pick something up for dinner.”

“I'm fine,” Steve said. He was, by his standards, which were ridiculous to anyone else. “Bad night for it.”

Ann was supposed to arrive later that night for four days of picking fights with her peers – she considered academic conferences a full contact sport.

“Ann has had many home cooked meals from you. She will survive without one tonight,” Diana told him. She kissed the top of his head because he smelled like smoke and she did not like it.

She could feel some of the tension in his back relaxing. She could feel her own shoulders loosen, tight from the stress of the day and coming home to a smoky apartment. They did that to each other.

“What distracted you?” Diana asked, after a time.

Steve blinked at her. “Huh?”

“What were you doing that made you forget about dinner?” Diana repeated.

“Oh,” Steve said. “That artifact Jean-Luc procured last month? The one you're convinced is a fake?”

“My mother was there,” Diana said, unable to keep the annoyance out of her voice. “I have held the original on Themyscira. I should know.”

“I tracked down the paper trail for you,” Steve said. “So you can prove it.”

Diana kissed him soundly for it. The last of his irritation melted away in the face of that, though she could tell he was still in some discomfort.

“At least it’s warm out,” Steve sighed, when they had parted.

“And we have a beautiful view,” Diana said, looking at him. Steve preferred the Fall but Diana liked it best as it was right then, with Summer seeping into the final days of Spring. He smiled at her, still rueful but less self-deprecating.

Diana patted his shoulder and reluctantly stood. “I'm going to get you a glass of water. And get the rest of the windows opened so you can come back inside before the end of the night.”

“Thanks,” Steve sighed, holding on to her hand for another moment before letting it go.

Diana walked through the apartment again, opening the remaining few windows and the doors to their other balcony. It did not take her as long to clean up as it would have taken Steve. He had well and truly burned things but where he would have tried to scrub the pan clean, Diana recognized a truly lost cause when she saw it and consigned it to the garbage.

By the time she was finished she thought it would be fine for Steve to come back inside. At least into the bedroom so he could change his smoke-smelling clothing.

He was leaning over the balcony railing when she returned, looking out at the city they had made a home in, after leaving England and all their travels. It had been years since she had first seen him in that spot – in the winter, at sunset the first time, with a bottle of wine their new neighbour had given them – and only days since the last time – with a coffee, late on Sunday morning after they spent an indulgent few hours in bed. In those moments, and all the ones in between, she looked at him and
thought: yes, this is home.

Diana stepped outside and Steve turned and smiled at her. She ran a hand over his shoulders.

“It should be fine for you to go inside, at least into the bedroom. Ann’s flight doesn't get in for another hour,” Diana said. “You have time to shower.”

“Shower, huh,” Steve raised an eyebrow. “Are you planning to join me?”

Diana’s thumb traced the curve of his cheek and she watched the way his eyes changed at her touch. “I could be persuaded.”

Steve stood, his eyes never leaving her face, as if he were seeing – really seeing – every inch of her. His fingers were soft against her cheek before they tangled gently in her hair and he kissed her. And if it was not for as long as it had once been, it was no less memorable for the changes.

There was only so much Steve could manage in a shower, usually. His stability was never the best, let alone when wet floors were introduced. But when they had renovated the bathroom in after they moved in, they had installed a walk in shower with a smooth stone ledge he could sit on. It – like their enormous bathtub – was meant to make it easier on him on days when the pain was bad.

The other uses they had found for it were a bonus.

Diana’s hair was still damp when Ann arrived but there was food from a nearby cafe laid out on the living room table. Ann took one look at her and raised an eyebrow in a way that was so reminiscent of Steve it still surprised Diana sometimes.

“Do you need me to come back later?” Ann asked, smirking. “Only, I picked up a little something at the airport for you.”

Sameer’s granddaughter Maryam rolled her eyes as she peeked around her aunt’s shoulder looking as uncomfortable and long suffering to exist in the world as she always did.

“Hi, Aunt Di–oof!” Maryam tried to say but couldn't get out before Diana was hugging her hard enough to squeeze the breath from her.

“What are you doing here?” Diana said, ecstatic. “You should have told us. We would have met you at the airport!”

“What? I don’t merit an airport pick up anymore?” Ann asked with a sharp smile.

“No,” Diana told her, adding when she went to object. “You know what you have done. Do not say you don’t deserve it.”

Ann laughed heartily as Maryam looked at her sideways. Ann was already pushing her way inside and down the hallway, shouting: “Where’s my favourite uncle?”

Diana took another movement with Maryam. Ann would undoubtedly monopolize her time after she said hello to Steve – it was inevitable – and Maryam, she knew, would gravitate towards Steve, as she had done since she was a baby and he was the only one other than her mother who could get her to stop crying.

Diana hugged her again and kissed the top of her head – Maryam got her lack of height from her grandfather’s side of the family. Maryam grumbled about it often; Sameer had too, once upon a time.
“You should have told us you were coming,” Diana said again. She resisted the urge to ruffle Maryam’s hair. She was a grown woman now and she hadn’t appreciated it since she was a teenager. “I would have taken some vacation time but I can see what I can arrange on Monday. How long are you staying for?”

“Don’t do that, Aunt Di, please,” Maryam said. She looked like she was going to protest for a moment when Diana went to grab her suitcases – her large suitcases – but then thought better of it. “I...might have gotten a job here.”

Diana stopped. She turned back to look at Maryam. Maryam was already shaking her head.

“It’s not a big deal, really, I oof–” Maryam tried, again, when Diana hugged her and kissed both cheeks.

“Maryam! That is wonderful,” Diana said. She lifted her bags as if they were nothing and started bringing them down the hall. “I thought you had an offer at Royal Brompton?”

“I did,” Maryam said. “I just...”

Steve stepped into the hallway and Diana could not help but grin at the way his face brightened, seeing the two of them. Maryam smiled back.

“Hey kiddo,” Steve said, striding down the hallway to wrap her in a bear hug. She hugged him back and didn’t look quite so embarrassed when he kissed the top of her head. “We would have come to get you.”

“I know,” Maryam said. “But Auntie Ann was already coming...”

“A cab ride with your Aunt Ann during rush hour,” Steve said, his voice teasing. “That’s not the way I would choose to spend my evening.”

“I heard that!” Ann called from the living room.

Steve laughed. He squeezed Maryam’s shoulders. “How long are you staying? Are you staying with us?” He called down the hall: “Ann can take the couch!”

“Um. Maybe awhile?” Maryam hedged. “Can I maybe tell everyone at once?”

“Sure,” Steve said. He gave Diana a questioning glance. “Of course. Let’s go to the living room. We’ve got dinner set up in there anyway.”

“Thanks,” Maryam mumbled, looking relieved. Steve let her go and she visibly squared her shoulders before disappearing through the living room door.

“Is everything okay?” Steve asked quietly, leaning close.

Diana touched his cheek and smoothed her thumb over the corner of his mouth where a few faint lines gathered when he frowned. “More than okay, I think.”

Maryam had always been more likely to react with discomfort to truly good news than she was to react poorly to bad news. She had never known what to do with praise.

Steve smiled, delight in every inch of it. He leaned even closer and kissed Diana, briefly. That’s what they did when they were happy.

Ann rolled her eyes at them when they came into the living room. Diana did not acknowledge it;
Steve stuck his tongue out of her. Maryam nearly choked on her mouthful of pastry when he did. Ann reached over and thumped her on the back before Maryam could bat her away.

“That doesn’t work, you know,” Maryam told her, her tone suddenly much more assured. “You’re more likely to make things worse.”

“Forgive an old woman,” Ann told her and Maryam scowled. “Now, tell us what’s going on so I can call my sister-in-law and yell at her for keeping it a secret from me.”

“I asked mum to,” Maryam said. She sighed, and looked down at her plate. “I’m not taking the job with Royal Brompton. I managed to convince them to take me on at Pitié-Salpêtrière. I start on Monday.”

There was a beat of silence. Steve started to beam.

“Kiddo,” Steve said. He got up and went to hug Maryam again, kissing the side of her forehead. Diana was a step behind him to do the same. “That’s so great. I’m proud of you. Congratulations!”

Diana kissed both her cheeks, cupped Maryam’s face in her hands and then did it again. “You do not have a place to stay, do you? You’ll stay with us for now.”

“If you’ll have me,” Maryam said. “I wanted to make sure it was actually happening before I said anything.”

“Of course,” Diana told her. “Always, you know that.”

“So, you’re moving to Paris,” Ann commented, dryly. “Not a terrible place. I’m not sure it’s better than Brompton when you’re a pulmonologist but it’s not really my field.”

Maryam gave her a look. Diana was reminded that though Maryam was still young, Diana had always thought she was going to be a force to be reckoned with, as she got older and more experienced.

“Salpêtrière is very good,” Diana said. “My colleague’s wife works there. I will have to introduce you, though she is in pediatrics.”

“As long as you didn’t burn any bridges at Brompton,” Ann said, still looking grumpy. “I supposed I of all people can’t fault you for wanting to spread your wings a bit.”

Maryam looked down at her plate again. Her poker face was not as good as she thought it was, not yet. Diana suspected she had upset some colleagues in England with her decision.

She also suspect that Maryam was not planning to return. She had never done anything be halves.

“Well, you can stay with us for as long as you need to,” Steve said. His face was still so lit up with happiness that when they stopped crowding Maryam and returned to their own seats Diana could not help but kiss him again.

“Are you sure you want to stay with them?” Ann asked dryly. “Sixty years on and they still act like newlyweds for heaven’s sake.”

Maryam swallowed her food and said, just as dryly. “I think I’ll be pretty busy, Auntie Ann.”

Maryam moved in with them. It was an…interesting nine months. Diana was surprised by how used to living alone they had become.
But Steve loved it. He had a recently been asked to help sort out original ownership for a cache of stolen art that had been located but otherwise had just finished two projects and had time on his hands. While Maryam threw herself into her work with the gusto she always did, Steve tutted about the hours she was working and he did what he could to make sure she didn’t burn out before she found her footing.

But it was impossible to ignore the way Maryam tried to...study Steve when she thought he wasn’t looking.

“It’s like being under observation again,” Steve said quietly, one night when they were laying in each other’s arms. “I always hated that.”

Diana was lying on her stomach, her chin resting on Steve’s shoulder. Her fingers drifted over the scarring on his other shoulder, where she knew he had patches of skin with faint or no feeling. Burns, she had learned in the awful weeks after the explosion, were like that sometimes.

“She is trying to be subtle,” Diana said. Steve huffed even as he lifted his arm to gently push the hair out of her face and tuck it behind her ear. It escaped as soon as she tilted her head and he repeated the motion. “If you weren’t such a spy, you might not notice as much as you do.”

“If I wasn’t so familiar with doctors,” Steve said, his voice a touch hostile. “How long do you think it will be before she asks me to do some tests?”

“She is sensible in many ways,” Diana said. “Since she did not ask immediately, I imagine she is waiting until she gains some standing at the hospital.”

Steve sighed. “It won’t take her that long. She’s always had more of the family charm than she thought she did. She just doesn’t like to use it. And she’s so smart.”

“It will take years no matter how talented she is,” Diana told him. “You have observed well enough by now to understand what it takes to get established in a professional field when you are a young woman.”

Steve made a face. Diana curled her arm around his side and shifted so it was her cheek resting against him. She felt the heaviness of his silence and watched his face.

“You were fine when Epione wanted to examine you,” Diana said, her voice gentle as Steve’s his face clouded. “She helped, in the end. What makes this so different?”

“Your people have a very different approach to medicine, you’ve seen that,” Steve said. “I know it’s different now but from what I’ve seen, maybe not enough. I’m not keen on a second go round of it. And Maryam will have to work within that culture and I don’t...”

He swallowed. “I don’t want her to see me that way. Even more than that, I don’t want her to have to see what...happened to me. To have to understand that.”

Diana lifted her hand to Steve’s face and cupped his cheek. He looked at her. There were so many years in his eyes sometimes. There had always been there, even when they first met, before he had lived them. Diana knew they blurred and fell away sometimes, when he looked at her, because she could feel them falling off her shoulders the same way sometimes when she looked at him.

“I know she’s not a child anymore,” Steve said slowly. “But she’ll always be...”

He trailed off, his hand falling back to the bed. Diana turned her head and dropped a kiss to his shoulder. She remembered. Yasmine’s pregnancy had been difficult; the birth had almost killed her.
She had been in the hospital for longer than anyone had expected, longer than the babies had been. Diana and Steve had spent a good deal of time looking after them when it was touch and go and Yasmine’s husband and parents and sisters had needed to be at her side.

Steve had ended up taking care of Maryam – the less squirmy of the two – most often. It had not taken long for his heart to be ensnared.

As she got older, Maryam had sometimes gotten lost amid the loud bustle of her family. She was a scientist in a family of artists and actors and writers. They only one who didn’t always like being around other people all the time in a family of social butterflies. As close as she was to her immediate family, she had always gravitated to Diana and Steve.

Especially Steve. Diana would admit that when the whole family got together, Ann had a tendency to monopolize her time and Ann had always been a little too blunt and cutting when Maryam had been a teenager and needed kindness.

Steve could be so good at that.

Diana moved up the bed, turning onto her side. Steve turned too, curling closer into her arms without thought. Diana’s hand drifted to his hair. She rubbed the short hairs at the back of his neck until he relaxed.

“You breathe easier when you sleep on your side, even when you are sleeping on an angle,” Diana told him. “You wake up gasping for breath when you sleep flat on your back. I suspect we will tell her these things, one day.”

Steve sighed. He shifted, bringing their faces even closer together. “You’re probably right. But as long as she lets me take care of her, I’m going to.”

Diana kissed him slowly. She petted his hair again, his eyes drifting shut. “I do not think one will lead to the end of the other.”

“Hope not,” Steve mumbled into the pillow.

And then he was asleep. Diana could mark the moment. She waited a minute, then another so she would not stir him back to wakefulness, before kissing his forehead just to hear the soft noise he made and see the way he curled closer to her, even in his sleep.

Maryam moved out nine months after she moved to Paris, when an apartment in their building came up. It was on the second floor and the other side of the building. It was still close, but it gave Maryam her own space.

Diana could understand that. They still both fretted about the hours she worked and whether she was taking good enough care of herself. It was not unusual for Steve to pack her fridge full of homemade. Diana took a less direct tactic. She called Maryam’s twin sister, Leila and told her Maryam needed a break; Maryam had never been able to say not to her twin.

But Steve and Maryam squabbled about it, from time to time, because in this, unlike so many other things, Steve was not nearly as good at hiding himself as Diana. Diana could tell that Maryam was biting her tongue every time they argued. There was something more she wanted to say. It took her nearly eight years to say it.

“I don't need a vacation,” Maryam said, unpacking the take out she had brought for dinner – Steve was getting over a cold, which meant he was banned from the kitchen. He had always been prone to
overdoing things before he was truly well. “You're worse than my mum.”

“Your mother agrees with me,” Steve said, taking the plate she fixed him without any real enthusiasm. His appetite hadn't come back yet.

“Well, Leila agreed with me,” Maryam said, giving Diana a look. Diana had to press her lips together to keep from laughing. “As Aunt Di knows.”

Diana kept her face as innocent as possible as she filled her own plate. Maryam suspected but had no proof of their collusion. Not yet.

“I do not know what you are talking about,” Diana said. “The last time I spoke to Leila she spent the entire call bragging about Nour’s latest school results.”

Maryam gave Diana a look. Diana looked back at her guilelessly. The years they had spent living in the same building had made Maryam more confident around her but it had made her no better at knowing when Diana was pulling something over on her. Steve was the only person who was ever really sure of that.

And Steve was on her side.

“She still heart set on studying fashion?” Steve said, as he pushed the food around his plate. Diana nudged his leg with her foot under the table.

Diana nodded. “Leila is...not so happy about it.”

“Fine, you can stop it now,” Maryam huffed but she was watching Steve as he looked down at his plate instead of her, her express shifting from annoyed to worried.

“T'm not saying a long one,” Steve said, putting his fork down without having eaten anything. “Just...maybe don't go in on one of the days you're not working for the next couple weeks.”

“I'm working on something right now,” Maryam said.

“And I know your work is important,” Steve said. “I know how hard you work too. Just...think about it.”

Maryam's eyebrows knit together at the lacklustre argument. Diana put her hand on Steve's arm before she could say anything.

“You need to eat,” Diana reminded him, her voice gentle.

Steve looked up at her, almost confused, but picked up his fork again and mechanically took a few bites. His appetite would return in a few days, when the exhaustion lifted, but while he was still recovering he needed nudging, occasionally.

Diana knew this. She was used to it.

Maryam scowled at her plate.

Diana could hardly blame her. She had gotten used to what Steve was like when he had a cold or flu. Maryam had not yet.

They were insidious in that they were slow. Irritants would make him choke, could make him pass out, but he was generally aware of what was happening then. Any kind of congestion pulled him under slowly and relatively painlessly. If left alone, all he could manage was dragging himself to the
bathroom, mechanically eating prepackaged food and sleeping.

And he slept. He slept and slept and slept. Afterwards, he would really only remember that utter exhaustion and what he had once described as an oppressive heaviness in his chest.

It had terrified Diana at first, the way he seemed to fade, but they had gotten used to it. They managed it, like everything else.

The world did not stop because Steve was sick. Diana had a job and responsibilities and she did not ignore them. Steve did not expect her to be at his side constantly – it would have crushed him, if she had. When she was needed, she picked up her sword and shield and left him for days.

This was their life. It had been their life for over seventy years.

It had not been Maryam’s.

“You know,” Maryam began, “I could do some tests. See if there’s anything that could help you bounce back faster when you're sick.”

Diana nearly dropped her fork at how similar she sounded to Steve when he was trying to be overly casual and had rehearsed what he was going to say a dozen times.

Steve looked at her, eyes narrowed. “You already work too much. I don't want you wasting time with me.”

Maryam's chin jutted out like her aunt’s did when she had an argument she was not giving up on. “Can I take a look at your old files then? I know you have them.”

“No,” Diana answered as Steve said: “Absolutely not.”

Maryam looked up, startled by their vehemence. Diana shook her head. “I doubt you would find anything useful in those files. They are...unpleasant.”

Maryam's expression went suspicious and worried. Steve noticed. He rallied enough to try to be reassuring.

“They didn't always know what they were doing, back then,” Steve said. “I don't think anyone was intentionally malicious...but there was only so much they could do to help. They were trying to help.”

Diana wavered on how much she agreed with Steve on that point but it did very little good arguing about it.

Maryam looked back down at her plate. Her shoulders hunched. On another person, Diana might have thought it defensiveness or retreat. On Maryam she recognized it as hunkering down for a protracted battle.

“It really wouldn't be much work,” Maryam said. “The tests are unintrusive and it wouldn't take that much time.”

Steve leaned back in his chair and looked at her, crossing his arms. Diana could tell he was running out of steam and trying to hide it. Maryam didn’t.

“There are issues with putting me in the system,” he told her.

Maryam looked up at him, a little hesitant. “I already talked to Aunt Jen about that.”
Steve huffed a little, impressed despite himself, the way he always was when one of the children, however old they were, displayed some sneaky ingenuity. “‘Course you did.”

Maryam pressed on. “If you let me get some baseline tests, just baseline tests, then I could give you some options at least. You wouldn't be committing to anything.”

Steve rubbed his eyes and looked at her for a long moment. Then he shook his head. “I'm too tired to have this conversation now, kiddo. We're going to have to have it another time.”

Maryam looked alarmed. Diana had expected as much. She was already there to help Steve up. He leaned against her heavily as she took him back to bed. They should have waited another few days before inviting her over but Steve had seemed fairly well and Maryam usually came over on Sundays if she wasn't working.

“Make sure she's okay?” Steve asked, hardly even in bed before his eyes started closing.

“Of course,” Diana told him and kissed his forehead. She hated this. She was so used to it. “Get some rest.”

When Diana went back into the dining room, Maryam had pushed her plate aside and was sitting with her head down on the table, her fingers clutching her hair. She didn't look up when Diana came in.

“I didn't mean to make things worse,” she said, her voice muffled.

Diana shook her head. “This is what happens when he is sick. He'll be all right in a few days.”

Maryam lifted her head enough to look at Diana. “It's because he's not getting enough oxygen. Or his body isn't absorbing it correctly. If I could find out which, I could do something to help him.”

Diana sighed and sat down beside her. Maryam looked stubborn and so miserable. Diana put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

“Now was a bad time to suggest it,” Diana told him. “He hates being sick.”

“I know that,” Maryam interrupted. “That's why I want to do something about it. I don't understand why he won't let me do anything.”

Diana let her finish. Maryam was a grown up but she was still very young and Diana knew very well there was nothing like disappointing someone you looked up to that made you feel like a child again.

“Steve loves you,” Diana told Maryam. “But he does not care for doctors much.”

Diana could see that Maryam’s first impulse was to be defensive. She thought from the way Maryam flinched a little that she may have actually bitten her tongue to keep her first retort behind her teeth.

“I do not want to put more on your plate,” Diana told her before Maryam could think of what to say in response. “But if you are going to pursue this with Steve, you may want to look into the methods that were used when he was first a patient.”

Maryam made a face. “I never cared much for history though, of course, I know the procedures have gotten better. It was really that bad?”

Diana only bit her tongue in the metaphorical sense. “Steve was lucky. We had money and resources and they could not kill him.”
Maryam stared at her; Diana continued. “Others were not so lucky. At best, many of the things that were supposed to help did more harm than good. He knows your intentions are good but sometimes that is not going to matter. You're going to have to be patient with him.”

“If I could see his medical files, I could know what to avoid,” Maryam said hesitantly.

Diana was already shaking her head. “Maryam, I do not know if he will ever be comfortable showing you those files. He loves you very much.”

Maryam's frown deepened. “What's that got to do with it?”

“If you...broke your arm and it was set poorly and it caused you a great deal of pain,” Diana said. “Would you want Leila to know every detail of that?”

Maryam didn't answer. Diana thought she could not decide whether Diana had a point or if she should be rolling her eyes.

“Now imagine it was not your sister but Nour, your niece, you had to tell,” Diana said, pressing on.

“I'm not a teenager anymore,” Maryam retorted but she looked vaguely uncomfortable with the idea.

“It has nothing to do with age,” Diana said. “He loves you the way you love Nour, the way that makes you want to protect her from everything bad in the world. You are asking him to show you how he has been hurt by it. That may be asking too much.”

Maryam was silent for long minutes. Finally, she looked at Diana.

“I thought...I knew Uncle Steve would take some persuading,” Maryam said. “But I thought you would be happy?”

Diana had to consider that.

“It is a terrible thing to get used to seeing someone you love in pain. For it to become routine,” Diana told her. “But it has. I am not afraid of threatening that status quo and I do not think Steve will be adverse to something that is going to hurt in the moment but ultimately improve his life.”

“But if we go through this and nothing changes,” Diana said and she did not even try to hide how much the thought dismayed her. “That would be a very hard blow to take.”

“I would never do anything to hurt him,” Maryam said.

“All of this is going to hurt him,” Diana said. “If only because of his previous experiences. I am telling you, that is inescapable. You must understand that if you are going to proceed with this. It was unwise to broach the topic tonight when Steve feels too exhausted to broach any kind of defence.”

“He doesn't have to get defensive,” Maryam said, exasperated. “We’re on the same side! I became a doctor so that I could help him.”

Maryam flushed, as if she hadn't meant to admit that. As if Diana had not known. In comparison to the rest of the family, Maryam was practically transparent. Even when she took pains to hide something, her heart remained very prominently on her sleeve.

“I know,” Diana told her. “But your biggest battle may be convincing him of that. And, Maryam, you are confident you can improve his health but you can’t guarantee it. You know that or you would not be so concerned about getting the tests done.”
“I can’t do anything before we have baseline tests,” Maryam said. “And...I am confident I can do something even if it’s only improving his pain management because your system is...dodgy. If he’s my patient, I can give you actual prescriptions.”

“We have made do,” Diana said. She sighed and looked at Maryam carefully. “Steve's hip is what bothers him most. The breathing problems, those worry me more. When they are exacerbated...He does not seem to remember it as well. The pain isn’t as bad, I suppose.”

Maryam rubbed her forehead in agitation. “If I were to guess, and I can only guess right now, when he’s congested like this his body is being starved for oxygen to the point that it’s affecting his cognitive abilities so, no, he wouldn’t remember as well.”

Diana went so tense so quickly that even Maryam noticed. She looked up, bewildered and worried. Diana tried to recover.

“I would not phrase it that way to Steve, the next time you bring it up,” Diana told her.

“Oh, uh, sorry, I didn’t...” Maryam cleared her throat. She flushed. “Um. There don’t appear to be any...long term effects? I mean, he always seems to recover.”

“Yes,” Diana said. “He does.”

Maryam cleared her throat again. She glanced at Diana for a second, looked away, then looked back at her again. If Diana had not been thinking of things like brain damage, she might have smiled at it.

“We never talk about it,” Maryam began slowly. “About why Uncle Steve is...the way he is. The not...aging and why he doesn’t...uh, die? I mean, we know that you’re a...”

Maryam gestured vaguely. This time, Diana did smile. She imagined it would be hard, being an atheist and having a goddess in the family. “A demi-god?”

“Right, that,” Maryam said, looking mildly uncomfortable. “But Uncle Steve’s not...?”

“No,” Diana said. Maryam struggled with the idea of demi-gods. Steve was more complicated.

Maryam did not look satisfied. Diana pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to figure out how to explain without going down the rabbit hole of gods and magic and everything that Maryam found difficult believe.

“There is a...baseline that he will not fall below,” Diana said. “But it is not a high one and we have avoided testing it.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Maryam said flatly.

“It means, he will never be worse than he was when he was...revived after the explosion,” Diana said. “But his condition then was very bad. And...We have avoided testing what a serious new injury could do to upset that balance.”

Maryam thought about that. “How bad is the baseline?”

“I believe a normal person would have died,” Diana said. “The doctors then told me he would, that he was coughing up lung tissue as well as blood.”

Maryam looked horrified but it was the horror of someone thinking of a loved one going through that. It was not the horror of someone who had never seen such things before. She sighed and ran a
hand through her hair.

“I would really like to see those files or at least the relevant sections,” Maryam grumbled. She made a face at Diana’s frown. “But I won’t...push. Not now at least.”

“You will have better luck with Steve if you do not,” Diana agreed.

“Do you, um,” Maryam winced. “Do you think he'll remember the conversation we just had?”

“Yes,” Diana nearly smiled at Maryam's groan. She patted her on the back instead. It was sometimes hard when the people they knew as children grew up. Pride was a tricky thing. “Steve is closer to recovery than illness right now. Once he can make it out of bed for several hours at a time, things generally get less foggy for him.”

“Great,” Maryam huffed.

“He is going to argue with you,” Diana told her. “Trying to convince him when he cannot is not the best method, with a very few exceptions.”

Maryam looked at Diana, confused. Whatever she saw on Diana's face made her wrinkle her nose. “Ew.”

Diana laughed. It was a relief. “No. Not that. No, he worries too much about his limitations and that is best solved by proving him wrong. You want him to be proactive in this. That means you will need to convince him.”

“But,” Diana told her. “If anyone other than me is going to convince him of something, I would bet on you.”

Maryam lifted her chin, even as it wobbled a little. Diana hugged her tightly and sent her home with all of the food they had not eaten since Steve would not be up for stocking her refrigerator for another week at least.

It took Maryam the better part of a year to convince Steve to go in for the tests she had planned. Diana thought later that it was her excitement that...unsettled Steve so much. Or perhaps having avoided being a patient for so long, they simply had underestimated how Steve's feelings toward the idea had festered.

Diana thought he could not have slept more than an hour the night before. He was already exhausted when they arrived.

Diana did not quite understand how much they had underestimated the toll it would take until they walked through the hospital doors and Steve reached over and grasped her hand tightly. It was not unusual for them to walk side by side but Steve stayed so close he was nearly bumping in to her.

They had been inside hospitals and doctors’ offices since the last time Steve went to see a doctor, but never for Steve himself. Not since their village doctor – who smiled sadly at Steve's war wounds, commiserated about his own and wrote out a prescription for morphine without asking questions – retired. They had only ever visited other people since then.

There were a lot of things Steve could push aside if it meant helping someone else.

It was harder when the only thing he had to think about was himself and everything that seeking treatment might entail.
Diana put her hand on his arm, above their joined hands. “We are only going to see Maryam.”

Steve exhaled. There were circles under his eyes. “I know.”

If anything, Diana thought, that just made it worse.

Maryam's office was...impeccable. It was nothing like her apartment, which seemed to have frozen in terms of style and cleanliness when she was still a med student. It was jarring enough that Steve froze for a moment in the doorway, his fingers flexing in Diana's hand.

“Oh good, you found it,” Maryam said, standing up to greet them. “Come in and sit down.”

Diana could feel Steve's hesitation. She did not let go of his hand for more than a moment as they sat down. Maryam smiled at them, pleasant and bland. It was meant to be unthreatening, Diana imagined. She could practically feel Steve recoiling.

“Okay, so, we're going to go over your symptoms in as much detail as you can give me,” Maryam explained, indicating the file open in front of her. “Then I'll explain each step of the testing for you. Then I’ll take you for the tests.”

Diana blinked. Maryam didn't even sound like herself. If they hadn't known her so well, it might have been reassuring – she was polite and inoffensive and took the time to explain the process – but for Diana, for Steve, it was like interacting with a pod person.

Steve hunched into himself, his answers monosyllabic, the way they were when he was in pain and trying to protect himself, trying to hold himself together. It only made Maryam double down on the bland pleasantness, which Diana bought might have been encouraging to anyone but Steve.

The tests, at least, were not intrusive, as Maryam had promised. Nor did they take a long time – Diana suspected Maryam had called in favours so they didn't have to wait. The worst was when Steve had to sit in a sealed room breathing into a mask and that was less to do with the test itself and more because he couldn't see Diana for several minutes. The x-rays were the same.

Diana thought that to a stranger, it would have been impossible to tell that Steve was seconds away from turning around and walking out the entire time they were there. It was in the way he went silent and held himself as if he were going into battle.

No one else remembered what that looked like except her now.

Diana knew Maryam noticed even if she didn’t fully understand. She had never seen Steve react like that. Diana caught a few glimpses of her looking confused and miserable but it was gone, mollifying pleasant smile plastered back on her face in the next second. But Diana’s main concern was Steve who was so tense by the end of it that Diana was beginning to worry he would throw his hip out.

It only took a couple hours, start to finish.

It felt impossibly long.

Maryam seemed at a loss to what to say to them as they left. Steve didn't even try to hug her, which was unthinkable, but Diana thought he would have jumped out of his skin if anyone but her had tried to touch him once the testing was done.

They took a taxi home and as soon as they were through the front door, Diana let her purse fall, turned, and wrapped Steve in her arms. He sagged against her, pressing his face against her neck as she rubbed his back.
“We’re home,” Diana told him and then, fiercely: “I would never let anyone harm you.”

“Wasn’t worried about that,” Steve said into her neck.

Diana tightened her grip on him and closed her eyes briefly. “I would never let anyone keep you from leaving.”

Steve shuddered, pressing as close to her as possible, as if he could burrow into her and leave himself behind. “Didn’t know I would react like that.”

“I was surprised it was that bad for you,” Diana said.

Steve huffed, a puff of air against his skin. “I thought I would handle it better. I didn't think it would be a problem. I thought I could handle it.”

Diana pulled back enough to look at him and when she was sure he was listening to her, she rested their foreheads together. “Anyone else would have thought you were. No one would have noticed but me.”

“And Maryam,” Steve said grimly. He closed his eyes, folding in to her again. “Fuck. She had to know something was wrong.”

“It's Maryam. It's your Maryam,” Diana told him because of all things, she did not want him to lose the closest person he had ever had to a daughter. “She will only be concerned for you.”

Steve didn't answer. They stood there until he pulled away. He looked so tired. Diana cupped his face in her hands.

“I don't think we should be anything else today,” she told him. “I think we should lie around and watch movies and forgot about this morning for a while.”

“That sounds good,” Steve said, giving her the ghost of a smile. He cleared his throat and did not quite meet her eyes. “We should call Maryam. Later.”

“We will,” Diana told him. “Later.”

Steve stayed awake long enough to argue about what they should watch – they settled on Star Wars because Steve had always liked adventure stories – and the first ten minutes of the film. Luke had not made it off Tatooine when Steve fell asleep against her shoulder. Diana waited until she was sure he was soundly asleep before carefully tipping him over so his head was resting in her lap and pulling the blanket off the back of the couch. She had expected as much but suggesting he go to bed and take a nap would have only made him feel like an invalid.

He woke up halfway through the end credits with Diana’s fingers carding through his hair. He gave her a look but it was half-hearted at best and she only smiled and kissed him lightly as he sat up, his hair mussed and out of place.

“That was cheating,” he complained without rancor as he tried to brush his hair back into some kind of order.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Diana said, looking at him innocently.

“That hasn’t worked on me in years,” Steve reminded her and he kissed her, slowly, still sleep warm.

“We can have a late lunch and try again,” Diana told him, teasingly, and kissed him again when he
scowled at her.

Steve made sandwiches and tried to call Maryam while Diana was making popcorn. He came back, his expression worried.

“Didn’t pick up,” Steve said shortly.

“She is likely still at work,” Diana reminded him.

Steve did not look convinced. Diana surreptitiously called Maryam’s work line while he was in the washroom but got no response.

That was not so unusual either, she told herself.

They were finished *A New Hope* and halfway through *Empire Strikes Back* when there was a knock at the door. Diana was making more popcorn and Steve got up to answer it before she had stepped out of the kitchen.

It was Maryam, in sweat pants and a sweatshirt from her university that was ripped at the hem, her hair up in a tangled, messy bun. She looked like she wouldn’t be sure of her welcome.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

Steve opened his arms. “C’mere, kiddo.”

It was not the Maryam did not like hugs. She didn't like being touched by strangers but hugs from friends and family were fine. As long as they didn't go on for too long.

She folded her arms around Steve and held on for a very, very long time. Her eyes were wet when she finally stepped back and she scrubbed at them quickly.

Steve caught her hands and waited until she met his eyes. “I don't think there's anything you would do that could make us close our door to you, okay, kiddo? I'm sorry if I made you doubt that.”

Maryam's eyes welled up more and she hugged Steve again. Even as Steve's face creased in concern, Diana could see some of the tension leave his shoulders.

“Diana's making popcorn,” Steve said, though they hadn't let go of each other yet. “We’re watching *Empire Strikes Back*. We can rewind it and start from the beginning, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Maryam said. “That sounds good.”

They paused before putting on *Return of the Jedi* for dinner, just reheated leftovers. They talked about Leila and the family, about how Yasmine and Bobby were doing on their two month long trip to the States, about Ann’s new book and all the ways Diana thought she overstated her thesis.

They did not talk about the hospital.

Diana offered to braid Maryam’s hair after Maryam tried and failed to fix it for the fourth time. Maryam sat at her feet for the first twenty minutes of the movie while Diana patiently and intricately braided her hair so it would hold for days, if Maryam wanted to leave it.

Steve fell asleep before they left Tatooine again. Diana knew he was out for the night but didn't wake him until the movie was over. He did not need prompting to go to bed then, only half awake to begin with.
Maryam went to eject the cassette. It let her avoid looking at Diana for a few more moments. Diana did not roll her eyes at these two foolish people that she loved but she very easily could have.

She went and hugged Maryam instead.

“Stay in the guest room tonight,” Diana told her. “We'll talk about it in the morning.”

“Do we have to?” Maryam said. She buried her face against Diana’s shoulder for a moment, which was not something she would usually do, and sighed. “I know we do.”

“We do,” Diana said and squeezed her a little tighter before letting her go. “It will not be as bad as you imagine.”

Maryam did not look like she believed her. Diana resisted the urge to hug her again. “You will see.”

Steve was fast asleep on his side when Diana joined him in bed. He snuffled in his sleep, just barely waking as she curled around his back.

“Okay?” he mumbled as she draped her arm around his waist. He covered her hand with his without opening his eyes.

“Yes,” Diana told him, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. “It will be.”

Diana was not sure Maryam slept that night, or if she had, it had not been well. She was up well before they were the next morning.

And she had tried to make breakfast.

It had not gone well.

Only Diana had been able to remove the spoon from the pot of oatmeal Maryam had attempted to make. It took more effort than Diana would ever have admitted.

“I do not understand how you got it so cold,” Diana said. She looked in their soup pot. She was not sure it could be saved. “But perhaps that is why the middle is uncooked.”

Steve ran a hand over his face, both in exasperation and because he was trying to hide his laughter. “Okay, get out of my kitchen. Do you want oatmeal?”

“Oh,” Maryam said.


Diana had to press her lips together to keep from laughing. “Pancakes are good.”

Pancakes were also fast and it was not long before they were sitting down to eat. Maryam looked awkward and concerned; Steve was tenser than he was letting show. Diana was almost convinced that she would have to begin the conversation.

It surprised her when Maryam did.

“So, um,” she said and it took her a moment to look at Steve. “Um. Can you tell me what I did wrong? It's not—I've had...people react badly before but it's usually more about what I have to tell them. It's not usually...like that. I'm usually pretty good with pati—people. I try not to be, you know, as abrasive as I can be? But if I was...”
“No,” Steve interrupted. He was looking down at his plate. “No, you weren’t abrasive like you can be when you get comfortable with people. Maybe that was part of the problem.”

Maryam was quiet for a moment. “I don’t understand. I was being professional.”

“I know,” Steve exhaled loudly. “I know. I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t like doctors.”

Maryam looked more upset than she had any of the other many times Steve had said that. “That’s not fair.”

“I know it’s not,” Steve said. He finally looked up at her, if only for a moment. “Nothing about this is fair. And I didn’t...I didn’t think I would have such a hard time with it. I knew I would be uncomfortable but I figured....I don’t know, that I would just get it over with.”

Maryam stared at him. “Your conditions are chronic, Uncle Steve.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Steve said shortly. “I know what’s wrong with me.”

“But you don’t, not really,” Maryam said. “You know what...nonsense doctors thought seventy years ago – which you won’t let me see – and what Diana's people could do to help. You don’t know what your lung function is or how it’s affecting your body and I’m not saying it would be a quick fix, it wouldn't be, it would probably take time to find the optimal treatment, but...”

“I won’t go back into the hospital,” Steve said, his voice taunt. “I don’t care. I won’t do it.”

Steve had gone a shade paler. Diana put her hand on his knee, under the table, a solid weight for him to hold on to. Maryam stared at him for a long moment, then looked at Diana, stony faced, and then back at Steve.

“What?” Maryam asked, honest confusion in her voice. “You don’t have a problem with hospitals. You visited my dad in the hospital all the time after his heart attack. You were there more than me when Nour was born. You were the one that took me when I broke my arm falling off my bike!”

Steve’s shoulders hunched. “That’s not the same.”

Maryam looked at him helplessly. “I don’t understand.”

“You kept...not calling me a patient. Before,” Steve said. The tips of his ears had gone pink, as if he were ashamed. “And I’d like to tell you to stop, that its fine, but the idea of it, of that...I don’t even know how to describe it so you would understand.”

Maryam was looking at him with slowly growing comprehension. “How, uh, how long were you in the hospital, when this first happened?”

Steve’s mouth shut firmly. He looked away. Diana squeezed his knee.

“Four years,” she answered.

“Six and a half,” Steve corrected. He didn’t look at either of them. “They were reluctant to let me leave the first time my hip went and Diana took me back. The reconstructive surgery they did, I’m not complaining but...when Elsie got a look at my files, it was so they could keep me there longer. So it was four years in, three months at home, and then another two and a half years in a hospital.”

Maryam was silent for a long time. Finally, she leaned forward, her voice very even. “My working theory is that your condition is most like mid-stage COPD, and I know that reference makes more
sense to me than you. I would usually recommend treating that with inhalers, breathing exercises and possibly supplemental oxygen overnight and when you’re sick. None of that requires hospitalization.”

Steve didn’t respond except to swallow. Maryam pressed on. “The testing requires you visit the hospital but...I hope the tests didn’t seem too invasive. They’re generally not thought to be.”

“Blowing into a tube didn’t bother me,” Steve said but his tone still had a skeptical edge to it.

“The results...are probably going to be off, a little,” Maryam said. Steve looked at her. She shrugged. “Stress and lack of sleep affects lung function. Your results will likely be poorer than they actually are.”

Maryam paused, carefully not looking at Diana. “It would have been helpful to...know all this in advance.”

Steve caught it. “Diana didn’t know.”

He sighed and said again, resignedly: “I didn’t...quite realize how badly I would react. I thought I could handle it.”

“I did not know the extent of it,” Diana said. “And...I was wrong about the exact cause behind it. I will admit I thought if there was anyone Steve could trust it would be you.”

“It's not that I don't trust you,” Steve said. “But you sounded like a damn doctor.”

“I am a doctor!” Maryam said, giving him a flat look that was at least growing less hostile.

“You didn’t sound like you!” Steve burst out. “I don't like people looking at me like that in the first place! I’m not an invalid. I could only stand this at all to begin with because it was you.”

Maryam did not look surprised by that but she still looked like she didn’t know what to do with it. She took a breath. “If you ever have to come back to the hospital, I’ll...be less professional. God that sounds weird.”

The expression on Steve’s face showed how uncomfortable he was with the thought of going back.

“I should be able to work with the test results we have. When I get those, we’ll go from there,” Maryam made a face. “But...Aunt Di said you were most interested in doing something about your hip.”

“I started wearing a brace when we were on Themyscira,” Steve said. “It helps. And you can buy them at the pharmacy now.”

“But you’re in pain more often than you should be,” Maryam said.

“I can handle it,” Steve said.

“You shouldn’t have to!” Maryam said. There was something fierce and frustrated in her voice. She visibly held herself back from saying more. “But...I’m not a surgeon but even I know that would most likely involve surgery and at least a few days hospitalization.”

“I am not comfortable with that,” Steve said immediately. Then, he hesitated. “Not right now.”

“No respectable surgeon is going to operate on your hip until we get your lungs figured out anyway. It would be irresponsible and I wouldn’t trust anyone who would,” Maryam said. She looked a little
sheepish. “Ah, and I would have to find someone else to do the surgery, obviously. I...looked into it in med school but...orthopedics bored the shit out of me.”

Steve laughed, a little startled. Maryam smiled at him hesitantly.

“We’ll get the test results back soon,” Maryam said. “I, um, I wasn't completely oblivious to your discomfort with...everything. That's why, you know, I tried to be so professional and why I waited to explain the tests in my office. I thought it was better to keep it out of your home as much as possible. But...if you're more comfortable with it, we can discuss the results here.”

Diana felt Steve relax, just a little.

“That sounds better,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Maryam said and some of the tension was gone from her shoulders as well. “We can do that.”

The results, when they came back, were not...good. Steve took it in stride. Diana found it dismaying.

“Your lung function is probably a little higher on most days,” Maryam said. “If you're ever comfortable doing the tests again, I would like to get a second set of numbers.”

Steve looked at her, his face unreadable. “We’ll see.”

“It would actually be good to get two sets of tests,” Maryam said, slowly. Steve's face went blank and controlled in a way she was starting to understand. “I think the greatest quality of life improvements we could make are when you're sick and, I mean, I'm going to try now but if I have results to tailor a treatment to, it'll be more effective. I’m hoping we can keep any sort of congestion from knocking you out for so long.”

Steve frowned. He did not say no out right, repeating instead: “We’ll see.”

Diana was still staring at the numbers on the sheets Maryam had given them. They were worse than she had been expecting. Steve had always been good at hiding his pain and exhaustion from other people but Diana had always thought she had understood the depths of it.

The results suggested otherwise.

“You are going to have to explain this to me,” Diana said. Steve looked at her frowning. “It seems...very low.”

“It’s not great,” Maryam said. “If he were actually a COPD patient, he would be between stage 2 and 3, technically stage three based on those results but I think his lung function is a little higher most days. But that's not the weird interesting thing.”

She sounded...almost excited. Diana frowned at it. Steve looked both trepidatious and amused, the way he always was in the face of enthusiasm he recognized but didn't understand.

“Weird and interesting,” he said wryly. “Great.”

“It's actually a really good thing,” Maryam said. “Your oxygen absorption rate is much higher than your lung function should indicate. It's not normal but it should be much lower, particularly given the scarring the imaging indicates.”

“Let me guess,” Steve said, voice dry. “You have a theory.”
“It's just a theory,” Maryam said but she looked intent now. “I'm... cribbing from neurology but. We know that if patients with traumatic brain injuries live long enough, new pathways are sometimes formed over time, allowing them to regain lost functionality in different ways. And, I mean, we barely understand the brain at all, you know? We know lungs better, kind of. We know that lungs have some regenerative properties, though they're minor. But usually when there's this much damage, the strain of keeping the body working degrades function over time and eventually the mortality rates spike.”

“But you can't die,” Maryam said. “At least, it doesn't seem like it so... maybe if you give them long enough, new pulmonary pathways form too. At least in terms of oxygen absorption. It's not like you're growing new lungs or anything. It doesn't work like that. Although. Did they even have proper imaging back then?”

“The only x-rays in that file are of my hip and leg,” Steve said. He had gotten tense again but Maryam was too distracted to notice. “And the quality isn’t great.”

“Hmm. It's an interesting thing to think about. We can manage symptoms but chronic lung conditions tend to worsen over time. If we could find a way to stop that...” Maryam waved her pencil in the air as if dismissing stray thoughts. “I would need another research grant and... anyway, doesn't matter right now. But the higher absorption rate is great.”

Steve's face had gone pinched and he closed his eyes briefly and took a breath, as if preparing to absorb a blow. “What would you need from me?”

Maryam blinked at him. “Huh?”

“What would you need from me to prove it?” Steve asked. Maryam was still looking at him blankly. “To help?”

“What are you talking about?” Maryam replied.

Steve was getting annoyed. “I don't know how to be clearer. What would you need from me to help prove your theory?”

“You can't?” Maryam said. Steve looked at her suspiciously. She threw her hands up. “You're alive and preternaturally young because of some magic mumbo jumbo that you can't or won't explain. How exactly would I phrase that on a grant proposal?”

Maryam rubbed her hands through her hair briskly. “Oh my god. How would I even account for the variables? We have no fucking clue how any that... resurrection stuff affects your results. Just thinking about it is giving me a headache.”

Maryam looked so dismayed considering it that Diana could not help it, she laughed. Both of them looked at her, startled. Steve's lips twitched, just a little.

Maryam sat up a little straighter. She looked emboldened and a bit annoyed.

“What the hell, Uncle Steve?” she asked, waving her hands as she spoke. “You get super stressed out at what are basically the least invasive tests possible because of past trauma. You could never be part of a medical study. Don't be dumb. You would make a terrible research subject.”

Steve’s mouth dropped open. Maryam looked less sure of herself than she had a moment ago, almost embarrassed, but she didn’t back down.

“Okay,” Steve said after a moment. “Okay.”
Diana put the paper down. It would not do to dwell on the numbers, particularly when there were interactions between them that she would need to study to understand. “We have the results now. What are you recommending in terms of treatment?”

“Breathing exercises to begin with,” Maryam said. She shuffled through her papers, plucked out a pamphlet and pushed it at Steve. He looked at it like it had been scrapped off the bottom of a shoe.

The design did appear somewhat patronizing, Diana would admit.

“Really?” Steve asked.

“Really,” Maryam said. “It works. Helps your absorption rate, makes your lungs more efficient. I’ll walk you through it. I would normally send you to pulmonary rehab but I don’t think that's going to work for you.”

“I already do this one,” Steve told her, pointing to an illustration in the pamphlet. He did not disagree about pulmonary rehab.

Maryam peered at it. “That's probably the least effective one you can do. Works in the moment but doesn't have a lot of long term efficacy. It's the oldest one we use, though.”

“Hm,” Steve replied, non-committedly.

“Other than the exercises, I want to see if a bronchodilator inhaler helps at all. And a combination one for when you're sick. It'll help open up your airways better,” Maryam continued. She took a breath. “And I want to see if using supplemental oxygen at night gives you more energy during the day.”

Steve looked at Diana. Everything about the way he held himself spoke of his uncertainty.

“Yes,” Steve said, despite his obvious lingering discomfort. “We'll try it.”

It seemed so small but Diana knew it was as great a leap of faith as he had ever taken.

“Okay!” Maryam said, beaming. “Okay, great!”

Steve lasted on overnight oxygen for a week. He moved in his sleep when he wasn’t sick and he kept pulling out the nasal cannula or getting tangled in it and he didn’t like the way it dried out his nostrils. Or that was what he told Maryam. It may have even been what he told himself. Maryam negotiated a compromise where Steve did a few hours of oxygen therapy with a portable tank every morning and evening instead.

Diana could not help but notice that it made Steve feel more in control of the treatment, for all that it took up more time out of his day than doing it overnight would. To begin with, it wasn’t something happening to him while he was unconscious.

And Diana thought making that compromise made Steve feel less wary when he was ill with a flu that turned into a chest infection, later that winter, and Maryam insisted on putting him in an oxygen mask and giving him an IV when it was at its worst and a sickly grey-blue started creeping into the skin under his fingernails. His recovery was much quicker, despite it being a particularly bad bout, and Diana spent fewer nights wide awake, with her hand on his chest, worried that he would stop breathing despite all the reasons she knew he would not.

It was only after that, after he recovered, that Steve let Maryam run a second set of tests on him to get the more accurate numbers she wanted. It was only after that, and when they found out Maryam was
submitting fraudulent paperwork to continue treating him for both his respiratory issues and pain management, that they started doing pro forma check ins at the hospital so it was more above board. Anything serious Maryam saved to discuss with them at home but for the check ins, at least, Steve became comfortable enough that they started to schedule them around Maryam’s increasingly sought after availability, even if it meant he went to them alone while Diana was at work. At the same time, Steve agreed to give Maryam copies of the pertinent notes from his old file – she had hugged him a lot that week but otherwise nothing changed.

It was not ideal, maybe, but it worked.

To any of their acquaintances, even to their friends and family, Diana thought the changes in Steve’s health would have been subtle but that was more to do with Steve’s tendency to hide when he was having difficulty than how effective the treatments were. After a year, he had markedly more energy; joining her for a gala after work no longer meant he had to take a nap in the middle of the afternoon.

It reminded Diana of when they first returned to Themyscira and the difference in air quality between there and the coal burning cities of Europe had made it so much easier for him to breath.

In retrospect, she should have expected him to throw his hip out even sooner than he did.

“Aunt Di!”

Maryam sounded more shrill and frightened than Diana had ever heard her. She dropped the mugs she had been bringing in to the living room and was in the hallway in the next moment.

Maryam was on the floor, Steve terrible pale beside her. Her legs were under his shoulders, her hands under his head. It looked like she had just managed to control his fall.

“Fuck,” Maryam said. “What the fuck. What the fuck!”

“Steve,” Diana said, lifting him just enough so that Maryam could get out from under him. He made a choking noise when she did.

“That’s...that’s dislocated,” Maryam said. “Holy fuck. What the fuck.”

“Gotta fix it,” Steve muttered into Diana’s jeans. Her fingers dug tightly into his shoulders for a moment but did not try to stop him when he half sat up, lifted his hips and twisted.

He made a strangled noise as he did it, and his face went dead white. Diana caught him as he fell back against her, unconscious.

Diana turned her head to ask Maryam to go get a blanket but Maryam was already on her feet, still cursing, and heading to the couch. She grabbed one off the back and helped Diana wrap it around him.

“Is his pain medication where it always is?” Maryam asked.

“Yes,” Diana told her. “In our bathroom cabinet.”

But they were not at home. They were in Maryam’s apartment.

“I’ll get it,” Maryam said. “Don’t move him. I...if it were anyone else, I would call 112.”

Diana shook her head. This was not new for all that Maryam had only ever seen the after effects of it before. “He would not thank you for it.”
Maryam’s lips thinned but she nodded. She was out the door in the next minute. Diana could hear her running down the hall.

Steve came to before she was back. His face creased in pain and his breathing picked up. He turned his head against her thigh.

“Lie still,” Diana told him, pressing his shoulders for emphasis. “Maryam’s gone to get your painkillers.”

“Fuck,” Steve breathed.

“I’ll get you home after they have kicked in,” Diana said.

“Yeah,” Steve said. He opened his eyes, then closed them again. His jaw clenched and unclenched. “Fuck. Fuck. ‘M brace got stretched out. Thought it’d be okay for a day. Fuck.”

“Maryam will be back soon,” Diana said. She stroked Steve’s hair, now that she was sure he wouldn’t try to move in pained confusion. “She is going to use this as an excuse to get you to wear the cannula while you’re sleeping.”

Steve choked. It was as close as he could come to a laugh, she thought. He reached up, searching for her hand. Diana leaned forward so he could squeeze it as he tried to breathe through the pain.

Diana could hear the moment Maryam stepped out of the elevator and began pounding down the hallway. She was out of breath when she ran back into her apartment.

“Percocet,” she said, skidding to a halt beside them and handing Diana the bottle of pills. She jolted a little. “Oh, water.”

Then she was gone again, into the kitchen. Diana opened the pill bottle just in time for her to come back with a glass. Diana propped Steve up enough to take the pill. Maryam sat down beside them in the hallway. She seemed to know to wait until Steve could loosen his grip on Diana’s hand before saying anything.

“So, uh,” Maryam began hesitantly. Steve opened his eyes just a little but did not attempt to move. “So, your hip just dislocated, I’m pretty sure.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. The creases in his forehead were starting to ease. Percocet did not make him as nauseous as morphine had but it could make him...loopy. “Goes out sometimes.”

“That’s...that’s not supposed to happen,” Maryam said.

Steve stared up at Diana for a second. He blinked. Diana could tell he was having trouble responding with anything other than: No shit.

“No, I mean, hip dislocations usually take a lot of force,” Maryam said. “And you...you realigned it yourself. That usually requires surgery.”

“Usually happens when I land. Feels like...feels like something pops back into place?” Steve said. “Brace needs replacing. Fucked it up.”

Maryam stared at him. After a moment she rubbed her forehead and then scrubbed a hand through her hair. “Okay, so, this is a little more than what you described to me as aggravating your hip.”

“Since Steve started wearing a brace, it happens with much less frequently,” Diana said. “Usually
when his hip is sore now it is because he has overdone it, not because it has given out on him.”

“That’s great,” Maryam said, completely neutral, which meant, of course, that she thought it was anything but great. “So...what do you mean by less frequently?”

“Once every few years,” Diana said.

“As opposed to?” Maryam asked.

“Lots,” Steve answered.

“Once or twice a year,” Diana corrected. “More, when he was just starting to walk again instead of using his wheelchair all the time.”

Maryam pinched the bridge of her nose. Her tone was too calm. Like Steve’s could be, right before his temper boiled over. “So, the problem is, he’s not aggravating his hip. He’s effectively re-injuring it with every dislocation. Maybe not as badly as the original injury but still pretty badly. Which isn’t quite how you described it to me.”

Diana looked at her, frustrated. The semantics of how they had described it aside – and Steve was admittedly circumspect regarding his health – this was not news to either of them.

Nor the best time for the discussion.

“Maryam,” Diana said, “You have seen the aftermath of this. You are the doctor prescribing his pain medication. What would you have done differently?”

Maryam’s mouth shut with a click. She thought about it, wrinkled her nose and looked at Steve.

“You ready for overnight observation at the hospital yet?”

Steve laughed at her, the sound unpleasantly strangled. “No.”

Maryam huffed. It was almost as fond as it was exasperated.

“I haven’t found a surgeon yet either,” she said. She looked thoughtful for a moment.

“No. You cannot take up orthopedic surgery,” Diana said. She sighed, stroking Steve's hair back. “Are you ready for me to move you?”

Steve groaned and pressed his face against her jeans again but his tone was...fuzzy, detached. Yes, the Percocet worked better for him than morphine had. “Fine.”

“You can put him in my bed,” Maryam offered. “I can take the couch.”

“Once he's settled I try not to move him for a few days,” Diana said. “Not until the swelling goes down.”

“I can sleep in your guest room,” Maryam revised. “Er. Just give me a minute to change the sheets.”

When she was gone, Steve looked up at Diana, his eyes half lidded and his expression slack. He looked like he was struggling with something.

“I’d like it if this didn't happen anymore,” Steve said. “I think...I think I could handle being in a hospital for a few days if this didn't happen anymore.”

Diana couldn't hide her shock. Her hand stilled against his hair. Steve didn't seem to notice.
“Lung stuff’s important, I know it worries you but...” Steve shook his head a little. “But mostly...I’d just like it to hurt a little less, sometimes.”

Diana swallowed. She had to press her hand over her eyes for a moment to keep from crying.

“Don't tell Maryam?” Steve asked. “Don't want to hurt her feelings. I know the lung stuff’s important.”

“I won't,” Diana promised.

Steve sighed and closed his eyes, mumbling: “I hate this.”

“I know,” Diana said. “Me too.”

She got him settled, stayed with him until he fell asleep. When she went back outside, Maryam looked up from where she was sitting on her couch.

“I put more ice packs in the freezer,” Maryam told her. “And got you some things from upstairs.”

Diana nodded, sitting down beside her. When she didn't say anything, Maryam glanced at her uneasily and asked: “How long does, uh, recovery generally take?”

“The swelling takes three or four days to go down, sometimes longer,” Diana said. “I will take him home then.”

Maryam nodded for few moments to long, like a bobble head. Diana felt the same. “Okay.”

Diana took a breath. “Could we have found a surgeon to fix his hip before now?”

“Maybe? I don't know,” Maryam signed. “A responsible surgeon wouldn’t have operated without an understanding of his pulmonary issues or, well, only if the trauma was acute. Dislocation is pretty acute trauma, from what I know about hip injuries but in a normal patient, if it happens rarely that would be considered the more stable problem. I would definitely be brought in for a consult and I couldn’t recommend surgery until the pulmonary issues were investigated.”

“But Steve’s not a normal patient. That...complicates even finding a surgeon because how do you explain, hi, please ignore that his lung function is only in the high forties, it’s really his hip that’s the problem. And please ignore the stress reactions he’s having to being admitted to the hospital,” Maryam huffed and rubbed her eyes. “Hell, I’m pushing ethical boundaries by not insisting on counselling for that as is. I wouldn’t trust him with a surgeon that didn’t raise concerns about it, you know?”

She looked down at her hands and then at Diana. “In a normal patient, my main concern would be that they would stop breathing or flat line on the table due to the effects of the anesthesia and the trauma of surgery, which, it’s a controlled trauma to fix things but the body still experiences trauma. The thing is, you said you had...avoided testing how new trauma would affect whatever hocus pocus is keeping Steve from getting worse. I don’t want this to be that test.”

Diana closed her eyes. “That is my greatest worry.”

“At this point, I am more comfortable taking that risk. I would be even with a normal patient,” Maryam said firmly. “We have the information we need to minimize pulmonary stress. There’s still risk involved but...in the end, in these situations, it always comes down to quality of life and if we’re not improving that, why are we doctors in the first place?”
Diana looked at this girl – woman – who she had known since the day she was born, who could be so stubborn and cranky and aggravating and sometimes had the worst timing. Who Steve had fielded a million teary phone calls from when she was a teenager. Who had never learned how to take praise and was looking back at her so earnestly.

Diana put her arms around her and kissed the side of her forehead. “I am very proud of you, you know. So is Steve.”

“Steve doesn't even like doctors,” Maryam replied, flushing dully.

Diana knew to let her go before she got uncomfortable. “That does not mean he does not love you. It does not mean he cannot see beyond that and be proud of what you've accomplished.”

“Yeah, well,” Maryam said, shrugging off the praise. “I still have to find the right surgeon. And then we're going to have to talk about it. Merde, this is already a nightmare.”

Diana had had so many nightmares about what could have happened that night at the airfield. None of them ended with Steve alive and in her arms so many years later.

This was just a complication.

“Can I have the x-rays from his old file?” Maryam asked, trying to sound nonchalant about it – she had learned that from Steve, all of them had, and Diana blamed him for it entirely.

“No,” Diana said and then amended: “You'll have to ask him.”

The first hurdle was finding a surgeon. Maryam was picky in the first place and that it was Steve made it more delicate still. When she finally stumbled over the right one, everything fell into place more quickly than Diana was expecting.

“She knows you,” Maryam told Diana, glancing briefly over her shoulder.

“She know me?” Diana asked bemused. “How?”

But Maryam had moved on to what were clearly more important concerns. She had returned to staring at the potato in her hand. “Am I doing this right?”

Steve looked over from the stove and frowned. “No. You're trying to just take off the skin not whole chunks of it.”

Maryam ran the peeler over the potato. She looked honestly befuddled when a chunk of potato flew off.

Steve pushed the sleeves of his sweater up, sighing in exasperation, and took both the peeler and the potato away from her. “Peeling potatoes is not hard.”

“Hey, you know what's hard? The double lung transplant for a five year old that I've been obsessing about for two months. And now it's done and it was successful and it's my day off,” Maryam said.

“You were the one who wanted to help,” Steve reminded her. He had the potato peeled in a handful of seconds and was already moving on to the next one.

“In my defense, I thought it would be easy,” Maryam said.

Steve huffed but he was smiling. “It's peeling potatoes. It is easy. It's just tedious.”
“Maryam,” Diana interrupted. “How does this doctor know me? I don’t recognize her name.”

“That’s the thing,” Maryam said, and she looked a little cagey now. “She doesn’t know you but she, uh, has encountered you. When you’re doing the, you know, the hero thing?”

Steve paused, looking at Diana in concern. “Are we sure that’s a good thing?”

“Normally, it would make me avoid her like the plague,” Maryam said before Diana could respond. “But...I was maybe looking at your old x-rays on my lunch break-”

“You need to stop doing that,” Steve told her. “You need to leave your office and eat lunch.”

“I was eating lunch. I was just...contemplating your x-rays while I was doing it,” Maryam said.

Steve tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment, sighing. It reminded Diana so much of Farah she had a moment of intense nostalgia.

“Why?” Steve asked. He sounded baffled but not, Diana noted, upset. Maryam opened her mouth to answer but Steve made a sharp motion with the peeler to cut her off. “No. I don’t want to know.”

Maryam shrugged and continued. “Anyway. She barged in because she was pissed at that coward Bergevin and he told her it was his office. He was trying to hide from her – didn’t work, from what I heard. But having x-rays up in my office made it less than convincing when I told her I didn’t give a shit about orthopedics. Luckily it didn’t take her long to realize that the images were so shitty because they were old as dirt. But then she wanted to know why so I had them so I made some bullshit story about helping my niece do research on an uncle who died in WWI.”

Maryam paused and looked at Steve. “Sorry for killing you off.”

Steve waved it off without looking up from the potatoes he was grating. “It’s fine.”

“So, she was interested in the files, because apparently some people like history. But then she started telling me this story because apparently that’s what people who like history do. Start talking about that stuff. Anyway, her parents sent her to London to stay with relatives just before the Nazis invaded France. She was there during the Blitz,” Maryam took a breath looking at Diana. “And she remembers a woman digging them out of the rubble after their house was bombed. She remembers her lifting a whole wall away. She saved the whole family.”

Steve had stopped grating potatoes. Maryam was looking at Diana as if she thought she would remember. Diana did not know how to tell her that that had been her life, every night, for years during the war.

“The thing is, though, she could describe you exactly. It was uncanny,” Maryam took another breath. “Except then she kept talking and told me about how her parents, the ones who sent her to live with her aunt, were French Resistance fighters during the war. The Germans caught them and her father died but her mother, she swears her mother told her the exact same woman showed up just after the camp she was sent to was liberated. That she helped her find her way home after she found out her husband had been murdered.”

Diana closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. She could not tell Maryam that that had not been memorable either, that all the faces from that time had blurred together for her long ago.

Steve’s hands settled on her shoulders, steady and warm. He smelled like starch and flour, a hint of ink beneath it. Diana knew if she opened her eyes and looked at his hands she would see a trace blue smudged on the calluses of his finger, from where he had been making notes earlier that afternoon.
She covered his right hand with hers. When she opened her eyes, Maryam was watching them, uncomfortable but resolute.

“The thing is,” Maryam said carefully. “She's good. New to Salpêtrière but an expert in the field – it’s why she was out for Bergevin’s blood. And I think she would do just about anything for you.”

“That's not something we trade on, kiddo,” Steve said gently so Diana wouldn't have to.

“I know,” Maryam said, and Diana was surprised at how respectful, almost reverent she sounded. But it was also Maryam at her most resolute. “But this is her job anyway. We just can’t go through the normal channels for it. We're never going to be able to. And this is better than any favours or blackmail I would have I call in.”

“I don't want you doing that for me anyway,” Steve said.

“Tough, I will and I am,” Maryam said. “But she's good. She gave me a rundown of what the x-ray showed ‘for my niece’s project’ just because she found it interesting.”

Maryam paused. “Your hip is even more fucked than I thought, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Steve said dryly. “I already knew that.”

“I know you don't do...what you do for any reason other than because it's right,” Maryam said. “And I know you don't want people to know about it. Or even say thank you. But...if Steve were a normal patient with a complicated case, this is the doctor I would want. And I honestly think it would mean a lot to her to just know you're real. That it's not just a story her family made up for themselves, you know?”

Steve's chin dropped to the top of her head, just for a moment. He didn't kiss her hair but he bent forward and rested there for a moment, breathing in. It was a similar sentiment to I-told-you-so but kinder.

She looked up at him. “Do you want to do this?”

Steve’s face was carefully neutral. As if Diana could not read it anyway. “I can manage without it.”

“That is not what I asked,” Diana said. She squeezed his hand. “I am with you as I always will be. Is this what you want?”

Steve did not look away. She knew that meant he was sure.

“Yes,” he said, simply.

“It's not without risk,” Maryam said, more quietly than usual. “And you'll have to stay in the hospital for days, maybe as long as a week because you're weird.”

“You'll be in the operating room, right?” Steve asked, looking to Maryam.

“Uh. I was planning to be, yeah,” Maryam said. “Why?”

“I trust you,” Steve said.

Maryam looked like she might cry.

“Then, we will find a way,” Diana told him. She looked at Maryam. “What's her name?”
Maryam blinked and looked at her blankly. “Huh?”

“You haven't told us her name,” Diana said.

“Oh, right,” Maryam said. “Dr. Jeanne Leblanc.”

“And you are sure we can trust her?” Diana asked.


Diana smiled at Steve, bemused. “You have taught them all far too well.”

“I am not taking the blame for that,” Steve said. He kissed her forehead and squeezed her hand once more before returning to the counter to start frying the latkes.

“Oh no, not at all,” Diana said as Maryam rolled her eyes. “How are you planning to approach her?”

“Dunno. Once Aunt Jen gives it the okay I was just planning to wing it,” Maryam said.

Diana raised an eyebrow at her. Steve looked like he was searching for patience again.

“She's already asked me to go for lunch,” Maryam said. “She's building up allies. I'm pretty sure she'll do most of the work for me.”

Things moved very fast after that. Faster than Diana thought she was truly comfortable with. Maryam’s favour at Salpêtrière was more sought after than either of them had realized. But for all that her modes of introduction remained...unorthodox.

Maryam did not quite push Dr. Leblanc through her office door while they were inside but she maneuvered her through quickly and locked the door behind her when they were both inside.

Dr. Leblanc was a tall woman, older with silvery streaked, blonde hair and sharp brown eyes. From her statuesque bearing and the way she crossed her arms across her chest, Diana would guess that she was normally quite reserved, though certainly confident.

She gaped at them, sitting hand in hand in the chairs in front of Maryam’s desk. It took her a moment to close her mouth and turn her head to glare at Maryam.

Maryam grinned, all teeth, and jabbed a finger in her direction even as she plopped into the chair behind her desk. “I told you so.”

“Je n'ai pas d'argent sur moi,” Dr. Leblanc said, smiling the same time.


“Oui,” Dr. Leblanc said. She glanced at them. “Is he...?”

“No. But those x-rays I showed you? Maryam said. “Both sets are his.”

Dr. Leblanc whistled.

“Yeah, yeah,” Maryam said, waving it away. “I only blacked out your calendar for 15 minutes. We’ll do a real consult later.”

“D’accord,” She glanced around and raised an eyebrow at Maryam. “Where shall I sit?”
“Not in my chair,” Maryam said. “Other than that, it’s up to you.”

There was a second chair just to the side of Maryam’s that Diana imagined she had brought in just for that purpose. She still got the distinct impression that Dr. Leblanc considered sitting on top of Maryam’s desk and blocking her from view for a moment before she took the second chair.

She stared at Diana for another moment but forcibly pulled her gaze away to look at Steve.

“Your hip is a mess,” Dr. Leblanc told him.

“People keep saying that like I don’t already know,” Steve said. There was only the slightest edge of hostility in his voice.

Dr. Leblanc laughed. “D’accord. That is fair. Though, from your later x-rays, the fracture you had in your fibula healed very well.”

Steve blinked, obviously surprised. “Thanks?”

“Ah, do not thank me, the rest of my news is not good,” Leblanc said. Her eyes darted to Diana for just a moment, a sliver of something like guilt in them. “Maryam tells me you have, ah, the...what’s the–”

“Dislocations,” Maryam supplied, leaning back in her chair.

“Nous parlons francais,” Diana told her.

“Oui, mais, I have to speak more English,” Dr. Leblanc said. She and Maryam exchanged a look. “If that is all right.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at Maryam, who looked back at him as if this were an obvious thing to do. He shrugged. “Sure.”

“D’accord. Okay. So, this is because...” Dr. Leblanc looked as if she was going to gesture to something but it was not there. “I will show you when we have a proper consultation. And, I would like my own x-rays. Dr. Davies’ are...”

She made a face and waggled her hand back and forth in a so-so gesture.

Steve snorted.

“Hey,” Maryam said.

“It’s not lungs. You don’t know what to look for so the technician, he did what he wanted,” Dr. Leblanc said. “Mine will be better. And then I can show you what we will do on the x-rays.”

“But for now,” Dr. Leblanc said and made an incomprehensible gesture. “So, the top of your thigh bone, there are chunks of it gone and the hip, ah, the hip, where the high bone goes in–”

“Socket,” Maryam supplied.

“Merci. That healed wrong. Badly,” Dr. Leblanc said. “It does not match anymore. So, it comes out. And each time it does, muscles are hurt, new scar tissue comes and so it is always being jarred even when it is not coming apart. It is aggravé.”

“That, I am very sure we can fix,” Dr. Leblanc said. “And I think there is a lot of scar tissue. This is not good. We will remove all we can but I cannot say if we can remove it all.”
Steve's shoulders visibly relaxed. Dr. Leblanc shook her head. “So, that is the okay news, yes? But the hip bone itself, there was another break and it healed wrong.”

She raised her hands to show them, palms flat out and brought them so they were touching but not aligned. “Like this, you see? They do not match right. Your one leg, it is shorter, no?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, nodding.

“So, if this were a new injury, if the bones were weak, I would break this again and...” she moved her hands together. “...bring them together and reset them. But this has been healed for many years and to reset this break would require...Well, it would be very painful and you would have to stay in the hospital and rehab for a long time. And we would have to do this before the hip replacement.”

“This, I do not recommend. This break is healed. From the x-rays, I would not think this is a cause of pain, though,” she gestured to Steve, “you can tell me if I am wrong. It is a problem for stability because of the difference in length. We will try to correct that with the hip replacement but it depends how big the difference is. And if we cannot you can fix with a, ah, a,” she held her thumb and forefinger a part, “a bigger bottom in one of your shoes.”

“A lift,” Maryam said.

She tilted her shoulder to the side and then her other shoulder the other way as if weighing something. “Your cane, you may still need. It will depend on the scar tissue and what we can remove. But there will be no more, er, dislocating, so that will be it. No new scar tissue. More stability. Less pain. Much less pain, I hope.”

“And if I wanted the other break...corrected?” Steve asked, his face blank. Diana squeezed his hand.

Dr. Leblanc shook her head. “I can give you more details but unless it is causing pain, this I will not do. There is no guarantee it would work and there is too much new trauma involved. I cannot recommend this.”

Steve’s face was so carefully controlled, Diana did not think either Maryam or Dr. Leblanc realized how much he appreciated that answer.

“Okay,” Steve said. “What’s the next step?”

Maryam smiled widely for a second before smothering it. She cleared her throat. “I’ve booked you an actual appointment with Dr. Leblanc on Monday. We start there. I’ve, uh, done most of the preliminary groundwork for this already.”

“Quand tu es chef de la pneumologie...” Dr. Leblanc began, smirking.


“Nous n’avons pas fini de parler,” Dr. Leblanc warned her.

Maryam waved her off. “Sors de mon bureau.”

Dr. Leblanc grinned but she glanced at Diana again as if she couldn't help it, then laughed nervously. The sound sat awkwardly in her mouth.

“I do not want to...” she began and her smile was suddenly tremulous. “I do not even know what to say but it is worse to say nothing. I cannot say nothing but...thank you seems insufficient.”
She pressed her hand to her mouth for a minute. “I can just barely remember you pulling us from the cellar but, ma mère dit—you gave me back my mother.”

Her voice broke. Steve was already letting go of her hand as Diana reached out to take Dr. Leblanc's hands. She did not even think about it.

“I do not do what I do for thanks,” Diana said. She tried to picture this woman as a child and could not but that was no matter. “It was a terrible time and I am so glad that at the end of it you were both there and could find each other again.”

Dr. Leblanc sniffed and cleared her throats and blinked furiously. She nodded in Steve's direction. “I would, ah, say I will look after him for you but—I would do that even so.”

Diana smiled. “I am glad to hear that. That is more than enough in thanks.”

“If you don't want me to speak of it...” Dr. Leblanc began.

“If you wish to speak of it,” Diana said, squeezing her hands, “I will listen.”

She meant it, too. She would have even if had been a stranger passing on the street who remembered her this way.

Diana saw the moment Dr. Leblanc had to withdraw gracefully or risk losing her composure completely. She let go of her hand gently so she would not have to be the one to pull away.

Dr. Leblanc stood and nodded and shook Steve's hand. “I will see you on Monday.”

Diana thought of that moment, more than all their subsequent appointments combined, as she paced the waiting room during Steve's surgery, as the hours stretched on and it had been an hour longer than they had estimated. Then two. Then three.

Diana did not know what she would have done if Maryam had not been in the operating room. She could trust her. Diana knew she could. Maryam would never let anyone hurt Steve.

Waiting was still torture.

Dr. Leblanc came out just after the sixth hour had passed. She had taken off her scrubs and she was smiling.

“It went very well,” Dr. Leblanc said before Diana had even crossed the room to reach her. “There was more debris than we expected with an injury that so old. It should have been removed during his previous surgeries. It is a miracle he was walking at all.”

“But how is he now?” Diana asked. She could not waste a thought for what the doctors who were long dead had or had not done, not now.

“It went very well,” Dr. Leblanc repeated. “Maryam is getting him settled in recovery. We cleared out all the debris we could find and as much scar tissue as possible. The replacement was the easy part.”

“We could not correct the length difference completely but we are within an inch, an inch and a half,” Dr. Leblanc said. “He will likely still be more comfortable with a cane and the scar tissue we could not remove will cause stiffness when he walks too much. But there will be no more dislocations.”
Diana did not relax – she could not relax, not while Steve was still in the hospital – but there was great relief in hearing that. Steve would be so happy.

“Good,” Diana said. “That's good.”

Dr. Leblanc hesitated for a moment before putting a hand on Diana's shoulder. Diana hugged her. As Dr. Leblanc hugged back, Diana got the impression she had been waiting to hug her since they had first met but had not let herself until that moment.

A nurse came out and told Dr. Leblanc they could go back and see the patient. Diana needed to see Steve, she knew she would have to restrain herself from the impulse to hold him the moment he was back in sight. But there was a nervousness too and the memory of the many other times she had seen him in hospital, in pain and achingly vulnerable.

The instinct to protect him from that was very strong. It made it...difficult to do nothing but remind herself that this was all to help when she got to his beside.

Steve was unconscious and intubated. There was an IV in the back of one of his hands, a monitor attached to the other. It was very different from the last time she had seen him immediately after surgery – when they had not wanted to let her in to see him at all. But he still looked...small. And fragile.

Diana hated it. She hated the way his eyelids looked so pale, next to translucent. She hated his stillness. She hated the too even rise and fall of his chest from the machine that was still breathing for him.

“We're going to be extubating him soon. He’s fine, we’re just making sure he doesn’t need it with the sedation too,” Maryam said. She gave Dr. Leblanc a dirty look. “You should not have brought her back yet.”

“You said as soon as I could,” Dr. Leblanc replied. “Are you all right? I have to reschedule another surgery.”

“Yes, thank you again,” Maryam said. Dr. Leblanc patted Diana’s shoulder once more before she left.

Maryam was checking one of the monitors. She glanced back at Diana and made a face. “You probably don’t want to see this.”

“I have seen worse,” Diana said. Maryam winced. “Do you need to me leave?”

Diana did not know how she could make herself leave.

“No, no,” Maryam said. “You’re not supposed to be here anyway. We might as well break all the rules.”

They extubated him, changing to a regular oxygen mask. Diana was surprised at how simple it was but then, she remembered the burns and the first surgeries on his hip and the months he spent coughing up blood and they didn’t know yet whether he would live or die.

She remembered every single time his hip had gone out and what it had looked like and felt like and how much pain he had been in.

“It went well,” Maryam said. She looked as worried as Diana felt and exhausted. “I can't believe he's been walking around on that for years.”
“He was always good at hiding his pain,” Diana said. She wanted to touch him. She would have just...done what she wanted, before, but she had trusted Maryam to help and she did not want to spoil her work.

“Not from you,” Maryam said.

“No,” Diana said. “Not from me.”

“He shouldn’t be in the same kind of pain, I don’t think but we – Jeanne, I didn’t really do anything – couldn’t fix everything,” Maryam said. “Maybe if it was closer to the original trauma but...he’s probably still going to be stiff and sore sometimes. We couldn’t complete correct the difference in length so he’s still going to have stability issues sometimes and–”

“Maryam,” Diana said. She had to swallow, near tears. “This is...”

“Don’t make me cry,” Maryam begged. “I can’t cry right now. I won’t stop.”

“This is good. This is enough,” Diana forced back her own tears. “Thank you.”

Maryam looked like she was biting the inside of her cheek. She cleared her throat and looked away from Diana. “So, um, we’ll start lessening the sedation over the next little while. Given his sensitivity to morphine, I’m expecting some nausea and maybe the shivers but, we’ll deal with that as it arises.”

“Do you have to go back to work?” Diana asked, frowning slightly.

“No, no this is it for today, I called in some favours,” Maryam said.

“How much is this costing you?” Diana asked. She had done so before; Maryam always evaded the question.

This time, she shrugged.

“Unless someone better comes along, they’re going to ask me to be a chief of pulmonology eventually,” Maryam said. “And I won’t be able to say no. I’ve been convinced I could maybe do it well so, it wasn’t my plan but it’s not a bad thing. But it would be worth it, even if I really hated the idea.”

Diana absorbed that. “If I hug you, it will make you cry, yes?”

“Oh god, yes, please don’t. When I’m out of scrubs and everything, you can hug me as much as you want,” Maryam said. She looked at Diana. “You can touch Steve, you know. Just be careful of the monitor. It will be good for him to know you’re there when he’s coming out of sedation. He might be in and out for a while. That’s to be expected. He’s going to need a lot of rest while he’s recovering.”

Diana thought it would have been impossible for her to keep track of how long she stayed at Steve’s side, with her hand on his arm or on his forehead. Still, even as Maryam and the nurses came and went.

She had no idea how long it took but she knew the moment Steve drifted back toward consciousness. She always knew. She leaned over him, watching as his face creased and his eyes open, just barely, confused slits of blue and blown pupils. He took a shuddering breath into the oxygen mask. He was clearly in pain but something in his face relaxed when he realized she was there.
“I am right here, beloved,” Diana said, resting her hand on his forehead. “Everything is well.”

Chapter End Notes

Definitely don't expect a double update like this again for, uh, probably ever? This is just a weird coincidence.

Another weird coincidence is the Star Wars mentions and posting this on the night Last Jedi is released. I didn't mean to do that.

This chapter is NOTHING like I thought it was going to be when I started writing it. It was mostly going to be about Steve and Maryam's relationship, which, that totally didn't happen.

I am faking with all the medical shit. I did research but I SUPER don't know what I'm talking about.

The magical mumbo jumbo stuff will be explain in a later chapter. Sorry, we're still only half way there!

I hope everyone likes Maryam. I'm so very fond of her.

As always, I really, really appreciate reviews!
Early 1950s through late 1960s - various locations

A year after Charlie died, Steve and Diana came back to London. They had spent the last five months on the French coast. Diana thought she might like it better than England and while Steve wasn’t so sure — he was still more partial to cities in general and London in particular — he would admit it had felt easier, being there.

Besides, it was near enough that they got frequent visitors. Even Ed could be persuaded to travel that far and the first time Sameer and the family had taken the ferry over he had sworn up and down he was going to retire to the house down the road from the one they were renting.

But London had one major advantage.

Their theatres kept casting Sameer.

They were small parts at first, then supporting roles. Steve and Diana returned every time no matter how minor the role or how short the run.

Steve went in his wheelchair when he had to. He wouldn’t have missed a performance for anything.

They had moved on to Rome — Diana was having a minor love affair with the city, Steve didn’t entirely share her feelings — when Sameer called them, so excited he was speaking rapid fire French.

His big break had come.

Sameer was not anyone’s first choice, nor even their second or third. In the end, that did not matter. Just two years after Charlie died, Sameer walked onto a London stage in the robes of a king and spoke the line: “Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.”

Steve and Diana attended opening night, of course. Steve’s heart was in his throat the whole time. He took Diana’s hand as soon as Sameer walked on stage and didn’t — couldn’t — let go until intermission. When Lear died, there were tears streaming down his cheeks; he just couldn’t stop them. He got up so fast to applaud when the cast took their bows that he nearly threw his hip out.

Diana could only see it once. Steve understood. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy it, he didn’t think but...they had been through so many tragedies of late. Steve understood not seeking out more, even in fiction.

But Steve couldn’t stop going. Sometimes with Farah, sometimes with Etta and Ed when they could be persuaded into town. He just...Sameer was so proud and he was so good and seeing that, seeing him getting everything he deserved, Steve didn’t want to miss a moment of it.

Sameer laughed at him for it and tried to cajole Steve into going out with him and his actor friends after the show, as often as Steve would let him get away with it. One night he managed to introduce Steve to a friend of one of his artist friends, who was helping track down art and artifacts that had been had looted during the war.
It was not subtle.

“How long have you been planning that?” Steve asked in the cab on the way home.

“Months. I wanted it to be Diana but,” Sameer said, grinning unabashedly and *winking* at him. “You’ll do.”

“Gee, thanks,” Steve said but he wasn’t really complaining and Sameer knew it.

“Diana is bored,” Sameer told him frankly. “And as soon as you stop being dazzled by my outstanding performance—”

“If you do say so yourself,” Steve interjected.

“Oui, but I have the reviews to prove it,” Sameer grinned. “And the number of tickets you’ve purchased.”

Steve rolled his eyes but didn’t deny it. Sameer continued: “You will be bored as well. You’re already bored. This touring around is well and good but the two of you, if you really are going to live forever, you need something to do, some way to help. Or you’ll go crazy.”

“It’s not that simple anymore,” Steve said, shaking his head.

“So? You think I was as spry in my second war as I was in my first?” Sameer asked. “You find new ways, my friend. And sooner or later, you're going to find a new cause or it will find you. It's who you are.”

“Besides,” Sameer continued. “You think I don’t know about what you and Diana did during the war?”


“Really? You didn't do the analysis on the information packets you were sent?” Sameer said.

Steve had. Diana had to sleep sometime.

But that had been a temporary arrangement.

“I only ever got into trouble as an analyst,” Steve said.

“Because you were never listened to so you went off and did it yourself,” Sameer said. “You think Diana’s not going to listen to you?”

“She actually doesn't a lot of the time, you know,” Steve said.

“Ah, but not when you're working on the same goal,” Sameer said.

“Did you miss the entire first mission we went on?” Steve asked, incredulous. “Or is your memory starting to go in your old age?”

“No, excuse-moi, I remember it perfectly, just like I remember the first mission we went on,” Sameer waggled his finger at Steve and laughed. “As much as you would like me to forget. No, it is not the same goal when you are trying to stop Maru and she is trying to kill Ares. They were not the same. Do you really think that if you go to her *now* and say there is this thing that will kill hundreds of people but we can stop it, she wouldn't listen to you?”
“Not without good reason,” Steve said. Steve did not add it was because she no longer had any trouble believing in man's inhumanity towards man. He would have preferred she not listen to him, ever, if it had meant she hadn't had to learn that lesson.

“I do not understand what the problem is then,” Sameer said. He put his hand on top of Steve's arm and said more seriously. “It will be difficult, yes, but it could also be worth it.”

Steve did not always agree with him but he had always listen to Sameer’s instincts and ideas. “Okay, Sami. We'll see what Diana says.”

Sameer arranged a dinner party so Diana could meet his friend of a friend, and several others, a week later. He watched, beaming, as they fell into a conversation that did not end until all the other guests had left.

Steve would not deny that it presented opportunities. And Diana had experience.

Ares had accumulated a great deal of wealth over the years, much of it through ill means and off the books. When they returned to England after WWI, Etta had led Charlie, Chief and Sameer in tracking it down to its very dregs. They seemed to think it was Diana’s right to decide what to do with it as much as it was anyone’s.

Except in a few instances, tracking down where the banknotes and gold had come from was next to impossible. Diana sank the majority of that into recovery efforts post-WWI and anonymously funding hospitals and orphanages where Ares had done the most damage.

Etta had been the one to pull Diana aside and tell her she needed to keep some for herself. Steve had not been without means and had been supporting them with his inheritance then but his funds were by not unlimited and, at the time, they had not known how long he would be in hospital or how much care he would need when he left it. The pension he had been granted was not nearly sufficient to support them, let alone pay for the private nurse they had needed to engage for several years.

After that had been brought to her attention, Diana also poured the money into Sameer and Etta and Charlie and Napi’s pockets too, as much as they would take and more. Even that fraction was more than they would ever need to live comfortable.

The paintings and artifacts they found were a different story. Diana and Etta and the boys had spent years tracking down where they came from — not just the country of origin but the specific people they were stolen from. Everything had been stolen in one way or another.

Diana returned things to their original owners wherever she could. If that was no longer possible — Ares had not been troubled by collateral damage — they went to museums.

Steve had not been involved in any of it. Occasionally he had been able to look at some documentation and offer suggestions but that had been more about giving him something to do when he was confined to bed and bored than because he had any particular insights. Most of them time he had not been able to concentrate enough for it past the pain and the morphine and the exhaustion from trying to get some semblance of his life back.

It left him a little lost at first, when they went back to Rome, then moved on to Germany. He identified a forgery there through sheer dumb luck and everyone they now worked with suddenly thought he knew as much about Impressionism as Diana did about ancient art. Then they moved on to Belgium and then France, which was as good a place to at least attempt to become the expert everyone but Diana — who laughed at him because she liked to tease him even if no one but Etta and Sameer would ever believe it — assumed he was.
Steve was observant, at least. And he had always been good with records, even if it was strange, in the beginning, because he didn’t have to steal them. It was easier to find deviations on paper — he would leave the artwork to the actual experts.

It was a place to start.

Besides, if Diana had had a brief affair with Rome, she fell head over heels for Paris.

It was strange, seeing her fall in love with a city. Steve still remembered her initial reaction to London — hell, she still disliked London — but she had been in man’s world so long now. He supposed you got used to how different it was, after a while, even found the beauty in it.

Steve couldn’t help but fall a little bit in love with Paris himself, watching her. She pulled him along with her, wanted him to share in the smallest discoveries she made — the out of the way patisserie that made the best croissants, a restaurant balcony with the best view of the city, a little, hidden away garden that somehow had the best sunshine all throughout the day.

It was impossible for him not to be delighted by her joy.

He was helpless to do anything but grin around the lip of his coffee cup as they sat in a tiny cafe and as she devoured a tarte tatin. Steve had no experience with French recipes but he would learn just to see that look on her face again.

It made him say, on a whim: “We should move here.”

Diana looked at him with a fork full of tarte in her mouth and raised an eyebrow at him. By the time she swallowed it, the idea had spun out in his brain, become more than just an impulse.

“You don’t want to travel anymore?” Diana asked. She sounded surprised. They were supposed to leave for Switzerland — there was a cache of artifacts in a bank vault whose ownership was in dispute — in a week.

“No, I do,” Steve shrugged and smiled at her. “But you love it here and it’s nice to have a home base. I don’t think we’re getting our house back anytime soon.”

Diana grinned. “Yasmine and Bobby do seem very settled there.”

“They’re talking about kids. It’s a good place for kids to grow up,” Steve said.

“You would not rather our home base was London?” Diana asked.

Steve wasn’t going to lie — he did prefer London. But that was as much about the people there as the city itself.

He had loved Boston too but when all the people he loved were gone it had become a different place for him.

Steve leaned back in his chair and idly turned his coffee cup in its saucer. Diana took another bite of her tarte. He watched her. “I like Paris well enough.”

“But you love London,” Diana said.

“You hate London,” Steve said. He shrugged, looking out at the bustle on the street for a moment before looking back at Diana. “I love London because my family is in London. But you’ve fallen in love with this city and Diana...”
Diana looked up at him and Steve smiled. He leaned forward and reached out, tracing the curve of her cheek for just a moment. Her eyes went soft and dark. “That's more than enough reason to buy a place in Paris.”

“I do love it here,” Diana said and her smile was as close to shy as Steve had ever seen — as if she couldn't believe it of herself, falling in love with a city! “Eventually, I would like to see more of the world but I suspect we will always want a home base in Europe.”

“It’s close enough to everyone else to make me happy,” Steve said. “And we already have a place to stay in London when we need it.”

Diana laughed. “I do not suppose Sameer and Farah would forgive us if we stopped staying with them. And you would not want to stay anywhere else.”

“No,” Steve said with a smile. He picked up his coffee cup again, pleased. “So, we can start looking when we get back from Switzerland.”

Diana’s eyes crinkled just so when she smiled like that. They were alight with possibilities, Steve thought. “You already know what neighbourhood you want, don't you?”

She smirked at him and took an almost dainty bite of her tarte. There were crumbs on her bottom lip. “I will take your opinion into consideration.”

Steve laughed, delighted. God, he loved her. He would follow her anywhere, everywhere she wanted to go.

“I love you,” Steve said. “I would follow you anywhere. I would rather not live in Pigalle.”

Diana had been taking a sip of her water. She snorted and nearly did a spit take when he said that.

“You are not a nice man,” Diana told him even as she took his free hand and twined their fingers together. “I love you.”

“I can live with that.”

The trip to Switzerland took longer than either of them expected — Diana had thought getting the artifacts back would be easier, still less jaded and suspicious than Steve; Steve had been a little too confident in his sleuthing ability and was hampered half way through the trip by a cold that confined him to the hotel for nearly two weeks.

When they came back — eventually, begrudgingly successful — they started house hunting.

It felt a little strange — neither of them had ever done it before. Steve had lived in his family’s home until he left Boston, then barracks, then an apartment Etta arranged, and then the house Etta had arranged that neither of them had seen until after it had been purchased. On Themyscira, Diana’s rooms had been part of the Queen’s suite, though more and more separate from her mother as she had grown. Before Steve had been able to come home, she stayed in hotels close by whichever hospital he was in.

It was different, looking for a place together.

They found it by accident in the end.

They had been coming back from checking out a house — Diana hadn’t liked it because it was too dark and Steve hadn't because of all the stairs — and were almost to the metro when they stopped to
help an old woman with her groceries.

The apartment building she lived in was half empty. It was structurally sound but it had taken some damage during the war — not so damaged that it needed to be completely rebuilt or so untouched that it would be quick and easy to fix — and fallen into neglect after.

As Steve had gone to leave, already thinking of the next place and the next place they had planned to see, Diana grabbed his hand and stopped him.

She was looking up at the unusually high ceilings of the entrance way. She didn’t have to say anything. Following her gaze, Steve could see the detailed molding and traces of paint beneath a layer of grime.

Steve looked at Diana while she was still taking it in. Her nose was crinkling because her smile was so wide. He looked around again, letting himself really see the possibility of the place instead of rushing past it.

When he looked at Diana again, she was watching him and grinning. Steve didn’t know how it was possible to do anything but smile back when she looked at him like that.

“She said that the penthouse was still empty,” Steve said, tilting his head towards the stairs. “Want to check it out?”

The elevator was out of service and looked like it had been for some time but the halls were silent and it took less effort for Diana to leap up the middle of the stairwell with Steve in her arms than it took for Steve to pick the lock of the penthouse doors when they got to the top.

The apartment was completely barren and covered in dust. The floors were a mess and the windows were boarded up all along one side of the building.

But on the other side they had been left alone and light poured inside. The ceilings were high and the floorplan was open. Steve watched as Diana walked into the middle of the room and looked around.

He knew just from looking at her that she liked how light and open it would clearly be if the windows on the other side were fixed. She hated how dark and cramped a lot of the houses they had seen had been.

Steve followed her inside. There didn’t look like there were any stairs in the apartment itself. That was an immediate selling point for him.

Steve thought it had...potential. It looked like a good space but it was going to need a lot of work.

“Steve!” Diana called.

He followed her deeper into the apartment, into what he couldn’t imagine using as anything other than a bedroom. The windows needed replacing but there was a balcony off of it. The adjoining bathroom would need to be completely redone but he could see how big and inviting it could be.

“Bookshelves along that wall,” Diana said, pointing to a corner. “And an armchair.”

“An armchair that’s just going to end up covered in your clothing,” Steve said, grinning at her when she huffed at him. They were going to need large closets — Etta or Farah or both of their forces had finally won the battle of getting Diana to enjoy clothes shopping “There’s a good room for a study down the hallway.”
“I saw that, there are no windows,” Diana said, her forehead wrinkling.

“I know, it’s entirely internal.” The thought pleased Steve made more than it should have. “We can make it as secure as possible.”

Diana snorted. “Spy.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve said, giving her a little salute that made her giggle.

He wandered out to the main room again while she went back down the hall, opening and closing doors, exploring. He stopped and stood in the middle of what could potentially be the living room, looking out through the glass balcony doors that had been half boarded up.

It was a good space. It was the first one Diana had shown enthusiasm for, the first one that she clearly thought could be more than just a place to hang their hats.

But it would obviously take a lot of work. The apartment alone didn’t look like it had been lived in for years and the building itself...They needed to see if the elevator could be fixed to start or it wasn’t feasible for him to live there, Diana couldn’t always be there so he could skip the stairs. And Steve knew if they fixed one thing, they weren’t going to be able to stop there, they just weren’t those kind of people.

Steve leaned against his cane. He could picture a wrought iron table, out on the balcony, with flowers on it — Diana sitting there, with steam rising from her coffee cup. She would be able to watch the sunrise from the bedroom balcony, which Diana would love and Steve...well, that's what curtains were for.

Steve could see why it had caught Diana’s attention. The molding, the layout, it was open and all clean lines and rounded edges, everything she preferred. Their house in England had felt too narrow and cluttered even to him some days.

Here, there were solid bones to build on.

For some reason, Steve thought of his father — who had started out as a poor merchant, more name and business sense than means. He had made it good, in the end, fuelled by a desperate need to prove himself and provide for his family, even if it was tempered by the sense of injustice he felt, like a stone in his shoe, always nagging at him even when it was never quite enough to break the skin.

It was that sense, and Steve’s mother — who felt injustice more like a knife than a stone and who had taught Steve through example when to hide and when to strike — that had tempered his father, and made him turn away from the more ruthless enterprises that could have catapulted the family into the nouveau riche instead of hovering just outside the boundary of it.

Steve had always been aware of the undercurrent of expectation that was placed on him. They had the money to invest in him to make the leap into upper class respectability the right way. The way that hadn’t been available to his parents because his father had too much heart and his mother had had too much sense to take the route of the Carnegies...or even the Macys.

It was that expectation that made him adaptable — taught him how to blend in. It made him a good spy, even as the bedrock of the morals they had taught him sometimes made him a bad one.

Steve wondered what they would have thought about him now. He had done everything he could — which, at the time, largely meant leaving it in Etta’s hands — to secure his and Diana’s future with his inheritance when it looked like he would never be able to work again. It was Diana’s unlooked for fortune that let them live more than comfortably. They weren’t in society the way Steve knew his
parents had wanted for him, for the family, but he had always despised that and the world was so
different now.

He thought — hoped — the things they had done together mattered more.

And what they could still do, going forward.

He tapped his cane on the floor. It needed refinishing, maybe a bit of repair work but...

Diana came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He didn’t even have to turn to
see how brightly she was smiling as she tucked her face against his neck and kissed him. Steve
turned his head, not quite able to look at her but so his cheek was pressed against her forehead for a
moment.

“We should buy the building,” Steve said.

Diana laughed and pulled back to look at him. Steve reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear
when it had come loose. He really did love the way her nose crinkled when she smiled like that.

“That seems rash,” she told him, teasingly but not dismissively.

“It may not even be for sale,” Steve said. “And it might be too much. We should definitely still look
at the other places we planned to but, if we decide this is what we want, we should buy the building.
I’m pretty sure this neighbourhood is only going to get more popular and someone will fix this
building up sooner or later. Sameer’s nephew works in construction, I think, or Etta had that contact
she liked who does. If we do it right, the rest of the apartments would probably go pretty fast and we
could freeze rent for the old tenants, we don’t want to force anyone out and—”

Steve stopped talking when Diana kissed him until he was breathless.

When they had to part, the look in her eyes made him seriously consider — just for a moment — the
dingy floor of the apartment that clearly hadn’t been lived in for years. He might have considered it
for more than a moment, but when she looked at him like that, he always wanted to take his time and
worship her.

“I’ll make some inquiries,” Steve said, still half-breathless. “We don’t have plans for the rest of the
day, do we?”

Diana’s smile was sly and pleased. “No.”

“Good,” Steve said and took her hand.

Diana slowed when they were nearly to the front door, passing by the closed kitchen door. “The
kitchen might be too small.”

“So we can make it bigger,” Steve said. Then, he admitted: “The kitchen reminds me of my
grandmother’s.”

Diana paused, just to kiss him again, softly. Or she tried to. Neither of them were in the mood for
softness.

Steve ended up with his back pressed against the wall and his hands tangled in Diana’s hair.

“I’m not planning on leaving the bed for the rest of the day,” Steve told her, when they managed —
just — to take their hands off each other for a moment. “But I’d like to get there first.”
Diana paused for long enough that Steve knew, he just knew, that she was considering whether or not she could fly them there without being seen. He laughed, giddy with the feeling of possibility before them and the warmth of her body pressed against his.

Diana snorted but then laughed too. They managed to untangle themselves and he locked the door behind them as they slipped out before hurrying to the street to hail a cab.

A year later they moved in.

Etta moved in with them.

They had been visiting London, again — Sameer was playing Prospero — when Etta called as frantic as Steve had ever heard her.

Ed had had a heart attack.

He died in hospital two days later, having never woken up.

Etta did not handle it well. It was like she aged a decade in front of their eyes; Steve thought the only thing that had taken more from her was the war.

When her daughter tried to take Etta home, after, it went...badly. Etta had always been stronger, the strongest, Steve sometimes thought, of the five of them that had made it through all of the war together, in one way or another. But Ed had been her comfort; he had been devoted to her for nearly forty years.

Steve knew what it was like to lose someone like that. He had buried his mother, sold everything and left the country.

After the funeral, Etta came back to Paris with them.

Her children, though well-meaning, were smothering her, Etta said. She needed a change, she said. Diana and Steve hadn’t even had to look at each other before Diana was inviting her home with them, for as long as she wanted and Steve was reaching out to take her hand.

But...she was quieter. Steve expected it but it still unnerved him more than he wanted to admit. The spectre of Charlie’s death felt uncomfortably close and Steve knew it was different. It felt different. Of course Etta was going to be sad and quiet, she was grieving her husband of thirty years, she had known Ed since they were little more than children.

Steve just felt...helpless in the face of it. He tried to keep it from Etta — she hardly needed his worries on top of her grief — but it made him seem more distant than he wanted to be.

Diana was better with Etta’s grief than he was. Etta had been there for her when Diana thought Steve was dead and in the early days of his recovery when they weren’t sure he would survive. Neither of them dealt well with not being able to do something to fix things but Diana understood better that they couldn’t, that company was all they could give her, sometimes.

Steve tried to distract her, tried to get her interested in the work the were doing but it just made her shut him out even more. They had planned a trip to Germany months ago to follow up on a lead but Etta just...wasn’t interested and they weren't about to leave her behind.

Steve ended up staying in Paris. The German lead involved exploring an abandoned mine. Unless they wanted to cancel entirely, Diana was the one they needed.
Without Diana in the apartment, it was uncomfortably quiet. Between them, they had been able to fill in the strange silences in conversations where they both knew Etta would have spoken before. Steve tried but he was avoiding talking about the research he was doing, and Ed, and Etta’s children...

It got very quiet the first couple days after Diana left.

Steve hated it. He was so frustrated. With Diana gone and Etta silent, he threw himself into his other project.

It was the only excuse he had for letting himself be so sloppy.

Steve and Diana had left quite a few things behind in the attic of the house Bobby and Yasmine now lived in when they moved to Paris. Steve’s uniform, Diana’s old, out-of-fashion clothing, the maps and guidebooks with a route around the British Isles they would never travel.

But Charlie’s trunk and the books inside, had come with them.

The books were sorted now. Steve had four categories: mentions of Themyscira, possible mentions of Themyscira, fictionalized mentions that might be based in fact, and duds.

There were only two duds. Steve was fairly sure Charlie had abandoned the project — he didn’t know why, why he had abandoned it, how he had started, why he hadn’t said anything, Steve would never know any of it — before he finished reading them. Steve was almost certain they contained no useful information.

He still couldn’t bring himself to throw them out.

Steve had added one book of his own — a notebook. At first, it had just contained analysis of the information Charlie identified but...he spent a lot more time in archives than Diana since she was better able to go investigate vaults or mines or possible booby trapped houses.

It wasn't hard to venture into naval records while he was there. He hadn't found much, one clear sighting, a few others that were possibles. The problem was the volume of information to look through.

But he had a few coordinates now and he had started plotting them out on a map.

He hadn't told Diana. He hadn't told anyone. He wanted to be sure first.

Last night, when he was plotting things out, Steve had thought for the first time that he was starting to get somewhere. He wasn’t convinced it would lead anywhere useful but it was something. He had stayed up late, trying to finish, but he had been so tired he hadn't cleaned up and left the study door ajar.

When he got up — having slept until mid-morning — the door was wide open and Etta was leaning over the map he had spent the previous night carefully labelling with coordinates.

She caught sight of him and straightened, her hands on her hips and, oh, that brought on such deja vu Steve worried for a moment if he had taken too high a dose of painkillers last night — the cold snap they were having meant his hip ached constantly — and was having a very vivid dream.

“Steven Trevor,” Etta said, exasperated. “What on earth are you up to?”

She sounded more like herself than she had in months. Steve could have cried.
Etta saw it in an instant and completely misinterpreted. “Are you all right? Is it your hip? You should have called me.”

“No, no. I’m fine,” Steve said quickly. “Just slept later than I expected. I, uh,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, “I think I’m going to need coffee for this.”

Etta did not look pleased but she allowed it. Steve made coffee, for both of them, and breakfast for himself while Etta relocated the map and his notebook to the kitchen table and spread them out.

“Explain it to me,” Etta said. “Diana hasn’t said a thing so it can’t be trip planning — I’ve heard everything about those plans. And if the Nazis had hidden painting at the bottom of the ocean you would have said something as part of your efforts to get me out and about.”

Steve looked at her, a bit embarrassed and a bit exasperated. Etta looked right back at him, her gaze flat and unwavering.

But her interest was piqued.

“It’s my inheritance from Charlie,” Steve said. Etta winced and Steve understood that. He felt it too. “Maureen gave it to me at the funeral.”

“I remember,” Etta said. “You said you thought they were war memoirs.”

“I did think they were memoirs,” Steve said. Etta was in spy mode. Steve recognized it. He didn’t want to give her any reason to doubt him. “And I didn’t...check right away.”

Etta grimaced. She put her hand over Steve’s. “Ah, Steve.”

Steve sighed and shook his head, even as he laced their fingers together. Etta’s had felt so much more fragile the past few years. “You’re not going to like the next part. I had a weird feeling about it and...I’m assuming you know, that some of the letters I got from Charlie towards the end, some of the things he said to me—”

“I got those too,” Etta told him. Her voice was very dry. “When he decided to remember me at all.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped. “Aw hell, Etta.”

She patted his hand again. “I’m assuming you never said anything because you were trying to protect me?”

“Less you than Sameer,” Steve said. “He wasn’t as bad about you. I didn’t think it was because he was writing you directly.”

“Mine were mostly phone calls. He was always soused, mind,” Etta said. “I refused to take him on when I went back to Intelligence. He quite resented that.”

“He stopped calling after...” Etta took a breath and looked away, almost mumbling. “When I reached the end of my patience, Ed, er, Ed tried to talk him down, the once. Patience of a saint, my Ed, but Charlie never called back after that.”

Her voice wobbled and she blinked rapidly for a moment. Steve squeezed her hand tightly and edged his chair closer. “He was really—”

“No, you’re not distracting me, Steve,” Etta told him. She wiped her eyes and looked at him squarely. “It wasn’t memoirs.”
“Most of them were just not the type I was expecting. They were naval memoirs or diaries,” Steve said, pressing on, ignoring the way his heart sank. “There was a note in one of them, it had to be five years old at least. It said ‘Themyscira, talk to Steve.’”

Etta stared at him.

“He never said anything to me,” Steve said. “I don’t know why. But there are about twelve books in there with references that could be Themyscira. I plotted out the six coordinates I’m fairly sure of last night. Plus the last one I saw before my plane went down and the first one I could get when we sailed out.”

He gestured to the map. Etta looked and frowned at it. She put her hand over the closest one, marked by a dot in pencil, the coordinates and date printed neatly underneath.

“None of them are the same?” she asked.

“That’s what I thought,” Steve said. “None of Charlie’s coordinates have been the same but I started looking at records myself and last week I found one that matches one of the ones he found.”

He tapped on the spot. There were two dates listed under the set of coordinates.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Etta said, her brow furrowed in concentration. She looked up at Steve, squinting the way she did when she was putting pieces together. “Unless...you complained about your equipment being damaged because there were such discrepancies from when you crashed to when you left.”

Steve nodded. “But everything seemed to work fine once we were on open water and there was no way it should have been that close to England given that I fled from Turkey.”

Etta squinted at the map a moment longer, her fingers drifting over the pencil marks.

“It moves,” she said finally, looking up at him.

Steve couldn’t help but grin. “That’s the only thing I can think of. It’s a magic, shielded island. Of course it fucking moves, which presents any number of problems if you’re trying to find it again.”

He sighed, long suffering. Etta snorted. “Predictive properties?”

“None that I could see until last week,” Steve said, tapping the marked point with two dates listed again. “Those are 63 years apart. I’ve only got the one point of overlap so it’s still possible it’s completely random but it’s a start.”

“You need more data points,” Etta said.

“I need more data points,” Steve agreed.

Etta tapped her fingers against the map. She looked at it silently for a long time.

“Why haven’t you told Diana?” she asked finally.

Steve exhaled. He pushed his hair back and stared down at the map for a moment.

“I wasn’t sure I trusted the information. Not at first,” Steve said. “Because Charlie didn’t tell me.”

“And because you didn't trust his work anymore,” Etta said, her lips twisting into a grimace. Steve understood perfectly well why she hadn’t taken him on during WWII.
“No, I didn’t,” Steve said flatly.

“But you have your own information now,” Etta said. She sat forward. “Steve, she’ll be so excited.”

“I know,” Steve said. “That’s why I haven’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s been over three years since I started looking for mentions of Themyscira in memoirs, shipping records, whatever I could find. I have found two mentions that I’m confident in,” Steve said. “I have no idea how long Charlie was looking. It could have been years. We have one point that repeats. What if we never find another? What if there’s not another and that was just random coincidence and not a predictive pattern?”

“If I could,” he drew a rectangle with his finger on the table, “open a door and go back to Boston in 1900, just for a visit, just to introduce Diana to my—” the thought made him swallow, “My parents. If I was told by someone I trusted and then they said no, sorry, it was a mistake…”

Etta pursed her lips. Steve knew she was thinking about Ed. After another moment, she nodded.

“You really are too dedicated to reading those silly books with my grandchildren,” Etta said, her voice just a little hoarse.

Steve laughed. “It gives me something to talk with them about. I can’t pick them up and spin them around like Diana can, you know.”

Etta smiled but it only lasted a moment. “I don’t know, Steve. It doesn’t feel right not to tell her.”

Steve sighed. “I know. I’m going to. I just want to have something solid to show her first. I don’t want to give her that hope and then have to take it back. I don’t want to hurt her like that.”

“I can’t help but think if you had said something to me before Ed might’ve been of help,” Etta said the last all in a rush, as if that was the only way she could get it out.

Ed had been navy in the First World War. Steve took her hand again and squeezed it tightly. Then that wasn’t enough and he got out of his chair to hug her.

She waved him away: “I’m all right. I’m all right.”

Steve sat back down and Etta sniffled once and forced a smile. “Well, I suppose I have to have absorbed something from listening to the man all those years. What have you got for me to look at?”

Steve’s heart leapt at the idea, even as he demurred. “Etta, you don’t have to.”

“Nonsense,” Etta said. “I’ve seen how busy you and Diana are with all that,” she waved her hand dismissively, “art stuff. You’ll never get anywhere without help.”

Steve looked at her, bemused. He had been trying to get her interested in helping with that art stuff for weeks.

Etta gave him a look. “Oh for pity’s sake, when have I ever given you the impression I was interested in art?”

Steve laughed. “I’m not particularly interested in art.”

“No, but you are very interested in Diana,” Etta said.
Steve shrugged, not denying it. “I’m not uninterested in art. I appreciate it and I do enjoy the outcome.”

“You enjoy being good at it too, I’d wager,” Etta said shrewdly.

Steve shrugged again. He wasn’t about to deny that. He knew he had been a little vain and that had taken a kick in the teeth after his miraculous but marring survival. He was good at the work they were doing now; he enjoyed being good at it. He wanted to be useful, somehow.

It made Etta smile. “Nothing wrong with that is there?”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. Steve had been a good operative but he knew that Etta had run missions between the wars. He had very little idea of what she had done during the Second World War — only that it had been a step up from that. He knew, too, that Etta would never tell him, or anyone, about it.

If she was willing to help, she would be very good at this.

“I supposed,” she said, still smiling, “you ought to show me what you’ve learned so far.”

Steve took her to one of the archives he had been visiting the next day. He had visited to check cargo lists against an art dealer’s records of sale. The archivists were fairly hands off and generally left him alone. It was fairly easy to...stray into other territory among the stacks.

The archivist who checked them in look at Steve in vague recognition and then raised a bushy eyebrow at Etta in confusion. “Quelle est la raison de votre visite?”

Etta smiled extra kindly at him. She had worn the most grandmotherly clothing she owned.

“Oh! Do you speak English? Dearie,” she said, taking Steve’s arm and looking up at him, “you will translate for me, won’t you, dearie?”

Steve did not try to stop his ears from going pink. The archivist did not look like he quite knew what to do. “I...speak little?”

“Oh good,” Etta said, speaking more rapidly than ever. “My late husband, god rest his soul, always said his father had been a sailor and no one knows better than I that the man could exaggerate but my grandson here,” Etta gripped Steve’s arm very tightly as if he would be amateurish enough to react but also, what the hell, “spends far too much time cooped up in places like this but he mentioned that he saw my husband’s father’s name in a record book when he was doing his research and I would just love to know more about the man and my late husband, god rest him, isn’t here to tell me more tall tales but my grandson, who knows these things, said he would see if we could find out what ships he sailed on.”

The archivist looked slightly stunned. He looked at Steve, who had already effected a look of long-suffering tolerance and began: “Ma grandmère...”

He was cut off with a wave of the man’s hand. He had already effected a look of long-suffering tolerance and began: “Ma grandmère...”

“Quelles boîtes voulez-vous?”

Steve made sure to mumble a bit when he told him as a contrast to the way Etta was beaming. As soon as the man went to get their request set up, he leaned over and hissed: “I am five years younger than you.”

“It is not my fault you fell into the fountain of youth somewhere along the way,” Etta said, her smile
not faulting for a moment.

“Grandson,” Steve repeated, unreasonably irked at the thought.

“I realized half way through I didn’t know if you were using an alias or not,” Etta said.

“I’m not,” Steve told her.

“That’s just sloppy work,” Etta sniffed.

“I’m not a spy anymore,” Steve reminded her. “I don’t need to use an alias.”

“Hm,” was all Etta had to say about that. Steve thought for a moment she was actually going to give him a talking to, which...yes, she had done that a few times when he had first been recruited as a spy and hadn’t actually known how things worked but it had been awhile.

By the time the archivist was back, Steve had forgotten why, exactly, he had been so pleased when Etta had wanted to help.

Etta chatted to him nearly the whole time they were there. She was still smiling when they got back to the apartment. They hadn’t found anything useful — it would take Etta months before she found even a dubious sighting — but they made it through more than twice the material Steve had when he was looking on his own.

It wasn’t a fix — Etta was still...Steve still heard her crying some nights and didn’t know what to do because when he had tried to comfort her, she shut him down completely — but it was something. It was a start.

Diana was supposed to be away for three weeks and Etta laughed at him when Steve began insisting on packing up everything they had been working on at the end of each day a week before she was set to return.

Steve knew Diana, though. He woke up two days later when she slid into bed beside him.

He blinked, still fuzzy with sleep, and turned onto his other side so was facing her. She hadn’t turned on any lights and it was still dark out.

“Time is it?” he mumbled even as he let his eyes drift shut again and curled his arm over her waist. Her skin felt a little cold and he snuggled closer to her to warm it.

“Early,” Diana said. “Go back to sleep

Steve frowned. There was something off about her voice. He just wasn’t sure...

Early, she had said. It was after midnight then. The date clicked in his mind suddenly.

Oh.

Steve opened his eyes, suddenly awake. Diana was looking at him in the dark, heartbroken remembrance in her eyes.

It was their worst of anniversaries. When Steve had told her he loved her, then run away from her, gotten into a plane and intentionally blown himself up.

It wasn’t a date that bothered Steve that much. He remembered the battle at the airfield. He even remembered pointing his gun back at a mass of gas bombs and the feeling of the flames rushing up to
consume him. He remembered searing heat and pain and choking and then...vague coldness, drifting.

But things were hazy after that. He didn’t remember coming back to life and the immediate aftermath of that was mostly blotted out.

It wasn’t the memory of dying that sometimes haunted him.

He had very few memories of his stay in the Belgian hospital, just vague impressions of pain and everything feeling heavy and slow and then Diana. He had been there for months and he had been told he had been fairly lucid for parts of it but he had been on an awful lot of morphine and had been in pretty terrible shape. His worst memories were of the hospitals in England and there were still gaps in those. Even after they had taken him home there were days that were fuzzy because of the pain or the morphine, or because sometimes it was just so hard to breathe.

Diana had thought he was dead for almost a week and when they had found him again, his condition had been so poor the doctors had told Diana that he was still going to die. When he defied expectations, the doctors had told them he could and probably would die at any moment.

That was a terrible thing to carry. Steve hadn't had time to dwell on it; he had been too busy recovering. Diana had been reminded of it nearly every day for years.

And when Diana hurt, Steve ached with her.

“Hey,” he said, bringing his hand up to smooth his fingers over her cheek. “I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.”

Diana turned her head to kiss his fingertips. She took his hand in both of hers and kissed the heel of his palm before pressing it against her cheek. She looked at him, her eyes dark and sad.

Steve wanted to wrap her in his arms and never let go.

“I know,” Diana said.

Steve smiled sadly. “Doesn't really help, does it?”

“It does,” Diana sighed. “But not enough.”

“Yeah,” Steve said.

Her hands had drifted. She let go of his hand, tracing her fingers over his shoulder, the bad one, with the scars.

When she drew back, Steve caught her hand. He kissed her fingers the way she had kissed his. He understood the impulse to check.

“It's fine,” Steve told her. “I don't mind.”

Diana paused. She propped herself up on her elbow and raised an eyebrow at him. “Steve?”

Steve didn’t like his scars being touched. He didn’t like people paying attention to his scars. They were ugly. Steve was aware of what he looked like now, how different it was from what he used to look like.

Diana didn't care; she didn't even really understand it. She loved him so his scars were as handsome as the rest of him. It had helped when he realized that, that she didn't love him in spite of the scarring,
that she loved all of him, which made his scars as attractive to her as any other part of him.

It helped. Even if the rest of the world didn't think the way she did. Even if it still bothered him when he looked in the mirror.

“It's you,” Steve said. “It's fine when it's you.”

Diana smiled at him, the way she did when she was discovering something new. This wasn't new — Diana had been touching his scars absently for years, long enough for Steve to get so used to it, it didn't bother him much anymore.

He supposed he hadn't ever invited her to before.

Diana watched his face very carefully as she lay her hand flat against the thick, discoloured skin where he chest and shoulder met.

“It doesn't hurt,” Steve said because he knew that intent expression well. He shifted so he was laying on his back. “Promise.”

“Steve,” Diana said, a little chiding, to make sure he wasn't just telling her what she wanted to hear.

She ran her thumb down his chest. He could tell she was being gentle but he couldn't really feel it. There was no sensation except maybe a little pressure.

That was the worst of it. Most of the skin had a little sensation it was just...very muted.

“It doesn't hurt,” Steve said again. “It's fine. It doesn't...I don’t have a comparison. It doesn’t really feel like anything.”

Diana frowned a little, laying her palm flat against his chest again and spreading her fingers to that the tips of her pinky and ring finger splayed over skin that actually had full feeling. Steve swallowed.

He didn’t know how to explain to her how much better the lack sensation was compared to the chronic pain he experienced.

But Diana knew him as well as he knew himself. He didn’t have to explain, when she had walked every step of it with him. She leaned forward to kiss his shoulder, the other one, the one that still looked the same as when she had met him, and he trailed his fingers along her hair, just for a moment.

“How was Germany?” Steve asked, when she was propped up on her elbow again, drifting her hand along his side where he would barely feel it. It felt easier now, for both of them.

Diana looked at him with a tiny smile because she knew he was trying to distract her from her sorrows. “Colder than here. And more boring without you there to annoy Jonathan.”

Steve smirked. Diana laughed at him. Jonathan was a...colleague, Steve supposed, who thought Steve was not appreciative enough of art. Steve thought he was mostly just sore about that time Steve had identified a forgery Jonathan hadn’t caught through sheer dumb luck. Their relationship was friendly but...they did like to poke each other a little.

Steve was better at it.

“He said to tell you hello,” Diana said. “He hopes you can’t come to Florence in two weeks either.”

“Etta’s going to come to Florence,” Steve told her. Diana’s face brightened immediately. “So
Jonathan can go suck an egg.”

Diana laughed again, her hair falling into her face. Steve had half lost track of where her hand was, the feeling distant and muted. If he hadn't been so intent on Diana, on making sure she felt better, it might have honestly been a little boring.

But then her fingers began to trace — ever so gently — the scars on his hip, the ones from the surgeries that hadn’t even really worked, thick and uneven and ugly.

Steve tensed and jerked away before his mind caught up to what was happening. Her touch hadn’t hurt, Diana was too careful for that, but there was feeling there. Steve sometimes thought he was more hyper aware of that part of his body than anything else. The impulse to protect himself was overwhelming.

Diana stopped immediately.

“It’s fine,” Steve said, pulling himself together.

Diana looked at him disapprovingly, even as she moved to stroke her fingers over his cheek, away from his scars entirely. “Steve.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Steve corrected. That was true. Flinching didn’t even make any sense. He trusted Diana more than anyone. He didn’t flinch away when she helped him ice his hip after it gave out — though, he did tend to be on a high dose of morphine whenever that happened.

Diana kissed him gently on the lips. Her fingers drifted through his hair. “I don’t think the reaction to pain, even remembered pain, is any more logical than grief is.”

Steve huffed and kissed her. Having his own words said back to him would have annoyed him coming from anyone but Diana.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

“I’m here,” Steve repeated. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know,” Diana said, lighter this time.

Diana’s lips curved just a little. Steve brushed her hair back from her face again. They were very close and he wouldn’t have looked away from her eyes if someone had let off fireworks outside their bedroom window.

“It’s early,” Diana said, resting her head against Steve’s chest. Steve imagined she could hear his heart beating as she wrapped her arm around him possessively. “We should go back to sleep. I did not mean to wake you.”

“I’m glad you did.” Steve’s arm curled around her back even as his eyes drifted shut. Diana was rubbing slow circles against his side, the skin with feeling this time, and it felt good. “I’m glad you’re home.”

He felt Diana’s smile when she kissed his chest. “Me too.”

Steve woke up late the next morning. He was on his side with Diana curled close, using his arm as a pillow. Their legs were entwined and Diana was pretending to be asleep still.
Steve smiled. Diana always woke up at dawn. Sometimes, she decided to stay in bed until he woke up too.

He leaned closer, the few inches between them, to kiss her slowly. When he pulled back, her eyes were open and she was smiling back at him.

Steve thought he would have been quite happy to curl even closer to her and stay there for a very long time. "Morning."

"Good morning," Diana said and kissed him because, Steve thought, he was there and she could.

His hand drifted down her back. He hummed, as if he was considering something. "I think we should stay in bed all day."

Diana chuckled and kissed him again. "I am sure you do."

"You deserve a day off," Steve said and he had been joking but the idea caught in his mind as he said it.

"We have a guest," Diana reminded him. Steve was well aware Diana wasn't going to spend the entire day in bed but she hadn't moved yet.

"Etta's family," Steve told her. "Not a guest."

"Was that supposed to convince me to ignore her for a day?" Diana asked.

Steve hummed. "I guess it's not the best argument."

"No," Diana agreed. She kissed him again. "You said last night that she's going to come to Florence with us?"

Diana sounded so hopeful. They both had been — were still — worried about her.

"Yeah," Steve cleared his throat. "We're working on something."

"Oh?" Diana said. "That Matisse?"

"No, Etta's really not interested in art," Steve said making a face. He traced a pattern against Diana's side idly. "No, it's...a personal project. For us."

Diana looked at him expectantly. Steve hesitated. He didn't like hiding things from Diana but he hadn't lied to Etta, he didn't want to get her hopes up just to dash them.

"I don't want to tell you exactly what it's about yet," Steve said. Diana looked surprised. "It might all be for nothing and if it is...I don't want to hurt you."

"Is Etta all right? Is everyone all right?" Diana sat up. She looked alarmed now. Steve kicked himself mentally.

"Etta's fine. Everything is fine. It's nothing like that, I promise," Steve said quickly. Diana believed him, he could tell, and that was a relief. "It's, uh. It could be a really good thing or a very disappointing thing and I haven't figured out which it's going to be yet."

Diana frowned, looking at him closely. Steve sighed. "I'll tell you if you want me to. If it doesn't pan out...I just don't want you to be disappointed."
“So only you will be disappointed,” Diana said, taking his hand. “And you will be disappointed alone.”

“Not anymore. Etta’s going to be disappointed with me now,” Steve said lightly. Diana did not look amused. Steve shrugged. “It won’t be the same kind of disappointment for me as it would be for you. I’ll mostly be disappointed on your behalf.”

Going back to Themyscira would not have been high on Steve’s list of priorities if he didn’t know how much it would mean to Diana.

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. She lifted his hand and patted it with her other hand before clasping it tightly for a moment. She sighed. “I am not sure I like this.”

“I definitely don’t like it,” Steve said. The last time he had not told her the whole truth it had been about Charlie’s letter and that didn’t feel the same. “I don’t like keeping things from you but if nothing comes from it, nothing changes. A possibility is just removed.”

She tilted her chin up. “You told me once that if you wanted someone to believe a lie, you look them in the eye when you say it.”

He hadn’t looked away from her once.

“It makes most people uncomfortable, forces a false sense of intimacy,” Steve said, with a half-smile.

Diana just looked at him. She was annoyed but waiting. It had never worked on her when he tried to be charming. He only ever tried when he was uncomfortable.

She knew that about him, as rare as it was. It was only because it was rare that she had any patience for it with him.

But only so much.

“You’re hard to look away from, for me,” Steve said, swallowing. “I’ll tell you if you want.”

“You said that already,” Diana told him. She smiled a little. “You can keep your secret.”

“I hope I don’t have to keep it long,” Steve said, honestly.

“I want to know even if it does not go as planned,” Diana said.

Steve blinked. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You do not want me to get my hopes up and then have them dashed,” Diana said. “If I know from the beginning nothing has come of your project, then I will be prepared.”

“You’ll still be disappointed,” Steve told her.

“I have learned to handle disappointment,” Diana said.

Steve exhaled. He rubbed his forehead hard with his thumb. “That breaks my heart.”

Diana kissed the hand she was holding. “It is not something that only man’s world taught me.”

Steve thought of war and Gods and remembered the way Diana looked after that last conversation with her mother as if it were yesterday. But he remembered the tower at the airfield more. And
worse, Veld.

“We can't have helped,” Steve murmured.

“You keep trying,” Diana said. “People everywhere keep trying to make things better. It makes it
easier to believe it can be.”

Steve didn't always believe that but he believed everyone should have that chance. And he believed
in Diana most of all.

“I love you,” he told her.

She smiled at him and leaned back down to kiss him. Her fingers framed his face, then slid past his
temple and into his hair as she kissed him again. “Je t’aime.”

Steve's hands drifted along her sides. “Are you sure you don't want to just stay in bed all day?”

Diana was tempted, Steve could tell, but she kissed him on the nose instead and told him: “I want
crêpés for breakfast.”

Steve groaned and let his head thump back against the pillow. “Those are still a work in progress.”

“Then it will be good practice,” Diana told him with a completely straight face as she got out of bed.

Etta cornered him in the kitchen as he was attempting to make her a semi-presentable plate of crêpés. Diana’s had been a minor disaster but she had smothered them in enough strawberries and ice cream
that she didn’t care. Steve had threatened to throw the whole thing in the bin — it really was an
abysmal failure — but Diana had escaped with it before he could grab the plate.

“You didn't tell her,” Etta said.

“Good morning, Etta,” Steve replied, trying to concentrate on his batter.

“I suppose you're expecting me to not say anything either,” Etta said.

“You know Diana can probably hear us right?” Steve asked as he flipped the — well, it was almost a
crêpé.

“Steve,” Etta said flatly.

“You can tell her whatever you want to,” Steve said, looking at her. “I told her we were working on
something that is going to disappoint her if it doesn't work out. You know my reasoning behind that.
I would prefer you not tell her but if you want to, I'm not going to stop you.”

Etta had an unhappy slant to her mouth. “I don't necessarily disagree with you in the end — mostly.
But if Diana asks me directly, I won't lie to her.”

“If she asks me directly, I can't lie to her,” Steve said mildly. “I won't and she could tell if I tried.”

“The lasso helps, I suppose,” Etta said.

“She doesn't really need it to tell with me anymore,” Steve said, with a slight smile. “She knows me
too well. I did offer to tell her.”

“Hm,” Etta said. “I did not miss your shenanigans, you know. At least you can't give me anymore
grey hairs.”
Steve laughed and leaned over to kiss the side of Etta's forehead. “It’s a shame you didn’t run more than one of my missions.”

“No, it's not. There is a world of difference between acting as your secretary with, hm, additional skills, shall we say? and being a handler. You were an excellent spy but you were a handler’s nightmare — why do you think you reported to Darnell directly? Anyone else would have court marshalled you,” Etta said. “We would have had a falling out over something and not spoken for fifty years. No, it’s better that I was never really your handler.”

Steve paused, frowning, before he could stop himself he asked: “What did really you do WWII?”

“Never you mind,” Etta said, briskly. Dismissively. “I won't be able to talk about that for another hundred years.”

Secrets of the realm, then. Etta wouldn't say a word, not unless the lasso was involved and even then, he wouldn't bet against her lasting longer than he did.

And...Steve wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He cleared his threat. “Hey, listen, what do you want to do today?”

“Bother that archivist some more,” Etta said with a grin Steve knew to fear. “I’ve had an idea I want to pursue.”

“Would you mind if—” Steve started. He didn't want to abandon Etta. “It's, uh, it is the anniversary of, uh, when I—”

Steve saw understanding dawn in her eyes. They went wide and Etta reached out to touch his arm. “I’d forgotten.”

“So had I,” Steve said mildly.

“But not Diana,” Etta said.

Steve shook his head. “I doubt she’ll ever forget it. I was thinking about, I don’t know, doing something to try to keep her mind off it.”

Etta looked at him shrewdly. “You want to take her out a date.”

That was exactly what Steve wanted to do. He just didn’t want to do it in a way that would bother his recently widowed friend. “Something like that.”

Etta’s grin was bigger and more pleased than Steve had seen in months. She tilted her chin up a little. “Well then. As I said, I have an archivist to bother.”

Steve smiled a little, then tried to smother it. “You pretended you don’t speak French, remember?”

Etta affected her slightly wide-eyed, guileless, grandmother look. “Why do I need to speak French? I’m just looking for my husband’s father’s name? There’s no need to speak French for that! My grandson—”

Steve groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. Etta laughed at him, her eyes sparkling.

“Poor dear,” she said, patting his shoulder in a way that was not comforting at all.

“Next archive we go to, we’re making up another cover story,” Steve told her. He flipped one more
sort of crêpé onto the plate he was making for her. It was thinnest one yet but still, he was going to have to work on the recipe more.

“How many of those are you planning to make?” Etta asked, looking at the batter he had left with mild alarm.

“Those are yours. You can take that plate,” Steve told her. He smiled, hearing footsteps in the hallway. “Diana’s going to want another plate full, I guarantee it.”

“Yes, she is,” Diana said from the doorway.

Steve grinned, nudging Etta’s plate closer in her direction. “Give me another ten minutes.”

They had barely finished breakfast before Etta cheerfully steamrolled her way over Diana’s objections and out their door on the way to the archive. Steve couldn’t help but laugh as they were left in her wake.

“You did say you thought having a project would distract her from her grief,” Diana commented. There was a little furrow between her eyebrows. She had absolutely scraped her plate clean.

“Etta and I are alike that way, I think,” Steve said. “And it seems like the only way she’ll let me help her.”

Steve went to gather up the plates but Diana stopped him, putting her arm through his and resting her chin on his shoulder. She didn't say anything, just held on. Steve turned his head and pressed his lips to her hair.

“I was serious about that day off, you know,” Steve said. “We could be lazy and spend the day and bed but I thought maybe it would be nice to go out. It's been awhile since we did, just the two of us.”

“What did you have in mind?” Diana asked.

Steve hadn’t thought that far ahead but he had always been good at thinking on his feet. “Hmm. Too cold for the gardens. We spent a small fortunate at Marché aux Puces and La Mistral just before you left. And I doubt you want to spend time in the catacombs right now.”

“That is not a day off,” Diana told him, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t care how useful the maps you are putting together will be.”

“Yeah, let’s leave a pin in that for today,” Steve said. He took her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “You know, you have spent a lot of time pulling artifacts out of bank vaults and abandoned mines since we moved here but I don’t think we’ve visited the Louvre since before we bought the apartment.”

A smile spread slowly over Diana’s face. “I would like that.”

It was less busy than Steve expected when they arrived. Diana still held his hand as if she expected to lose him in the crowd that wasn’t there. Museums were just about the only place Diana got distracted enough to lose him. They generally had a good peripheral awareness of each other but there were some places and things that just caught Diana’s attention in a way that was special.

Steve had spent quite a bit of time in galleries while he was growing up. His mother had loved art — Steve wondered, sometimes, what she might have been in another time or class bracket — and she had taken her children on endless trips to the Boston galleries. He appreciated art, probably because of that.
But he didn’t love it like his mother had. Like Diana did.

There was something unique and wonderful about watch Diana walk around the Louvre.

She looked like she belonged there.

Steve sat and watched as Diana walked through a hallway full of sculptures. They had walked through once together and then he sat down while Diana went to look closer. She always made sure he saw everything and he made sure to never hold her back.

Besides, when Diana stopped to examine one of the marble figures, she turned her head and the sun coming in from the windows and hit her hair just so...Steve didn’t care that he was sitting in a room full of masterpieces, there was nothing on earth more beautiful than her.

Diana noticed him watching her. She glanced at him and grinned just for a moment before continuing on, a softer version of that smile playing on her lips. Steve imagined he looked similarly smitten. The only other people in the hall with them were another couple and an older, white-haired man with a little girl who was impatiently tugging on his hand. The older man had glanced at Steve and chuckled as the little girl pulled him into the next room.

Diana came back. Steve started to get up but she sat down beside him instead. She put her arm around his waist and leaned into his side. Steve put his arm around her shoulders automatically, it wouldn’t have even occurred to him to do otherwise, and kissed her temple when she rested her head against his shoulder.

They didn’t say anything; they didn’t need to. When Steve had been a spy, he had used silence as a weapon, a way to get people to tell him things because it made them afraid. When he had been a patient, it had meant the worst, darkest kind of loneliness, lying awake and in pain at night, counting down the seconds until it was morning. When he had been a soldier, he had forgotten what it was like, there was never even a moment of it.

Between them, it was comfortable. It was the only time it ever was, for Steve.

The other couple walked from the room, arm in arm. They didn’t even glance at Steve and Diana, oblivious of everything except each other.

Steve kissed Diana’s temple again, then bent down to kiss her smile. When he pulled away, there was a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“This was a good idea,” Diana told him.

“I have those, on occasion,” Steve said, slightly wary.

“We could go over to Jeu de Paume if you are missing your Impressionists,” Diana said, her expression completely innocent.

“Tell you what, I’m going to find out when the next, nearest air show is. We’ll take Jonathan too. See what a real technical and engineering masterpiece looks like,” Steve replied.

Diana snorted and stood, holding her hand out to help him up. She linked their arms together when they were standing, and headed to the next display she wanted to see. “You would have to trick him into going after your stunt on the train ride to Zurich.”

“The man rolled his eyes at me just because I wanted to talk about something other than art for five minutes on a three week trip,” Steve said. “I’m going to pull his leg a bit.”
“You said Impressionism was not your favourite style of art,” Diana said. “He asked, albeit, somewhat...”

“Snottily,” Steve offered.

“Somewhat impolitely, what style of art you did like,” Diana continued. She was grinning again. It was infectious, Steve felt like laughing. “And you spent the remaining two hours of the train ride extolling the virtues of modern aviation, with an hour devoted to the Spitfire alone.”

“He asked,” Steve asked.

“I will never forget the expression on his face,” Diana told him. “And I do not believe for a moment you didn’t believe every word you were saying.”

Steve shrugged and repeated: “He asked!”

“You are incorrigible,” Diana said but she was still grinning at him.

They ended up at La Mistral after Diana had had her fill of the Louvre, wandering the shelves until the proprietor raised his eyebrows at the sheer number of books he bagged up for them and the ease with which Diana carried that. After that, the market near their house, where they had made friends with just about all of the vendors. Steve chatted easily with everyone, using his knack for remembering details to keep track of everyone’s family and asking after them by name.

Diana — she was just Diana, carrying everyone along with her enthusiasm. The patisserie mistress shoed her husband into the back to get her a better box of eclairs and the fruit seller all but forced a bag of pears on Steve and instructed him on just how he was supposed to prepare them as Diana ate one as a sample. They all knew that if they found something Diana liked, Steve and Diana were going to buy it in generous amounts.

Diana and Etta chatted in the kitchen while Steve was making dinner — Etta hadn’t found anything new but she seemed to have enjoyed tormenting the archivist and had come home in the mood to tease Steve. After dinner, Etta insisted on making tea — Steve still didn’t do it right, apparently — and they sat in the living room, the curtains pulled back from the windows, looking out over the lights of Paris.

Steve was exhausted, pleasantly so, but exhausted. One moment he was listening to Etta recount with great enthusiasm the a rather embarrassing story about introducing Steve, a spoiled American, to the wonders British cooking during the war — then Steve blinked and opened his eyes to Diana crouched in front of him, her hands framing his face.

“Mm. Didn't meant to fall asleep,” Steve mumbled, rubbing at his eyes.

“You were tired,” Diana said, as she helped him to his feet. Steve wasn't sure where his cane was, he leaned on Diana instead.

“Do you want a pill?” Diana asked, when Steve was sitting on their bed, undressing.

“No,” Steve answered. His hip was aching and he wouldn't sleep well but... “You're more likely to have nightmares tonight and I don't want to be so doped up I sleep through it. Besides, this would be the fourth night this week. You know how I hate that.”

“Steve,” Diana said. She wasn't protesting, just checking.

“I'll take it easy tomorrow,” Steve said. “I'd rather do that. I would have been fine if it weren't so cold
Diana looked at him for a moment. It was a look Steve recognized, a little bit of sorrow, still, and regret, and still a hell of a lot of frustration but mostly acceptance. It wasn’t aimed at him and Steve didn’t take it as such. It was just the way things were. All they could do was accept it and keep moving forward.

“Okay,” Diana said before kissing him, slow and sweet. “We will sleep in tomorrow.”

“If you’re home this early, I bet we have to meet with Jonathan tomorrow,” Steve reminded her as they got into bed.

“Jonathan can wait,” Diana told him. “I don’t care how much you like to tease him.”

Steve laughed. “Spoilsport.”

Diana curled tight around his back, holding him more securely than she really needed to, her arm heavy around his chest. He put his arm over his and laced their fingers together, squeezing once.

“I’m right here,” Steve said. He would repeat it as many times as she needed him to. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Steve could feel her breath on the back of his neck just before she pressed her lips there. “I know.”

Etta stayed with them for the better part of five years. They visited London at least every six months — if they went any longer without visiting, Sameer called and sounded very hangdog until they planned a visit. Etta usually stayed with one of her children, then, and spent time with her grandchildren. Every time, Etta said she was going to stay a little and look into selling the house, maybe finding an apartment close to of her children.

Every time, she was back in Paris within a few weeks.

At some point, Steve thought Etta must have had some kind of conversation with her children because they stopped pushing her about it quite so much. And her grandchildren starting spending part of their summer holidays with them.

Steve actually really enjoyed that — they went back to renting a place on the coast. Sameer and Farah joined them, except when Sameer was in a show and sometimes the girls did too, a couple summers they even convinced Charlie’s daughter, Margaret, to bring and her family. It was almost idyllic.

Steve’s worried became more absent. It nagged at him like a toothache, the thought that they were too alike and that Etta was reacting just like he would. That there had to be something more they could be doing than just offering up a distraction.

The problem was, Steve didn’t have anything else to offer. He had done the same thing in 1914, tried to just leave his life and his grief behind. Paris had been a hub of aeronautics then and it seemed a world away from Boston and everything he knew.

But he had run right into a war.

Steve had known even at the time that it wasn’t an escape from the griefs he was carrying around with him. But people had been dying and it was anathema to him to stand aside and do nothing when he might be able to help stop it. He tried, at first. He couldn’t be drafted into service, then, and there were still places where it was possible to pretend, even in Europe. Steve had learned early on that
there were always ways to turn your head and ignore the suffering of others.

He just couldn’t do it.

The war had ended up blotting out his other griefs, sure, but only because it replaced them with ones that were a hell of a lot worse.

Etta...mentioned Ed, sometimes, but briefly. She wouldn’t talk to them about it, wouldn’t even acknowledge she was avoiding going home, back to the house.

They talked about Themyscira instead.

“Another reference to Sirens. This one seems rather too outlandish to even go in the maybe column. None of the other commonalities we’ve been finding either,” Etta sighed, placing a heavy log book on the desk and then thumping her head on top of it. “Do you think your mother-in-law will appreciate that comparison?”

Steve’s mind snagged on the idea of Queen Hippolyta as his mother-in-law for a moment. Etta laughed at his expression and he glared at her. It was hardly the first time she had said it — she had quickly learned it was useful if she wanted to derail his train of thought.

“Hard to tell,” Steve answered, pinching the bridge of his nose before returning to shuffling through the sheaf of loose leaf reports he had. “I wouldn’t say I got to know her that well between the interrogation and Diana sneaking me off the island.”

Etta snorted. “As first impressions go...”

Steve bit back the impulse to remind Etta she had upended her future mother-in-law’s tea set on their first meeting. It would only make her go stiff and silent again. “Yeah, yeah...”

Steve stretched his neck back and forth and regarded the books and papers spread out on the desk before them, piled up on corner of the map marked with the coordinates they were relatively confident in. They had added a few — a very few — more since Etta had taken it on as nearly a full time project and at times it still seemed insurmountable.

It felt a little hopeless right then, with it all laid out before them. They rarely got the chance to do that but Diana had gone to Frankfurt without Steve for two weeks.

They had just returned from an extended trip to parts of North Africa and the Middle East last week. Sameer had had six months between contracts and wanted to show them the country his parents were from. Once they had started planning, Farah mentioned that she had not been back to the city in Tunisia her grandparents were from since she was a child. Etta had joined them as well and the trip had spiralled from there.

They came back to a series of messages from Jonathan asking for Diana's help with some recently located looted antiquities that had been found in Frankfurt and Steve had had to say no. In another month, they were going to London for Sameer's next premier and Steve didn’t think his body was going to keep up with him if he tried to do all three trips. He needed some recovery time.

That didn’t mean Diana had to stay. If there was one thing Steve had been adamant about when they started this, travelling, working together again, it was that Diana not let Steve hold her back. He needed the recovery time between their trips; she wanted to go help.

So she went and he stayed. It was the best solution they had available to them.
“I wish we had had more time in Constantinople,” Etta said, putting the tomb she had been reading, picking up another one. “We hardly got any time to look in state archives let alone any private ones.”

“Hm. That archivist did take a shine to you,” Steve said. “I’ve never felt quite so superfluous.”

“I think he was just pleased I knew what I was doing and didn’t ask him to translate,” Etta said. She didn’t look up from her book. Steve peered at the faded print on the cover — it was a logbook from a Massachusetts whaling company. Where had she even found that? “You got to be my assistant instead of my grandson this time. That should please you.”

“It would please me more if you would tell me where and when you learned to read Ottoman Turkish,” Steve said.

Etta ignored him. It hadn’t been the first time he had asked. Steve had some very limited — and German accented — Turkish. Sameer had taught him some conversational Arabic and Farah had taught him how to swear in two Berber dialects. But he couldn’t read any of it.

Etta could. Well enough to get by without a translator. Steve had no idea when or how she had learned. And, as with anything else he assumed was related to her WWII work, Etta was not talking.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose again. There was a dull ache in his head from the tiny, slanted text he had been staring at for hours now, and a sharper one in his hip.

He sighed. “I need a break.”

“Mmm,” Etta glanced up, squinted and pursed her lips. She motioned to her own face. “You’re getting pinched looking around the eyes.”

“I’m not surprised,” Steve said. He winced as he pushed himself up from the chair. Etta had buried her nose in the logbook again. “Are you going to keep at it?”

“Mmm,” Etta said. She didn’t look up again. “Just for a little while longer, I think.”

Steve knew that meant she would still be at it when he came back. He didn’t try to persuade her to take a break too — he had learned better than that by now. He left her to it while he stretched, took a hot bath, then debated and ultimately took a nap. Steve had managed well for most of the trip but towards the end the feeling that they were running out of time had started to press on all of them, and he hadn’t paced himself as well as he should have. Exhaustion lingered from that — Steve just counted himself lucky his hip hadn’t gone out.

When Steve woke up, it was later than he would have preferred and he didn’t feel as rested as he would have liked. He forced himself up, still feeling groggy and grimacing at the way his hip twinged with every step, and got dressed again. Neither of them had stopped for lunch, earlier, and Steve somehow doubted Etta had stopped to eat while he was napping. He went to see if she wanted dinner early.

“Did you eat?” Steve said as he pushed the ajar study door the rest of the way open. “I bet you didn’t. I can make—”

“I’ve found it,” Etta said.

Steve stopped and stared. Etta was beaming, though she also looked strangely pale. “What?”

“I’ve found it, the way to get back,” Etta repeated. She looked down at the map, then back at Steve, and then pointed to the map again. “It’s there every twenty-one years, not every sixty-three. Stays for
at least twelve hours. Look.”

She pushed the logbook from the whaling company forward, opened Steve's notebook and put it on top, then her own where they kept all the references that might or might not be Themyscira, then, finally one of Charlie's books.

“It's all here. We'll use Charlie's as the starting point. There’s sixty-three years difference between that and the reference you found in the same location. Then, there’s the reference we found that's iffy, likely because it's so bloody old. It’s one hundred and forty-seven years before the reference Charlie found. We weren't counting it before but it fits the pattern,” Etta said.

She pulled the logbook out from the bottom of the pile again, looking triumphant. “And I've just found this. They record, ahem: Weather poor. Rain and strong winds. In and out of a strong fog for several hours. Crew morale low due to weather. Several compass reported malfunctioning. Williams and Knox reported as the ship swung about, they glimpsed an island in sunshine. They were remanded to the surgeon for fear of scurvy when they tried to convince the Captain to come about.”

Etta closed it with a snap. “Recorded eighty-four years after Charlie's reference. It could still be random, it could, but I see a pattern. And if I’m right, Themyscira is right there every—”

“Twenty-one years,” Steve finished. He stepped forward and read the entry himself before looking back at the map. He believed Etta, he did, it was just...he had pursued this because he had to, because he couldn’t live with himself if it was possible and he didn’t try to find a way back for Diana. Especially after figuring out it moved, he hadn’t really allowed himself to hope they would actually find it.

“Etta, this is...” Steve said but he couldn’t find the words. He laughed instead and came around the other side of the desk to hug her.

“It’s a good chance, anyway,” Etta said, more demure than he would have expected.

“Better than I was expecting,” Steve laughed. He looked at the other locations they had mapped out. There was only one other place they found with overlap. He did some quick calculations in his head.

“It’s not the same for every location is it?”

“No,” Etta said. “Not as far as I can tell. It may be that it turns up in some spots more frequently or stays in some places for longer but, no, it seems that just this location is every twenty-one years. For at least twelve hours. We would need more data for figure out any further patterns.”

“How do you figure it’s there for twelve hours?”

“Oh, that was easy,” Etta said, waving her hand dismissively. She tapped the logbook. “This sighting was in the morning, on their way back to shore. But then there’s that reference you found of those poor sots caught in a gale. Their first sighting was around midday and tried their darndest to get to the island if only for the calm waters but the ship kept getting swept away. By evening, the storm was gone, their instruments were working again and the island was gone.”

Steve smiled crookedly. Half way through the explanation, Etta’s hands had migrated to her hips and she looked very satisfied with herself. Etta caught his expression and cleared her throat.

“Oh, stop it,” she said but she looked pleased. “I just found the last piece, is all.”

“You’ve done more research than I have since you found out about this,” Steve said. He hugged her again and kissed the top of her head. “I wouldn’t be anywhere close without you.”
“You’ve got your own work,” Etta said. “I only sped things up, I suspect. You would have found it eventually.”

“Eventually being the keyword,” Steve said.

“You had another nineteen years for it,” Etta told him. “If you’ve not done the math.”

Steve hadn’t. There were...complications to that. “I hadn’t, no.”

Etta’s smile dimmed just a touch. Anyone who didn’t know her well wouldn’t have noticed. She rallied again before Steve could mention it.

“You said something about dinner?” Etta said. “I’ll even have a glass of wine with it now that the work is done.”

“I’d say more than one,” Steve agreed. He quickly thought through what he could make with the groceries they had and grinned. “Tartiflette?”

It was basically bacon, cheese, potato and onion. Etta loved it.

“Oh, yes, please,” Etta said. “That’s spoiling me.”

“As you said, you deserve a little spoiling,” Steve said, grinning. He couldn’t wait to tell Diana.

Etta had a glass of wine sitting in the kitchen and chatting with Steve as he made dinner. She had another glass with dinner — Steve had half of one. Afterwards, the took the rest of the bottle back to the study.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’ve hardly had a drop,” Etta said as Steve topped up her glass and poured himself another half glass.

“I can’t mix my pain pills and alcohol, you know that,” Steve said. “Makes my breathing even funnier.”

Etta narrowed her eyes at him. “You’ve already said you’re not having one tonight.”

“No, but I’m going to want one tomorrow,” Steve said. “Besides, I go so long between drinks nowadays it doesn’t take much for me to feel it.”

“Mm,” Etta said and then, more quietly: “It’s depressing to drink alone.”

Ed had fixed an Old Fashioned for both of them just before dinner, Steve remembered. They had the ingredients in the apartment specifically for Etta but she hadn’t touched them, even when Steve offered to make it for her.

“I guess we have become a bit of a dry house,” Steve said. He paused and took a very small sip of his wine. “My mother would be proud.”

“Temperance, was she?” Etta asked dryly.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Didn’t have much luck even in her own house, though. My dad would’ve just gone to the tavern but my grandma thought the whole idea was ridiculous and she wasn’t going to give up her sherry or Toddies for anyone.”

Etta chuckled. “We wouldn’t have won the vote without the temperance woman. I would raise a glass to them but, well...”
Steve laughed. “No, I don’t think they would appreciate that. My mother certainly wouldn’t have.”

Etta smiled but there was a strange look on her face. “You’ve mentioned them more recently. Your parents. Your family.”

Steve exhaled. He had thought of his family more recently because he was trying to find a way for Diana to see hers again. But also because he could feel that kind of loss waiting for him again, with the family he had made for himself.

He couldn’t say that to Etta though. He shrugged, instead. “I guess I have.”

“She’s...” Etta said, looking at him as if he was being willfully obtuse. “You’re so excited for Diana you didn’t even notice where the location we found it is, did you?”

That brought him up short.

“It’s...” Steve frowned because he had known, obviously, he had plotted it himself, but Etta was right, he hadn’t thought about it.

He looked at the map, at the dot they had made in the Atlantic and laughed. It was either that or cry.

“That’s right,” Etta told him and took another gulp of wine, her smile wholly unsympathetic. “Straight off the coast of Massachusetts. You’ll have to figure out how many days out it is. I’m no sailor but you could leave from Boston harbour, I suspect.”

“Of course,” Steve said, rubbing his hand over his face. He looked at the map again, tracing a line with his finger. He didn’t even need to think about it. “Boston’s too far into the bay, you would be a fool to leave from there. You’d leave from Chatham or one of the islands, maybe even go down from Nova Scotia instead.”

He paused. “I would need to look at the shipping lanes to be sure but...I think they avoid it. I’m not sure how that happened.”

“Sometimes I forget that you could keep up with...that you know much about seafaring,” Etta said. There was a slight bite in her voice as she avoided mentioning Ed. “I suspect the sense of unspeakable dread, the impenetrable fog and the instrument failure had people navigating around it. Even if there were only a few rumours to that effect most of the time.”

“Sailors are superstitious,” Steve agreed, ignoring it. He hesitated. “My father made a point of knowing a bit about shipping, more than just when the shipments were supposed to be coming in. He taught me a little.”

Etta was watching him closely, if a little blearily. “You’ve never said anything about wanting to go back.”

“Sometimes I do and sometimes I...don't isn't the right word. Most of the time, it's not something I think of much,” Steve said.

“But you have been lately,” Etta pressed.

“It's been a possibility lately,” Steve said. He tapped his fingers against the desk slowly. “Diana's managed to convince me of that.”

“You were becoming more of a homebody than I ever expected of you,” Etta said. “And you never seemed particularly suited for it, not like...”
Etta stopped abruptly. She finished her glass and filled it with the last of the wine. Steve had been more generous with her glasses than his own.

Steve didn't comment on that. He took his own small sip instead so that she wouldn't feel alone.

“I have thought about going back more recently,” Steve repeated. “I wasn’t sure — I'm still not sure — there's any point. There's nothing that ties me to Boston anymore. Everything will have changed. And...I don't know, I don't feel like the same person as the one who left there.”

“Then why go back at all?” Etta asked. She was looking anywhere but at his face.

Steve was quiet for a long moment, idly turning his wine glass around. Finally, he sighed.

“There are all these things that only I remember now. I don't think there's any stories I have that Diana doesn't know but that's not the same as having the smell and the taste of a place, you know?” Steve said. “And she'll never know my Boston but, she might understand it better, and the parts of it that are still so much a part of me, seeing the place.”

“But do you want to go back?” Etta said. “If Diana wasn't a factor, would you want to go back?”

“I...don't know, there's not...” Steve hadn't even been able to imagine the end of the war, until Diana, let alone what he would do next. “I don't know.”

“It's all tied up with her then,” Etta said, bitterness in her voice. Not directed at Diana or him, not specifically, but...Steve knew loss, he didn't think he would ever know that particular kind of loss.

Steve didn't deny it. The thought of Diana was in everything he did. Even when he made choices that would hurt her because it was the right thing to do — the worst of them being to take out that plane — he made those choices thinking of her, regretting all the ways it could affect her. Diana was always in his thoughts, that did not mean she was his only consideration.

“It is,” Steve agreed.

Etta's eyes welled up. “It was the same with my Ed, you know. I don't think the man ever had a thought that didn't end with 'I can't wait to tell Etta about this.’”

She choked at the end of the sentence and had to cover her face with her hands. They were shaking.

“Etta...” Steve reached out but Etta wouldn't let him take them.

“No,” Etta said. Tears were still spilling down her cheeks but she just wiped them away and sat straighter. “No, if dwell on it too long I'll start to cry and I'll never stop.”

“No one would fault you for that,” Steve told her.

“No, if dwell on it too long I'll start to cry and I'll never stop.”

“No one would fault you for that,” Steve told her.

“But it's not what I want,” Etta burst out. “What good does it do? What good does it do? I don't want to remember him that way — bawling my eyes out at the thought of him. I resent that. I resent it. And don't you tell me I shouldn't.”

Steve swallowed but he knew better than to give Etta platitudes. “I won't. Etta, all we want — all I want to do is help. That's all. It doesn't seem like we are if you can't even talk about him.”

“You can't help. You of all people know that,” Etta said flatly. “I didn't even know you had a sister until Diana told me. The only reason I knew your parents were dead was because I read your attestation papers.”
“I...wouldn't recommend grieving the way I did,” Steve said. “And it's not the same, not exactly. I just felt numb about them, all the time. That's clearly not what you're feeling.”

“I just want to scream all the time. And I don't know when that will stop. I don't even have regrets, you know, about the way we lived, how we spent our time together, I know people do, but I don't and still, it seems so unfair, so unfair,” Etta choked and her hands fluttered useless for a moment before wiping harshly at her cheeks. “I don't want to talk about this anymore. I won't.”

“You don't have to, okay? You don't have to,” Steve said, catching her hands and holding them loosely, so she could pull away again if she wanted. He just had to reach out. “Etta. You don't have to. Listen, I've got more of a plan for the research we've been doing. We can talk about that.”

“You can't know...” Etta gasped. Steve didn't think she had even heard him. She was squeezing his hands so tightly it hurt. Steve was careful not to flinch. “What would you do if it was Diana? You can't tell me...”

“That's not something I worry about,” Steve said, honestly.

That caught Etta's attention at least. “You must have thought about it. You worry when she goes off to do what she does. I know you do.”

“I do,” Steve said. Etta pulled one hand away to wipe her eyes. Steve took the other in both of his and rubbed it, trying to be soothing. “Because whenever I find reasons to hope, people remind me of how terrible we can be. But...I have thought of it. And I don’t think it would take me very long to follow her.”

Etta looked momentarily shocked. “Steven. That's a horrible thing to say.”

Etta didn't sound like she thought it was horrible. She sounded almost envious and a little disbeliefing. Steve understood that. She knew he wasn’t the type to give up in the face of tragedy, even if he couldn’t imagine life without Diana anymore.

But that wasn't what he meant.

Steve shrugged. “I wouldn’t kill myself, if that’s what you’re thinking but we have no idea why I'm...like I am now but Diana’s an Amazon and a demi-god. I'm guessing whatever is keeping me this way couldn't hold out against anything that could kill her. So, on the off chance I outlive her, I don’t really worry about what I would do. Die fighting a fast losing battle against the end of the world, I suspect. I can’t imagine losing her to anything short of that.”

Etta laughed, watery and just slightly bitter. She pulled her hand away and wiped her eyes again. “I'm not sure if that's depressing or not.”

“Like I said, I don't think about it much,” Steve said. He took another swallow of his half glass of wine. He would have liked to have gotten drunk in that moment. He wished there weren’t so many consequences if he did. “It would be more depressing if I thought it was possible.”

Etta tipped some of what was left in her glass into his. Her hand wasn’t quite steady but she still didn’t spill a drop. “You believe in her so much I would call you a fool.”

Steve nodded and said: “But you do as well.”

Etta raised her glass to that. Steve clinked it and took a sip.

Even most of a bottle in and with eyes red from tears, Etta hadn’t poured him anymore than he
should be able to drink without an issue. The amount of care in that casual gesture made Steve swallow.

“I am glad you decided to come stay with us,” Steve said. “And not just because I would be years behind in this research without you. I'd be glad you were here if you didn't want to do anything but laze around in your housecoat.”

“I may take you up on that tomorrow,” Etta said with a tremulous smile. She shrugged and looked at Steve frankly. “I'm happy here. I know I'm getting on in years and I love my kids but I'm not ready to move into a granny apartment. There was a bulwark against that when...”

Her voice wobbled. When Steve squeezed her hand she hesitantly squeezed back. “When it was the two of us. I know they're only worried but I'm not some doddering old woman. Not yet.”

She gave Steve a look that used to make him sit down on the spot and complete however many — licates of paper work as she demanded. Etta had rarely forced Steve into things and had generally along with his seemingly ill-advised plans — they always worked out in the end but he was aware anyone else likely would have tried to kibosh them. When she made a point of being serious, he paid attention.

“I'm confident neither you nor Diana would ever treat me as such,” Etta told him.

“No ma'am,” Steve said, wondering idly if, in a just world, she would have out ranked him in the end.

“Good,” Etta said, and if her lips trembled a little neither of them acknowledged it. “Now, tell me why we're going to spend more time going cross eyed over shipping records?”

Steve raised an eyebrow. He hadn't thought she had picked up on that. He was glad she had. “Diana might be very cross with us for it.”

Etta frowned and tilted her head. “That isn't making you sound the way it should.”

“Diana's going to cross because the idea of deliberately...removing something from the historic record would offend her. Meddling with historic documents would even more,” Steve said. “But you and I are spies. We know the best way to hide something if you can't erase it completely.”

Etta sat up straighter and her eyes had gone sharp. “Misdirection.”

Steve nodded.

“Good thing we kept a list of where we found everything then, isn’t it?” Etta smiled, as much of a spy as he was. “This time we use aliases.”

Flooding in the Netherlands delayed Diana's return by nearly a week. It was probably longer than necessary but Diana remembered the North Sea flood of 1953 and its high death toll despite all her efforts. She arrived home the day before they were supposed to leave for London, exhausted but pleased — there had been no fatalities this year.

Etta and Steve argued about whether or not to tell her while Diana showered a week’s worth of stagnant water and grime off.

“She's going to want to know as soon as possible,” Steve said, sorting Diana's clothing into piles of what they could wash at home and what would need to go out for cleaning.
“She's going to have wanted to know from the start. That ship has sailed through no one’s fault but your own,” Etta said.

“And I stand by that position,” Steve said. He consigned a blouse to the maybe rag-maybe garbage bin — he doubted there was any chance of getting that smell out. “But there's no reason not to tell her now.”

“A happy shock is still a shock,” Etta told him. “And she won't be happy that we're altering archival records. I don't see a reason not to give her a few days and tell her after we get back from London.”

“We're in London for three weeks. Besides, she's not that kind of tired,” Steve said because he knew Diana and knew she wasn't.

“No, she is not,” Diana said from the doorway of the laundry room.

Etta startled. Steve had to smother a smile as Etta waggled a finger in her direction. “Goodness me, have a heart for those of us who are no longer spring chickens and tread more heavily. My hearing is hardly bad but it's not what it used to be.”

Diana smiled at her, soft and fond. She was tired, Steve could tell, but not the kind of exhaustion that needed comforting, just the kind that needed a good night’s sleep.

“Have you finally decided to tell me about your secret project?” Diana asked, raising an eyebrow at both of them. There was no hint of teasing in her voice — Steve was well aware that if had been anyone but him and Etta the Lasso of Hestia would have come out long ago.

“Yes,” Steve answered.

Etta shot him a dirty look. Diana frowned. “Do you not wish me to know yet?”

“It’s not that,” Etta said. “I just don’t want it to spoil your time in London, that’s all.”

“It is bad news then,” Diana stated.

“No,” Steve said, meeting Diana’s eyes for a moment, his voice soft. This was the best news they could have hoped for.

“But it’s the kind of news you’re not going to be able to stop thinking about,” Etta told her. “Not that I suppose you will be able to now anyway.”

She gave Steve another look. He remained unrepentant.

Diana’s lips quirked into another small smile. “I believe I would have wished to know before I overheard you but Etta is right. I must insist upon it now.”

Etta sighed. “Right. I’ll make a pot of tea then.”

Diana frowned as Etta headed to the kitchen and looked at Steve questioningly once she was gone, walking over to stand at his side. Steve shrugged. “It isn’t bad news, I promise. But Etta’s right. It’s news you might dwell on.”

“This is why you should have told me from the start,” Diana said, not meanly but not entirely kindly either.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Steve said. “It would be easy for me to agree because we found a way but I can’t help think of what I was going to tell you if we hadn’t.”
“Found a way to what?” Diana asked.

Steve took her hand and leaned closer, kissing her cheek so lightly it may as well have been a whisper. He squeezed her hand once and let go.

“I’ll go get the maps,” Steve said. “And we can join Etta in the kitchen.”

Steve laid out their new map — he had copied all the coordinates they had from their working map, with its scribbled notes and crossed out points, in a painstakingly neat hand. Diana had seen the worst of his rushed handwriting before, of course, but this seemed too important for that.

He had hardly unfolded it when Diana reached out and brushed her fingers over the set of coordinates he had recorded as soon as he had gotten his bearings when they left Themyscira.

“I know this,” Diana said and gave him a tender smile. For a moment, Steve was helpless to do anything but smile back.

But then she looked closer and her face creased. Her frown deepened and then deepened again. She looked up at him, eyes wide and dark. “What is this?”

“We’ve been looking up old naval records, shipping, exploration, military, whatever we could find for references that, we think, are of Themyscira. Charlie—” Steve swallowed because it still — would always — stung, “—saw it first but he didn’t say anything before he died. And then there were more references that I just recognized. I can show them to you. We were able to pinpoint a spot that it comes back to.”

“It moves, you see,” Etta said. “Steve thinks it must be part of the defenses. But we’ve found a spot where there appears to be a pattern and, well...”

“Themyscira is going to be right there,” Steve said, pointing to the neatly labelled spot in the Atlantic, “in nineteen years. We think we found a way that you can go home.”

Diana didn’t look at either of them for a long moment but she clenched her jaw, just slightly, in the way Steve meant knew she wasn’t angry but holding back tears.

“You are sure of this?” Diana asked, her voice did not waver but Steve could hear how it wanted to. “This should not be possible.”

Steve and Etta exchanged a look. They were spies. Nothing was for sure. Coincidences did occur and false intelligence could be planted — as they were doing even know in all the archives they had visited to cover their tracks.

“As sure as we can be,” Steve said. He reached out to put his hand on top of hers. “Diana—”

Diana caught him and pulled him into an embrace so tight she squeezed all the breath from him for a moment. He wheezed. She let go of him in an instant and had him sitting in a chair before he started coughing.

It only lasted a moment, hardly long enough to leave her looking so horrified and holding his face in her hands with such worry.

“Steve,” she said and now her voice wobbled, just barely but still there. “Breathe.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Steve said, a little croaky. “’S easy enough to do with me. Stop looking like
that."

It was easy enough to do but Diana had never done that to him before. He couldn't even imagine what she was feeling. They had taken it as fact that she would never see her home again.

There were tears in her eyes, spilling over her cheeks. Steve reached out and brushed them away carefully. Her hands moved on his face, checking, making sure he was fine — which he was. He pressed their foreheads together for a moment.

“I’m fine, Diana,” he promised.

Diana laughed wetly. She kissed him once, swiftly, before pulling him into her arms again, very slightly less enthusiastic than before but no less overwhelmed.

“It should not be possible,” Diana murmured thickly against his neck. She was pressing her face against his scars as if they were not even there. “I did not think I would ever see it again. My mother —”

Her voice faltered and Steve held her as tight as he could.

“I know,” he said, voice quiet. He pressed his face against her hair and rubbed slow circles on her back. “I know.”

She clung to him for long moments. Steve was vaguely aware of the sound of Etta behind them, pouring them all cups of tea, but nearly all of his focus was on Diana. She was always so solid and strong, and it was no different in that moment, but there was a fierce, unlooked for want in the way she grasped him right then too.

It was why he couldn't tell her until they were sure, one way or another. To have made the possibility real for her, when she had accepted it as impossible for so long…if they had had to take it away again after that it would have been cruel.

Her grip on him loosened. Steve smiled at her, softly, when she pulled back too look at him and tucked a piece of loose hair behind her ear. She kissed him, just as tender.

He would have given every last breath in his body to go on kissing her like that forever.

But Diana's hand was pressed flat against the side of his throat and she pulled away before there was the slightest stutter.

“You are all right?” She asked again, looked at him closely.

“Yes,” Steve answered truthfully.

Diana nodded. She glanced at the map, then back to him, and then finally to Etta.

“Please,” Diana said, “Show me what you have found.”

Etta did most of the talking. She made Diana laugh first, telling her stories of their initial archival trips — Steve grumbled at appropriate moments — before explaining what they had looked for, the common elements they had found: the strange fog, the overwhelming sense of dread that often manifested in fears of sirens for sailors, the glimpses of the island, like a dream, slipping in and out of view before they turned tail and ran or were swept away.

Diana frowned at Etta’s emphasis on the anxiety and men felt when they got anywhere near
Themyscira — another defensive measure, as far as they could tell. “Is that what you felt?”

“I had just stolen a notebook containing the worst weapons I had ever seen, I was being chased by the German navy and my plane was going down, dread doesn’t begin to cover it,” Steve said with a small, amused smile.

Diana didn’t look so amused. “Steve.”

He shrugged. “I’m not joking that much. I was concentrating on the mission. All I had time to think of when my plane broke through the fog and started going down was that failing was unthinkable. Nothing was more terrifying for me than that.”

Etta poured him more tea. Diana put her hand on top of his.

“But after,” Diana pressed. “When you were on the island?”

“No more than usual,” Steve said. “I was...tense all the time then. You couldn't escape it, not completely, during the war.”

He had told them it felt like the world was ending when they interrogated him. That feeling had been festering inside him for years, since the promised ending by Christmas had come and went years before. Themyscira hadn't added anything new.

Etta reached over and patted Diana’s hand. “He would have said something to me when you two turned up if it had been that noticeable.”

Diana nodded, looking a little less worried. Steve felt he had missed something but Etta started talking about how she had figured out the pattern and the moment slipped away.

By the time they were done explaining and answering Diana's questions and had started taking in her input on how Themyscira’s movement worked —- she remembered the stars changing — and how they were going to get there — instruments failed before the fog began, from what they could tell, but Diana thought she might have a sense of where it would be if she got close enough, she had felt it’s presence fading as they left — it was late and Etta and Steve were drooping more than Diana was.

They went to bed, all aware that tomorrow they had to get up relatively early to make the ferry.

But there was one more thing Steve had to tell Diana. He just had to wait until Etta was in her bedroom and they were in theirs, rooms and walls between them.

He took Diana hand, just as she finished changing into her nightgown and looked up at her. He had thought out his words a couple dozen times, even practiced them once or twice. Diana would be able to tell but it was the only way he could get through it without his voice breaking.

“I know that for humans nineteen years can feel a very long way away,” he said. Diana frowned at him confused. “And I hate that you even have to wait that long, to see your people, your mother again, but...there’s a chance that Sameer and Etta and Farah will still be with us then. And I don’t think it will be a short trip when we go to Themyscira.”

Steve didn’t think it would happen but there was always the possibility that when they got there, Diana would decide it was a one-way trip. He was a little worried about how her mother would react if Diana did want to stay but he wasn’t afraid, not even for a moment, that she would leave him behind.
But there were other people they would be leaving behind, no matter how long they stayed, and Steve didn’t know if Diana had thought of what that might mean yet.

He hated to say it, hated to put any kind of damper on her happiness.

But he knew Etta. She had done the math already too. She had done it before she even told him she had discovered the final reference they needed.

“If they're still here, I don't think I can leave them knowing we probably wouldn't see them again,” Steve said. He swallowed. “I don't think I could do that.”

Understanding dawned in Diana's eyes. “No. No, we will not leave them.”

She sat down beside him abruptly. Steve leaned forward and kissed Diana’s shoulder before resting his chin there. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Forty years is a lot longer than nineteen,” Steve said. “It's a lot to ask.”

“It has already been a long time. But I know my mother is there and she will remain there. I cannot imagine what catastrophe would take her from Themyscira,” Diana said, complete certainty in her voice.

“But, my heart is with yours. They are family too, and once they are gone,” her voice wavered. Steve tightened his arms around her and she ran her fingers through his hair gently before pressing her lips, briefly to the crown of his head. “Our time with them is finite and I would not waste any of the hours we have left with them. I could not leave them behind any more than you could.”

Steve kissed her shoulder again. “I love you, you know.”

“And I you,” Diana replied. He lifted his chin with her fingers so she could kiss him. “Is this why you did not tell me?”

“No,” Steve told her. “Impossible choices are still choices. I wouldn’t make it for you. I didn’t want to tell you until we knew for sure, one way or another, whether going back was possible. If it hadn’t been, if Themyscira’s location was always random and we could never predict where it was going to be, I wanted to tell you that from the start. Having your hopes disappointed is a hell of a thing, you know that as well as I do. You deserve better than that, whenever it is possible.”

Diana smiled at him, very faintly, and ran a hand along his jaw. “It is not about deserve.”

He kissed her fingertips. “Diana, we fall so short of giving you what you deserve it is laughable. Whatever I can do to make you happier, I’m going to do.”

“I understand. I am not sure I agree but I understand why you kept it a secret,” Diana said. She met his gaze squarely. “I would prefer you do not do it again, though.”

“I'm not sure I can promise that, if I think it's something that will needlessly hurt you,” Steve told her, honestly. “I don’t see the point in that.”

Diana hummed and rested their foreheads together, close enough that they could feel each other’s breath. “I do not like secrets but I trust you with my heart. I will trust you with your secrets. I know you do not keep many from me.”

“No, not from you. I make it a rule not to. This has been the only one I've kept intentionally. I can't see there being another.” Steve took her hand. “I would have told you this time, if you had asked me
to. I will always tell you when there’s something I’m not saying and I promise if you ask me, I will always tell you what it is.”

Diana looked at him for a long time before lacing their fingers. “I will hold myself to the same promise. As it happens, I have considered it and there is one piece of knowledge I have kept from telling you.”

Steve stared, honestly stunned. The thought that Diana was keeping a secret hadn’t even occurred to him. He would have never thought to ask.

It took him a moment to get over his surprise. He thought about her wording, how strange it seemed and how uncomfortable she seemed.

“It’s not your secret,” Steve realized, focusing on her again. “Is it?”

“It is not,” Diana confirmed.

Steve wanted to ask a hundred questions — whose it was most of all — but he stopped himself. He trusted her and did not want to put her in that position.

“Okay,” Steve said. He had to let that knowledge go, it was the only way he wouldn’t feel compelled to try to figure it out. “Thank you for telling me.”

Diana squinted at him for a moment. She stroked her hand over his cheek and kissed him again, slowly.

They slept curled close together, that night, Diana warm against Steve’s back, her arm solid around his waist and their fingers entwined together. The way they slept most nights. And Steve dreamed of Diana standing on a beach, like the one where they had first met, where she had saved him. But this time, all her cares were worn away. She was happy, with none of the chaos he had brought crashing into her life, and when he looked at her, her face was so bright it was like looking at the sun.

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Etta stayed with them until just before her 85th birthday. Steve and Diana went with her to help sell the house and find her own apartment near her daughter in London. She wasn’t ready to give up living on her own, not yet.

Diana asked her why, worried that she might feel like they were leaving her behind. Their pace of life had slowed down because Steve needed it to, just before Etta decided to move back to England, they had slowed it even further for her.

Etta had just shaken her head. “Sometimes you just know it’s time.”

She was only a few blocks from Sameer and Farah. It was convenient. It made sense.

Diana missed her, when she was gone. She loved their apartment in Paris — had started thinking of it as home before they had even moved in. She loved coming home to Steve, she loved their neighbours and the quiet evenings they had and the evenings when Steve decided to be inventive and left the kitchen an absolute wreck, she loved walking to the market and eating breakfast on their balcony and the way the rain sounded against their windows.

But she also had the sense of time running out. She knew Steve felt it too, had felt it for years. It beat against her breast bone, sometimes, a dull, persistent ache when Etta’s letters got so much shorter because her arthritis made it painful to write and Sameer spoke a little too loudly on the telephone.
because he was losing his hearing.

Paris had become home but they spent more and more time in London. After Sophia had moved out, Farah had insisted on rearranging the house, moving the guest bedroom to the bottom floor to make it easier for Steve.

Farah looked at Steve knowingly sometimes, when Sameer’s knees creaked, when he started using his own cane from time to time. She reached over and squeezed Diana’s hand when Etta forgot the point of the story she was telling.

Farah was younger than all of them. She had just started to go grey and the worst of her health issues was periodic tinnitus — she swore it was the exact pitch as the ambulance she had driven in the early days of the war. She had married Sameer knowing she would likely bury him — it just hadn’t mattered, not until near the end.

Sameer’s death came slowly and then all at once.

He had been declining, over the past few years. There was nothing terrible — no demons or disease to fight against. It was just old age and all the ailments that came with it.

Steve was familiar with it — both his grandmother and his parents had reached what humans considered old age. He dealt with it quietly, though Diana knew it unmoored him, the way he portrayed all his pain to everyone but her.

It was entirely unfamiliar to Diana.

She had become well acquainted with loss since her first brush with it on the beaches of Themyscira but she was accustomed to the violence of death. Even outside of the battlefield and disaster zones, her losses had always been violent and abrupt. Charlie’s death had shocked her to the point of disbelief and even Ed’s had been too sudden, too young and too painful for all that it had been from natural causes.

Sameer’s was different.

A year before he died, Sameer had a bit part in a movie. He had had some small parts on television and in films before, but the casting director had specifically recruited a host of elder statesmen and grande dames of the English stage. Being sought out had touched him, even if he only had one line.

He finished his last play six months before his death. It wasn’t a large part but the reviews said he stole the show. More importantly, it was the first and only time Sofia got to act on stage with him. Her part was even smaller than his but their names were both there in the same playbill.

It was a good, long life.

It was hard to find comfort in that but, in the years to come, Diana thought it was enough. It had to be enough.

Diana and Steve were in London when Sameer had the first stroke, they had been in London for months, by then, with little intention of leaving. They were staying with Sameer and Farah — they always stayed with Sameer and Farah — and they were there when Farah realized something was wrong.

The stabilized him enough at the hospital for long enough for the children to get there. He woke up for a few hours and his speech was slurred but understandable.
It gave them long enough to say goodbye.

The second stroke was in the middle of the night, or that was what the doctors told them. Sameer didn’t wake for it. He was there, sleeping, one moment and then a shrill alarm went off. He was gone before the nurse made it into the room.

Farah was holding one of his hands when he died. Steve held the other, Diana’s hands on Steve’s back.

They took Farah home. There were only a few hours until dawn and the rest of the family would arrive with the daybreak.

Diana stayed up with her when Farah could not sleep. Steve could not — he tried, he wanted to, but it was impossible for him to fight exhaustion for very long, his permanently damaged lungs and the toll they took on him would not allow it. He slept on the couch, dark smudges already growing under his eyes.

Diana stayed awake and held Farah’s hand. They did not speak much — Farah explained what they would need to do, how she planned to have Sameer buried. Neither of them had been particularly religious but there were rituals that were still comforting.

“It should be as soon as possible,” Farah said, looking at Diana and then past her and then at her again. “But I will be damned if I don’t wash my husband’s body myself — there’s only my son-in-law who would be truly suitable anyway. And Sameer would kill me if I dressed him in anything less than his best suit.”

“He had six best suits,” Diana said lightly, though tears pricked her eyes. “Which will you choose?”

“The blue was always my favourite,” Farah said. There were tears streaming down her cheeks. They continued no matter how often Diana wiped them away for her. But now she smiled too. “But he thought he looked the most dashing in the dark grey. That will do best.”

She stared into the distance for a moment before taking Diana’s hand and looking at her. “I think it will be mourning clothes for me but you. Nothing black or drab. Something spectacular instead.”

Diana laughed. “It is what Sameer would have preferred, I suppose.”

“He would have complained at me not doing the same,” Farah said, her face creasing. “But for the first time, I don’t think I have anything but mourning colours in me.”

Diana cupped Farah’s face in her hands for a moment, wiping her tears away with her thumbs, before she pulled her close and let her cry against her shoulder.

Steve stayed and helped Farah make arrangements while Etta helped Diana pick out a dress for Sameer’s funeral, the most stunning they could find on such short notice. It was red and shimmering gold and fit her so well Steve dropped his cane the first time he saw her in it.

She only wore it twice — for the funeral and for the memorial service his fellow thespians had for him at St. Paul’s, Covent Garden in London. It made Farah grin and Diana could not help but think of how Sameer would have laughed at every head that turned in her direction. Steve wore a full suit, his best, his polished pilot’s wings the only hint of his military service. Farah insisted they sit one on each side of her, their daughters and sons-in-law and grandchildren flanking out from them.

They stayed with Farah for the first few months after the funeral. Sofia and Nadia both called it her mourning period until Farah snapped a dish towel at them and told them she was hardly likely to get
pregnant at her age. Yasmine’s method was to unleash the twins — three years old and impossibly
ergetic, even Maryam when she wasn’t clinging to Steve’s good leg — on their grandmother.

The girls were there so often the house rarely felt empty. Their behaviour had not changed — they
were still loud, all talking over each other, and quick to laughter. Farah and Sameer had lived alone
since Sofia moved out but Farah told Diana it only made her feel loved, even though she was prone
to chasing everyone but Steve out of the kitchen when she wanted a moment alone.

They talked about Sameer as if he were just in the other room and cried about him because he
wasn’t. Sofia stole some of his shirts and wore them tied up in a knot in a fashion that made Nadia
scowl and Farah laugh. Nadia had taken to coming over while her children were at school and
writing at Sameer’s desk in his cluttered study. Farah had stopped wearing any of her jewelry except
the pieces Sameer had given her. She gave the rest away to her daughters and granddaughters Diana
and even some to Etta’s girls.

Sameer was still such a presence in the house, it made it feel like they might open the front door to
find Sameer standing there in his uniform, smiling and dripping wet. Home at last.

But that would never come again.

Though the girls stayed until all hours of the night, particularly Sofia, they could not be there all the
time. They had families and jobs and sometimes the house fell silent.

Sometimes it was just them, especially at night.

The second night after Sofia stopped intentionally falling asleep on the couch so she could pretend
she was only accidentally staying over, Diana woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of
Farah crying.

Just after Etta had moved in with them, and intermittently in the months and years after, Diana had
woken up to the sound of her friend crying. But Etta had not wanted it acknowledged, had not
wanted to be comforted, had only wanted to forge a head and deal with her grief in her own way.
Diana had ached for her but could only respect her wishes. She would curl all the more tightly
around Steve’s back instead of going to Etta, trying to preoccupy her ears with the sound of his
beloved, uneven breathing.

She had waited and slowly Etta had brought her grief to Diana in the smallest of pieces. They had
talked around the edges of it sometimes and she had let Diana stay with her, sometimes, when an
unexpected remembrance brought her to tears during the day.

It wasn’t much. It did not feel like enough. It was still more than she showed to anyone else.

But Farah and Etta were not the same.

Steve made a confused noise, reaching for Diana in his sleep when she sat up in bed and her familiar
warmth wasn’t pressed against him. He woke a moment later and blinked at her blearily.

“Hmm?” he mumbled, his hand brushing against her side. “Diana?”

“She's crying,” Diana said, so quietly.

The look on Steve’s face was heartbreaking. Diana could not help but reach out and caress his face.
Steve exhaled slowly.

“I'm going to her,” Diana told him.
Steve stared at the ceiling for a moment. He was thinking of Etta, Diana knew.

Steve was the one who had told her that people did not grieve the same, nor always in ways that made sense. And Etta and Farah were not the same.

“Pajamas,” Steve said, finally. He had put on a panama top earlier, always overly conscious of his scars, but not pants. Diana had managed even less. “Pass me some? And you too.”

Diana raised an eyebrow at him. “I was not planning to go in the nude. I have learned something of the sensibilities of man’s world by now.”

Steve rubbed a hand over his face and then let her help him up. “I am not awake enough to be useful right now.”

“It is good, then, that I am and you need only be present,” Diana told him. They left his cane behind — Diana had no intention of relinquishing his arm or marking him climb the stairs.

“That’s comforting,” he said, with a matter-of-factness she found lacking in most men when they said such earnest things.

Farah stopped crying when Diana knocked on her door. She did not tell them to go away. “Diana? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Steve’s face went resolute at that, as if he could not stand to hear it. Diana opened the door but Steve was the one who said, as they came in: “Budge up.”

“Steve!” Farah hissed, sitting straight up in bed at that. “What are you doing?”

Diana had planned to be comforting. Steve used tactics similar to Yasmine’s.

“If you tell me this is the first time you've had two people in bed with you, I'm going to call you a liar,” Steve told her.

Diana snorted. Despite herself, Farah laughed.

“I won't,” Farah said and obligingly moved over. “But you're a prude.”

Diana laughed out loud at that, even as she tucked herself against Farah, hugging her tight. Farah did not hesitate to curl into her arms any more than Steve ever would.

“I am not a — look, just because I don't want the details of what anyone else does in bed doesn’t mean I'm —” Steve sputtered. “Sameer had a big goddamn mouth and after I knew about him and didn't freak out, I always knew more about what he was doing than anyone who wasn't doing it with him needed to. It’s not my business. It’s not anyone’s business. You walk in on a guy one time—!”

“Steve is not a prude,” Diana said as Steve got into bed on Farah’s other side. He fussed with the covers and fidgeted — trying, they both knew, to find a position to lie in that was physically comfortable for him, a sometimes near impossible task.

Farah shuffled another pillow to him. Diana became aware that the bedding smelled, very faintly, of the cologne Sameer favoured. “I am going to need examples to believe that claim.”

Steve groaned. “No.”

Farah laughed. “Prude.”
Steve shifted again. Despite the teasing, the bed was clearly not meant for three and Steve’s movements were clumsy with sleep and discomfort. He nearly slipped. Farah and Diana both grabbed him.

Diana lifted her head to tell him: “If you are going to fall off, tell me and I will lasso you to the bed.”

“I thought you weren’t going to give me examples,” Farah said, choking on a giggle before she managed to whistle.

“No, he doesn't like that,” Diana told her.

“Jesus Christ. I'm leaving,” Steve said with no intention of doing so.

Farah was laughing so hard it looked like it hurt. She was laughing so hard she was crying. She was gasping.

And then she was just crying. Diana held her closely, her tears soaking the pillow and Diana's shoulder as she sobbed. Steve rubbed her back.

“I miss him,” Farah said, simply. “I miss him so much. He would have thought this was so hilarious. He would have been insufferable. I just want to tell him and hear him laugh and I can't. I can't. I never will again.”

Farah shuddered and sobbed. Diana wept with her. She felt the same. No matter how much gentler Sameer’s death had been there was still such a sharpness to it. She understood better why Etta could hardly speak of Ed, in ways her refusal to do so made all of their grief easier to set aside. But she had seen it rise up so sharply in Etta’s eyes and the eyes of her daughters only to be swallowed down. Diana thought it might be better to simply feel it, all of it, no matter how sharp the pain.

Farah fell back asleep, eventually, cradled in Diana's arms. Diana raised her head enough to look at Steve, who was doing the same — neither of them wished to speak and wake Farah. Steve's eyes were red, his face tear stained and haggard. He touched her arm for a moment, letting her know that while none of them were okay, he was not in immediate need. The look in his eyes asked the same question on her and he did not put his head back down until she had nodded.

It was not something they talked about. More pillows migrated to Farah’s bed after Steve woke up snoring that first morning — by noon he was visibly exhausted and had to lay down — clear signs his breathing had been poor while he slept. But they had lived together before, and Sameer’s absence lived with them then too. It felt more familiar than odd and both Steve and Diana knew how strange an empty bed could feel, how silent the world could seem when there was no one breathing beside you in the darkness.

When the house was full of Farah's children and grandchildren it was not so noticeable. When it wasn't, Steve and Diana filled the gap.

It lasted until Sofia stormed into the kitchen on morning with two suitcases so full they were spilling open and announced unceremoniously: “Todd is a fecking bastard and I'll be damned if I go back to Lou.”

Farah looked at her youngest daughter over the rims of her tortoise shell, reading glasses. “Todd was always a bastard. Lou was...well, your sisters liked him.”

“If he ever removes his head from his arse and comes around begging me to take him back, I'll consider it,” Sofia said. “But unless he's on his knees, I don't care to see him.”
“I thought you already seduced the girl he left you to pursue?” Farah asked, her attention returning to her paper. Steve choked on his mouthful of toast. Diana and Farah exchanged a glance, barely keeping from laughing.

“You all right, uncle Steve?” Sofia asked, as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, glanced up at him, and then shoved them back in her bag.

“Fine,” Steve said, reaching for a glass of water. “There's leftovers on the stove, if you're hungry.” Sofia smiled brightly before bouncing up to go fix herself a plate. “Ta, I'm starved.”

“And I only tried to seduce Sarah,” Sofia continued, exasperated. “She refused us both. Told me not to come back unless I was serious, which is a sight better than Lou. She told him he could go fuck himself.”

Farah snorted. “I knew I liked that girl. Largest freshwater lake.” Sofia gave her mother a look like she had lost her mind, even as Steve, without looking up from his section of the paper, answered: “Superior.”

“You're doing the crossword in pen?” Sofia asked, sitting back down at the table and loading scrambled eggs onto a piece of toast. She looked so appalled Diana saw Steve look away and take a sip of tea to keep from laughing. “When you have to ask a question like that?! Mum!”

“Your father's not here to give me the wrong answers with a straight face,” Farah told her. “And when Steve is wrong I just don't tell him and carry on.”

Steve choked on his tea this time and Diana thumped him — carefully — on the back. Sofia giggled around her toast and eggs. Farah looked up at him and winked.

Sofia crammed the rest of the toast into her mouth. “So can I stay in my old room for a while or has it been given over to the hellions — I mean grandkids?”

“It's my crossword room now,” Farah told her, voice completely bland. “They're all half-finished and filled in with ink.”

“Thanks, mum,” Sofia said, kissing Farah on the cheek before getting up for coffee. “Tech starts next week so I'll be out or sleeping most of the time.”

“This is new? It has been that way since you were a teenager,” Farah asked but she glanced over her shoulder at her daughter as Sofia filled her coffee mug and Diana could see how pleased she looked.

It made it easier for them to leave, a few weeks later, to go to help with a cache of art that had been found in Vienna.

Farah came into the bedroom as they were packing the last of their things. She had a small box in her hand.

“I have something for you,” Farah said to Steve.

“Oh?” Steve asked, raising a curious eyebrow. He looked at Diana — she shrugged. This was not something Farah had discussed with her.

“I meant to give it to you after Sameer's funeral,” Farah said and she wiped at her cheek suddenly. Steve stepped forward in faint alarm but she waved him off. “But I wasn't ready to part with it yet.”
She pushed the box at him as if that were the only way she could bring herself to give it away. Steve frowned looking down at it. It was plain and brown. The writing on top was too faded to read and it was a little scuffed up.

It was just big enough, it turned out, to hold a pocket watch.

It was simple and sturdy with a closed case, unlike the modified watch Diana still often wore on her wrist. The plain case was a smooth, polished gold. It was clearly well taken care of.

Steve glanced at Farah in confusion before he opened it to see the watch face and the inscription inside. His face went blank, then shocked and bewildered. He looked lost as he traced the inscription with his fingertips with exceeding care before bringing his hand up to cover his mouth.

“This is Sameer’s watch,” Steve said hoarsely. “It — the inscription says it was his grandfather’s, then his father’s, then Sameer’s.”

“He left it to you,” Farah told him. “I just. It took me some time before I was ready to let it go, even to you.”

Steve rubbed at his mouth. Then wiped his eyes. Then wiped his eyes again.

“You’re sure?” Steve asked, looking at her with wet, disbelieving eyes. “Surely one of the girls or you might have grandsons...”

“It was in his will,” Farah told them. She reached out and close his hand around it. “And even if it wasn’t, I would be sure.”

Steve opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. He closed his eyes and only managed a jerky nod. Farah's face creased, she reached out and in the next moment Steve was holding her very tightly, his shoulders shaking.

“Thank you,” he managed, after long moments.

“He loved you so much,” Farah said, reaching for Diana's hand even as Steve pulled away just enough to reach for her too. “Both of you. Both of us.”

“He was my brother,” Steve said, wiping at his face. He was holding the watch as if it were the most precious thing in the world. “I can't explain it any other way.”

“And you are my sister,” Diana said, cupping Farah's face in her hands before kissing both of her tear stained cheeks.

Farah laughed, smiling through her tears as she held on to both of them. “So many years as an only child and I was really just waiting for you.”

Diana lost count of all the times she caught Steve idly turning the watch over in his hands or opening it to read the inscription while they were in Vienna. She caught his arm when she spotted it and leaned close to him, remembering Sameer and remembering how she had clung to the solidness of Steve’s watch on the nights she could not stay in the hospital with him.

She found herself distracted, counting down the days until they could leave Vienna and return to the house the sporadically rented on the French coast — Etta and Farah had both asked what the plan was for the summer, when they could bring their grandchildren — it was an easy demand to meet.

It was a surprise to arrive and find Bobby, Yasmine and the twins settling in two houses down.
“They’ve sold the one mum and papa rented before,” Bobby told them, and then, more quietly, “It's likely for the best — I went to see it and it's gotten rather run down. That would break mum’s heart, I think. She's coming over next week for the summer. We thought you might need the extra room this year.”

Diana raised an eyebrow at that but before she could ask, Yasmine came back holding a very squirmy Leila in her arms while Maryam shuffled along behind them, holding tightly to her mother’s pant leg, her face screwed up in concentration.

“It's no use, they won't go for a nap until they've said hello,” Yasmine said.

Leila giggled, grabbing onto Diana's neck and not letting go when Yasmine leaned in to kiss her cheek in greeting. Bobby scooped Maryam up and transferred her to Steve’s arms before she could start to whine. She immediately stuck her thumb in her mouth and was asleep against Steve’s shoulder five minutes later — Leila was more interested in unraveling the braid from Diana’s hair.

“Leila, no,” Yasmine said, attempting to pry her fingers away.

“No!” Leila exclaimed crossly, clenching her little fingers tighter in Diana's hair.

“It's fine,” Diana said, looking at Leila seriously. “If you are gentle.”

Leila looked back at her gravelly, stuck half her hand in her mouth while still holding Diana's hair in the other, and nodded.

Diana kissed her forehead and shifted so Leila was more secure on her hip. Leila began twining Diana's hair around her fingers.

“Steve’s a cheat for making nice with the easy one,” Yasmine said, smiling as she reached over to run Leila’s back.

“You leave my Maryam alone,” Steve said, kissing her forehead. Maryam grumbled in her sleep. “Are you staying the whole summer then?”

“I’ll be back and forth with work,” Bobby said. “But Yasmine and the girls will be. And Nadia’s bringing her kids out when mum comes over. Yusuf is up for a promotion at work so he’s likely worse off than I am.”

“Sofia says she’ll join us when she’s done filming,” Yasmine added. “Etta’s coming with mama. I think Stan and Angie and Beth and Bill are all coming next month.”

Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise. “That is a crowd.”

“Auntie Etta and mama have been plotting,” Yasmine said. “Charlie’s daughter, the one who didn’t move to the States after their mum died, she’s bringing her lot next month too.”

“Margaret,” Diana supplied. They had kept in touch with Maureen until she died — something that always baffled her to Diana’s dismay. Mending ties with Charlie’s family had taken time and care. Charlie’s daughters had had a complicated relationship with their father — there was still hesitance there, sometimes, however much things had thawed.

Yasmine put her hands on her hips and looked around, clearly pleased: “Should be a good summer.”

It would turn out to be idyllic. Not the last such instance they would have with the friends Diana had first come to think of as her family, but one she would think back to for years to come. The houses
they rented were outside of town but close enough that Steve and Etta could both walk there comfortably and to the beach, if they turned the other way. They weren’t exactly next door but hardly far enough apart to worry about the steady stream of children — Etta’s and Sameer’s and even Charlie’s grandchildren — that went back and forth between them. Even the weather favoured them with far less rain than was usual for the region.

Etta, more than any of them, seemed determined to take full advantage of it.

“Sidecars!” Etta announced, bustling out into the back garden carrying drinks on a tray. “Diana, I’ve made you one to try.”

Farah rolled her eyes. “I thought you had given up.”

“I’ve given up on finding a suitable wine, beer or cider,” Etta said. “Cocktails are another story.”

Diana dutifully sipped it and immediately made a face. It was not any better than any of the other alcohols from man’s world that she had tried. She had never understood the appeal — they tasted terrible and had no intoxicating effect on her.

Farah took a sip of her own and coughed, sitting forward. “You’ve gotten the proportions wrong.”

“I tested it,” Etta protested.

Farah harrumphed: “You could drink paint thinner without blinking. It's not supposed to be this strong.”

“Well, give it back then,” Etta said, extending her hand.

Farah pulled the drink closer. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t drink it. You just shouldn’t make people think that it’s supposed to taste like this.”

Etta sniffed. “I want a second opinion.”

Farah laughed and sipped her drink. “We both know that between us the spare won’t last until everyone gets back.”

The young people, as Etta and Farah’s children had collectively taken to calling themselves, had taken most of the kids to the beach to give the “old people” a break while everyone was there for the weekend. Steve and Bobby had gone into town to do the grocery shopping with the twins and Jenny after Maryam absolutely refused to go to the beach, Leila refused to be separated from her sister and Jenny asked nicely — an almost bewildering novelty by comparison.

“They'll be in town for ages. I was planning to make more before then,” Etta said.

“You should let Steve make the drinks,” Farah said.

Diana looked at her, a bit surprised. Etta had started making her own cocktails recently but otherwise refused them and drank wine. She hadn’t let anyone make her one since Ed died.

It went unremarked on, generally. But Etta did not seem overly perturbed. She did scoff at the idea.

“Steve might be an excellent cook but he’s far too light a hand when it comes to drinks,” Etta declared.

“You're not supposed to taste this much alcohol,” Farah said.
Etta took a sip and smacked her lips. “I'll drink yours as well if you're going to complain this much.”

“You will not,” Farah said. She took another drink, wincing very slightly, before putting it down beside her chair.

She looked out at the garden, looking pleased. Diana followed her gaze. The slim blue line of the ocean was just visible over the stone fence and away down the sloping hill.

“Lovely day,” Etta sighed. “It's so clear you can probably see England from the beach.”

“You can never see England from the beach here,” Farah said.

“Diana might be able to,” Etta said.

“Diana cannot,” Diana answered.

Etta huffed. Farah giggled. Diana smiled slowly. She was thinking of all the moments she had spent with these women and of their family on the beach and of the trouble Steve and the twins were likely getting into in town. But it was all idle — mostly she was enjoying the warmth of the sun and the way Etta and Farah teased each other. Her heart felt very full.

“I do like to think I can see it,” Etta said. “Home.”

Diana could feel Farah and Etta exchanging looks. She was not entirely surprised. They had been whispering to each other about something since they arrived.

“If there is something you wish to discuss,” Diana said. “It is best to simply discuss it.”

Farah laughed, looking pleased with Diana’s forthrightness. “It takes such a long time to bring spies around to that way of thinking.”

“Steve was a spy,” Diana said. “It did not take him that long.”

“Steve was an active spy for half as long as Etta and Sameer were,” Farah replied. “And I would trust Steve with all of my secrets so long as I didn’t ask him to keep them from you.”

“Oh, everyone knows if you want something kept mum, you entrust it to the women in the office,” Etta sniffed. “We used stopped using Boy Scouts as messengers during the war because you couldn’t trust them not to be braggarts. The Girl Guides were much more reliable.”

“I’m convinced the twins are plotting to overthrow us all as we speak,” Farah said dryly.

“I am not distracted,” Diana told them both. “I do not know what it is you wish to say to me but you keep coming to a point and then avoiding it. If you do not wish to discuss it, that is fine, but I am inviting you to simply say it, if you wish to.”

Etta looked uncomfortable. Farah’s eyes went soft. “It’s not such an easy thing to say, Diana. And we’re not — it’s not necessarily something we agree about.”

Diana looked at both of them. “There are many difficult times we have been through together. More than I have counted. I cannot think of anything you could say that would be harder than some of them.”

Etta exhaled and took another sip of her cocktail. Farah glanced between them. She straightened her shoulders and looked at Diana squarely.
“We’ve been talking about Themyscira,” Farah said, to Diana’s surprise. They had only told Farah and Sameer about their discovery so far, no one else. It seemed best to keep that information out of anyone else’s hands. “And about what will happen when it’s time for you to go.”

Diana’s heart ached in her chest. Steve’s dilemma was simpler than hers — he was going to Themyscira for her and for all that he prized her happiness above all, his allegiance was to her and to the family they had made and that was not something he truly had to separate. He did not feel torn in two as she did, sometimes, between their family here and the family she had left behind — suddenly possible for her to reclaim.

But, though it had hurt, she had not lied when she told him that her heart was the same as his, she would not forsake her newfound sisters for those that had been longer in her heart. Not when their time with Farah and Etta was so finite.

“You need not worry about that,” Diana told them.

Farah looked at Etta, her mouth twisted into a bittersweet smile. “I told you so.”

“I never disagreed,” Etta said, but there was a melancholy to her expression that Diana did not like.

“I do not understand,” Diana said.

“I told Etta that you wouldn’t leave, well, without us,” Farah said.

“Before we’re gone,” Etta corrected. “I never said I thought they would leave us. I said it was a morbid sentiment to consider and they might not have thought of it.”

“Steve did,” Diana told them. She had not considered it, not immediately, the way Steve had. For all that she had joked he had stopped thinking like a spy, he still thought things out to all of their bitter ends the way a spy would.

Etta snorted. “Yes, he did always know exactly how horrible the consequences would be and did whatever he felt was right despite them.”

Diana knew that better than most. For all the pain it had caused him, and her by extension, he could not stand idly by instead of doing the right thing. It was one of the things she loved best about him.

“We have discussed it,” Diana told them. “Leaving you would be—”

She did not have the words for the way it made her throat feel like it was closing up. The way she had on the beach with Antiope’s limp body in her arms, the way she had when Steve finally made her understand what Charlie had done.

“It would be unfathomable,” she said, finally.

Farah reached over and put her hand on Diana’s arm. “I appreciate that, I do. But, Diana, are you crazy?”

Diana blinked. Farah shook her head. “I am twenty years younger than the rest of you and my mother lived to be ninety-eight. I have three aunts who lived past a hundred. You could end up waiting much longer than you expect and then what? Charlie’s children aren’t all that much younger than me and Maureen died in her seventies. You are never going to find an ideal time to go.”

“And, more than that, I do not want you to wait for me,” Farah told her. “You are my sister. I don’t want to be the reason you do not see your mother for another forty years or more. That is not a
burden I wish you to bear for me.”

Diana could think of not other response than to hug Farah, tightly.

“Oof, you’re going to make me spill my drink,” Farah complained, as if she was not hugging Diana back just as tightly.

“I appreciate it, sister,” Diana said. “Though I cannot say what we will decide. It is a hard proposition for both of us but especially Steve. You are his family and he has no other.”

Farah’s laugh was watery and when she pulled away she touched Diana’s face, very briefly, before wiping her eyes. “I will tell Steve the same thing. You’re as likely to go and come back and find me still here as anything. We know you’ve already kept your travels restricted to Europe so that you’re never too far away.”

Diana raised an eyebrow at that. It was not untrue but it was hardly a burden. “We have done so gladly.”

Farah squeezed her hand again but then Diana glanced at Etta, who, she realized, had been silent while Farah spoke. She looked deeply unhappy.

“Etta?” Diana said, unsure.

Etta smiled, a resigned thing that Diana hated on sight. “It seems such a selfish thing to say that I don’t know if I can say it.”

Farah was already reaching for Etta’s hand. Diana reached for the other. For a moment, Etta looked like she might not accept it but then she squeezed Diana’s hand, very tightly.

“It’s unlikely to be an issue, you know. I’ve already lived longer than anyone in my family has before,” Etta said. She tried to muster a smile and it broke Diana’s heart. “But I’ve already buried my husband and most of my other friends. Losing you...”

Etta swallowed and met Diana’s eyes before repeating her words: “It would be unfathomable to me.”

“We will not leave you,” Diana promised, ignoring the way Etta’s hands shook where she held onto Diana’s shirt. “Etta, we could not.”

Etta sniffed and nodded against Diana’s shoulder.

“Well, like I said. I’m well past my expectations already so it’s unlikely to be a problem. But it still seems so unspeakably selfish,” Etta said, pulling away from Diana gingerly before taking out her handkerchief and wiping her eyes. “To ask you to stay.”

“We had already decided to stay,” Diana told her. She took Etta’s hand back and squeezed it for emphasis. Steve had said nearly the same thing to her but this was always going to be the choice she made. “And every another moment with you is a blessing.”

Etta laughed, dabbing at her eyes again. “That is hardly true. But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“That deserves the other drink, I think,” Farah said, passing it over.
“I won’t argue with you,” Etta told her, downing the last of hers and clutching the new glass as if it would steady her. Diana had not let go of Etta’s other hand and Etta had not asked her to.

“I will make the next round,” Farah said, adding, when it looked like Etta might object: “No. I’m going to. No arguments.”

Farah took her and Etta’s empty glasses and went inside. Etta took a sip of hers and looked away, clearly trying to gather herself.

She did not manage it.

“You really decided to stay before?” Etta asked. She still wasn’t looking at Diana. “I thought Steve might have guessed.”

Steve had mentioned that Etta seemed off when they initially discovered there was a way back to Themyscira. He had not guessed at this.

“Steve told me he could not bear the thought of leaving you the same night he told me it would be possible to return home,” Diana told her. “I could not bear it anymore than he could.”

“He should have let you have one night to enjoy it at least,” Etta said. She sighed. “I do wish I could be less selfish about it, like Farah, though I suppose she is right that she has time on her side. It’s just that...”

Etta swallowed. She let go of Diana’s hand and looked down at her hands, turning her handkerchief around over and over in them. Her chin trembled. “It’s been a struggle, since Ed died. I can still hardly say his name without falling into tears and it’s...it’s strange. Because that was never us or, rather, it was never me. I never felt like I needed him, not like that. He was just always there, my Ed. And then when he wasn’t...”

Etta had to press her handkerchief to her mouth. She tried to start speaking again but just shook her head.

“I cannot imagine,” Diana said, her voice quiet.

Etta laughed a little and rubbed at her eyes. “Oh. You’re the one person who doesn’t have to. We had Steve dead and all but buried for days before we found out he had survived.”

“And it was terrible,” Diana said, even thinking of it now made her heart squeeze in her chest. “I loved him then, so fiercely I hardly knew what it meant yet and I believe I would have grieved him for...a very long time. But now that we have spent so many years together, built a life together, I cannot imagine how terribly lonely it would be to have to continue on without him.”

“You would,” Etta said, the certainty in her voice unshakable.

And Diana knew she would but that was not the point. “Etta, you have. I do not find it strange that you would want to avoid further grief in the future. Especially when it is an unnecessary grief.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” Etta said.

“But you do not believe it,” Diana guessed, sadly.

Etta sighed. “I’m just glad it was what you had already decided.”

So did Diana. She could not imagine how her heart would have broken if she had not already
thought it through.

It stayed with her, even as Farah came back with new drinks — which Etta pronounced were fine, she supposed, and Diana did not like any better — and the conversation was deliberately turned to less heavy things. It dwelt in the back of her thoughts as Yasmine came to fetch them for dinner, being set up at the other house because of its larger kitchen, and they met the noisy crowd coming back from the beach on their way. She thought of it as she sought Steve out in the back garden — dinner was in the oven, he had entrusted Bobby with keeping it from burning and given Jenny the task of setting the table.

Steve was sitting in the back garden with, for once, not Maryam but her sister Leila asleep on his lap. He smiled at Diana as soon as he saw her and tilted his head back. Diana grinned and fulfilled the unvoiced request, cupping his face with her hands as she kissed him softly.

It felt both strange and wonderful that unless whatever god had granted them this gift — and she was sure they owed Steve’s life to the gods, though she did not know which and he had his doubts — decided to revoke it, she should never have to mourn him, would never have to watch him grow old before her eyes. The taste of it had been enough and she did not deny she feared it’s reversal or their good fortune proving untrue.

But she not speak to Steve of that, not now, when he was smiling so and she knew his heart would ache at Etta’s grief the way hers did. She would tell him later, in a moment when his smile did not feel so dear.

“Hello beloved,” she said. “Do you need a rescue?”

“That depends,” Steve said, Leila’s head pillowed in the crook of his arm as he looked up at Diana. “Did it smell like Bobby was burning the roast?”

“No,” Diana answered.

“Then we’ve got a few minutes yet,” Steve replied, the grin still hovering around his lips, his eyes bright and clear.

“We do,” Diana said, and she could only return the smile, her hand drifting over his hair before settling on his shoulder. She glanced up as he sighed. It was easier to see the ocean from there and the sun was just beginning to set.

Etta died in her sleep, three weeks after her ninety-first birthday. Diana and Steve had only just left to go back to Paris after visiting for her birthday and they had spoken to her the evening before to let her know they had gotten home safe.

The funeral was packed. Steve stood with Etta's daughter Beth, for awhile. The family hadn't quite expected the amount of attendance they got. Steve could place people in context even when he did not know their names. There were the dwindling Suffragettes in their purple, white and green ribbons, all grey-haired now, the few school friends who had survived Etta among them. One or two ancient military men in wheelchairs who did double takes upon seeing Steve. All of the village, who continued to politely ignore Steve and Diana's apparent youth. The family, of course, not just Etta's children and grandchildren but Sameer’s and Charlie's too.

And then a larger contingent of unassuming looking men and women, mostly middle aged now and, dressed in civilian clothing, with one or two uniformed exceptions. None of them knew them personally but Steve recognized them.
“Secrets of the realm,” Steve murmured, earning him a raised eyebrow from both Diana and Etta’s daughter. He shrugged. “They’re her colleagues. From the Second World War.”

Beth didn’t look like she entirely believed him. “All of them?”

At a glance, there were at least sixty people there that Diana did not recognize at all. Steve followed her gaze for a moment before looking back at Beth and smiling. “It’ll be a hundred years before they declassify everything your mum did for England during the war.”

Steve glanced at the crowd again, eyes widening. He cleared his throat. “Uh. Dick White just walked in.”

“The head of MI6?” Beth looked alarmed and put a protective hand on Steve’s arm. Diana was reminded that Beth had been persuasive enough and valuable enough to have kept her job as a civil servant after WWII, when most women had been let go in favour of returning men. Just because she had not followed her mother into spycraft did not mean she had not followed in her footsteps. “Is he going to recognize you?”

“I was gone well before his time,” Steve assured her, patting her arm. “And there’s no one left who knew about Diana.”

He smiled to himself: “And if anyone does says something about recognizing me, just tell them I’m Captain Steve Trevor’s grandson.”

They both looked at him strangely at that but Steve just shook his head.

The spy contingent, Steve included, stayed quiet at during the funeral, though Diana spotted Chief White having an awkward seeming conversation with a narrowed-eyed Beth after the service.

“He’s trying to recruit her,” Steve said, appearing nearly silently at Diana’s side. She doubted anyone else would have heard him approach.

Steve had stayed very close at her side since they had gotten the phone call saying Etta was gone. She supposed most people would think he was handling it well but Diana knew Steve. He dealt with the worst pains, the ones that were the deepest and most unshakable by going quiet. She heard his heartbeat in every beat of silence.

That had not stopped him from sneaking behind the head of MI6’s back and eavesdropping when he was talking to Etta’s little girl.

“That will end poorly for him,” Diana observed as Steve slid his arm through hers again. They shifted, just so, so he could lean some of his weight on her without anyone noticing.

“Beth has always been rather set against spy work,” Steve agreed.

“Despite your best efforts,” Diana teased.

Steve smiled but it did not reach his eyes. He looked very far away. “Etta didn’t want that. She...insinuated enough that she didn’t like where things were going by the time she left.”

Diana ran a hand over Steve’s arm and he came back to himself. He squeezed her arm, looking rueful. “Sorry.”

Diana shook her head. “I have found myself...adrift more than I expected these past few days.”
Steve swallowed and nodded. “It’s hard to be the last ones standing. I love Farah but...”

“She was not part of us yet, when your plane exploded,” Diana said.

Steve looked at her, slightly surprised. “Is that what it was for you? Your...marker of what you had
to be there for, I suppose.”

Diana nodded. “There are no words to describe what that was like. I have tried but for those who
were not there it is impossible to understand.”

“It was the war for me,” Steve said quietly. “There’s not one moment. One battle. Just. All of it. It
was the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

Steve remembered dying, remembering burning alive and the painful days that followed it. But
Diana had seen enough of the horror of his war to understand what he meant.

Steve’s fingers brushed against her cheek just for a moment. His smile was small but it was genuine.
“You’ve been the best, if you’re wondering.”

She kissed his fingertips. “I have never had to wonder.”

Steve leaned a little closer, as if he was going to tuck her hair behind her ear and whispered: “We’re
about to be approached.”

He had hardly finished speaking when there was a polite cough behind them. They turned to see a
sheepish looking woman, with glasses and a black, funeral outfit that was just a touch out of date
enough to be unfashionable but not remarkable. Diana had certainly never seen her before today.

“Um,” she said, her bashfulness so seemingly unaffected Diana did not think it was an act. “I was
asked to give you this.”

She handed Steve a plain brown envelope, thick but not cumbersome. Steve took it, looking at her
with a faintly confused but pleasant expression on his face. He clearly did not believe her expression
to be entirely honest.

“What is it?” Steve asked. There was no hostility in his voice, no suspicion. His only tell was the
way he held himself, a bit stiffly, a bit taller. Diana doubted anyone but her noticed, no one else was
quite so attuned to watching his body language for signs of pain.

“I don’t know,” the woman said before meeting Steve’s eyes directly. “It’s from Etta.”

Steve blinked but recovered quickly. “And you didn’t look inside?”

“No. I didn’t assemble the package and whoever did didn’t look at or create what’s inside. She
fragmented us, so we wouldn’t know.” The line of her jaw became a little more resolute. “You don’t
have to trust me. You’ve no reason to. But I promised Etta. I imagine we all did.”

Steve was genuinely taken aback for a moment. Then he smiled, a little crookedly. “I understand
that. Thank you.”

She shook his hand and then, after a moment’s hesitation, not of dismissal or fear but as if she was
not quite sure whether she should be awed or not, Diana’s. Steve watched her as she disappeared
into the crowd, tracking her until she disappeared out a side door.
“What was that about?” Diana asked, voice low.

“I have no idea,” Steve said. He went to open the envelope but paused before breaking the seal. “If this is from Etta...”

Diana’s hands closed over his. “We will open it later.”

They did not get the chance to until much later. No matter how curious they were, they were hardly going to leave the reception until all the other guests had gone and even then, Etta’s family came back to Yasmine and Bobby’s, where Farah, Steve and Diana were staying. They stayed until nearly midnight, until grandchildren had all fallen asleep in a heap together and had to be carried by their parents to the cars.

It was good, a balm, to be surrounded by such love in the midst of their grief. For all of them.

Steve only produced the envelope again after Diana had said goodnight to Farah and closed the door of their bedroom — now the guest bedroom, behind her.

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed in just his shirt and dress pants — his tie and jacket had been lost much earlier that evening. He turned the envelope over in his hands.

“Do you want to do the honours?” Steve asked.

Diana hesitated as Steve did. This was a last unexpected gift, a last piece of Etta. Once it was opened, there would not be another.

Diana sat beside Steve and he passed her the envelope. Diana took a breath and broke the seal.

She pulled out...papers. Copies, it looked like, of their documents — Steve’s and the false ones that Napi and Etta had produced for her in the aftermath of the war. She passed them to Steve, frowning, as she found another envelope, a small one in the stationary Etta preferred. It had their names on it in her hand writing.

She opened it and took out a single sheet of paper. It read:

For when you come home.

Love,

Etta

“It's our papers,” Steve said. “But she's had all the dates changed. It's everything we need and it's more than airtight. I'm pretty sure they're actual government documents. These will last us years.”

Diana looked. She could not pick out the nuances Steve could but their ages were as young as could reasonably be believed. The scarring made it hard for people to pinpoint Steve’s age and people did not like to ask Diana. They would not have to worry for a long time.

“Aliases too,” Steve said, shuffling through the pages. He flipped through the pages of a passport and laughed suddenly, rubbing his fingers over his mouth, a harsher movement than usual, one he only made when he was trying not to cry.

He passed her the passport. “Look at the name.”

“Steven Trevor Prince,” Diana read out loud. She huffed and looked up at him. Steve smiled and winked before putting his arm around her. “A good alias.”
“The guy who came up with it thought he was being pretty clever,” Steve said. He nodded to the little envelope. “What did the letter say?”

Diana handed it to him. She watched him read it, watched him swallow and close his eyes. Tears trickled down his face.

Diana covered his hand with her own. They leaned into each other, heads bent close. Steve sniffed and rubbed his face. He turned his head, so close that his breath ruffled her hair. They curled into each other.

Diana brushed her thumb over the swoop of Etta’s signature and blinked as her vision blurred with tears.

“Thank you, sister,” she murmured.

Steve’s breath hitched and he exhaled slowly against a sob. They sat together in their shared grief and thankfulness for a long time.

There were another four years before they had to leave for Themyscira or wait an additional twenty-one. They meant to travel more, planned to spend some time in North America before they left but then Sofia got the starring role in a play, and Nadia had another baby and Ann got divorced and Charlie’s oldest granddaughter got married and through it all they were working and travelling and it seemed like no time had passed at all.

Diana understood what Farah meant about never finding the ideal time to go. Time dwindled down until finally there were only four months left before they had to sail to a very precise spot in the middle of the ocean or wait another twenty-one years to make the attempt.

They had a trunk and three suitcases going with them — everything else of importance was stored safely in Bobby and Yasmine’s attic. After her latest break up with Lou, Sofia had decided to move to Paris for a while. She arrived with Sarah in tow, and kissed them goodbye.

Diana could not help but linger as they stepped out into the hallway. The building had been more than half empty when they had found it — it was full, it felt alive now. Many of their neighbours were older, too, and she wondered how many of them would be gone by the time they came back.

They stopped in England to say goodbye. Diana left flowers on Etta and Ed and Sameer’s graves and Maryam was so sullenly inconsolable at being left behind with no return date that Steve could hardly speak as they drove back to London.

They spent the last day before they left with Farah. Diana felt as if her heart was lodged in the base of her throat the entire time. The idea that she would get to see Themyscira again, that she would get to embrace her sisters, her mother again, made her so joyful she could hardly contain it.

But the leave taking hurt.

Farah drove them to the airport. It was a painfully quiet ride for the three of them but Farah stayed right until they were at the gate and she could go no further.

“I have something for you,” she said to Diana, taking her hand and placing a thin gold necklace with a single pearl charm like a teardrop.

“Sameer bought it for me before we were married to replace an heirloom from my mother that, well, that I lost when we were doing something untoward,” Farah explained, winking at Steve and grinning conspiratorially at Diana to soften the sting of the goodbye.
But Diana could not help but feel the full bite of it as she put the necklace on. “I will treasure it.”

Farah hugged her close. “We will see each other again. I know it.”

“This is the last call for Pan Am flight...”

Farah kissed both her cheeks, hugged Steve tightly and then they had to get on the plane. Diana turned, just before they boarded the plane and saw Farah waving at the end of the tunnel.

It was cold when they landed in New York and awkward with Charlie's daughter and her family, who they did not know well. Steve put his charm to work and made some headway, especially with the children, but Diana could not help but think of her first impression of London, hideous and hulking and soulless. They only had two weeks there — just enough time in case Steve had needed recovery time after the long flight.

But he hadn't needed it and Steve had a passing familiarity with New York, even if it was decades outdated. He liked the city and despite his impatience to move on to their next destination, took the time to convince her of its charms to a better effect than he had managed in London. It was not Paris but it was not so bad.

They still called Farah every other night just to hear her voice.

They headed Northwest from New York and, truthfully, to the part of the trip Diana was both most excited and most apprehensive about.

They were going to visit Napi.

Diana was fairly sure she would see him — she did not know if he would reveal himself to Steve.

Steve had written Napi faithfully. Even if months, even years went by with no reply. So long as the letters were not returned, Steve continued to write. When Napi’s sons came to England during WWII, they had them at their table and when they left, Steve added them to his correspondence. George and Lenny were more reliable writers than their father. When their children were born, Steve sent gifts and wrote them as well as they grew older.

He was determined to keep in touch.

But there were things Steve did not know.

Diana had received a few letters of her own from Napi. Never to their address. They simply appeared when she was not looking. She would come home when Steve was out and find one sitting on the hall table or open a drawer when Steve was in another room and see it waiting there.

It was the only secret she had ever kept from Steve.

She abhorred it. The only reason she kept it was because it was not hers.

Napi was as much a god as she was, perhaps more so. Diana was privy to only a few of his secrets but she had recognized what he was at once the first time they met.

In the beginning, she had not known it was a secret. It had taken her years to realize the others did not see him as she did. She found that very strange — Napi had never tried to hide himself as Ares had.

But, over time, Diana realized there were many things that men had forgotten how to see.
By the time she realized that the others did not know, saying something would have been betraying a confidence. Napi did not hide what he was because he did not have to — most men were blind to it and those who could see still were among his people — that did not mean he wanted the others to know.

Napi had tried to simply let the friendship fade, to let time and distance take their toll. It would not have been unusual. People fell out of touch all the time. But, particularly after Charlie, Steve had only become more dogged about staying in touch. Diana did not know what Napi thought of it all, she had not received a letter from him address only to her in years. But they had not received a letter saying he passed from Lenny or George even as they made the arrangements to visit.

When they landed in Calgary in the early evening, Diana was unsure of the reception they would find with their friend.

Lenny met them at the airport. He was smiling and he hugged them both for a long time. He looked older than Diana expected him to be somehow — but she had known him as a young man, barely more than a teenager. Maybe it wasn’t so surprising.

“It’s been a long time,” Lenny said. “We’re glad you came.”

“We’re sorry it wasn’t sooner,” Steve told him.

“It’s a long ways,” Lenny said, shrugging. “We rented a cabin for you.”

“You did not have to do that,” Diana said.

Lenny looked at her briefly and Diana could tell there were things he was not saying. “Having you stay on reserve would have complicated things. Da suggested it. He’s already there.”

Steve’s face — which had done something complicated and uncomfortable before he could mask it — brightened at the mention of Napi. It made Lenny smile and, when Steve wasn’t looking, wink at Diana.

If Lenny looked older than Diana expected, than Napi simply looked old. It did not give Steve pause — it was what he was expecting — but it surprised Diana somehow. Perhaps because she knew it was a guise. Napi met her eyes while Steve was making friends with Lenny’s youngest daughter — the toddler was fascinated by his shiny pocket watch — and shook his head just slightly, asking her to wait. Diana inclined her head in agreement.

It was three days into the visit before she got a chance. Steve’s hip was bothering him — Diana suspected it was due to the cold — and had gone to bed early, having learned decades ago that pushing it would only lead to him being out of commission longer. Lenny had taken the opportunity to take his children home for an early night.

When Diana came back downstairs from helping Steve get settled, Napi was standing by the fire. He still looked no younger but the hunch was gone from his back and he stood as straight and tall as Diana remembered.

“I would like to show you something,” he said.

Diana nodded. She took a step to get her coat, then paused and raised an eyebrow at him.

Napi smiled. “No, I don’t expect we will be seen.”

They left their coats behind and walked up, into the mountains. Diana followed and Napi lead
unerringly through even the darkest, thickest copses of trees until the reached a ledge where the stars swung out in the sky before them.

It was beautiful, cold and clear.

“You know,” Napi said. “Most people would ask me if this was spiritual.”

Diana knew better. Napi did not share those parts of himself with her. “It is a lovely view.”

“Sometimes you can see the Northern Lights,” Napi said. He paused, looking at the sky. “I would bring Steve here if I felt like impressing him.”

“He would not make it,” Diana said.

“He would if you carried him,” Napi replied.

Diana shook her head. “No. Maybe in summer but in winter the air is too cold. He would have too much trouble breathing.”

“I always forget that part of things,” Napi said.

For a long time they were silent, looking at the sky.

“I am not going to tell him this visit,” Napi told her, finally.

Diana sighed. Napi looked over at her. “You’re disappointed.”

“I do not like keeping things from him,” Diana said. “And...it has been hard, having to say goodbye to our dearest friends.”

“Death is always hard,” Napi said and there was a terrible sadness in his voice. “But I am not sure it would not be for the best to let our friendship end naturally, as if I was only the man he thinks I am. Perhaps not for him or you or even me. But I must take other things into consideration.”

“Your people,” Diana said.

She could understand that theoretically but Diana had never been a god the way Napi was. She had been the daughter of the Queen but not raised to be more than that, more than any other Amazon. The world of men had long since stopped believing in her brothers and sisters and she had never sought or wanted followers.

“My people,” Napi agreed. “There are many things I cannot protect them from but I will put their well being above any others. Someone must.”

“I can only agree with you,” Diana said. “Though it breaks my heart for Steve to lose you.”

“And will I lose you as well, if I chose not to tell him?” Napi asked.

“No,” Diana said. She crossed her arms over her chest. It was not a hard decision to make — and if Steve knew, he would have said the same. “No, if you ever need me, I will come. Even if you never tell Steve. Even if I must keep it from him.”

Napi nodded. He looked more surprised than Diana expected him to but he looked pleased as well. “I am sorry to have put you in that position. I would not even consider telling him if I had not seen the way he treats you. As a woman and as a god.”
That surprised Diana but Napi only shrugged when she looked at him. “Lenny likes him well enough too.”

Lenny and Steve had spent far more time in somewhat hushed conversation than Diana had expected. They had during the war too. They just seemed to fall into it.

“Your son knows who you are,” Diana observed.

“Lenny? Yes. George is less sure though sometimes I think he glimpses it,” Napi said and he grinned widely. “I didn’t tell Lenny. He saw me on his own.”

It was that, more than anything, that made Diana hope. That and when Lenny caught her arm in the kitchen the day before they left and nodded to the front door. They went outside, away from the noise and where they were unlikely to be overheard.

“Oh, it’s a cold one,” Lenny said, as he rubbed his hands together and blew on them. “Boston will be a touch warmer, I hope. Steve won’t have such trouble with it.”

“It’s the ocean that worries me,” Diana confessed.

“You have a month still,” Lenny said. “It’ll warm a bit by then.”

“I hope so,” Diana said. She still worried but she could set those worries aside until they got to Boston. She touched Lenny’s arm. “Thank you. For everything. It would have broken our hearts if we did not get the chance to say goodbye.”

Lenny laughed and squinted at her as if he was trying to figure something out. “That’s what I came out to tell you. He’ll tell Steve, eventually. I’m sure of it.”

Diana blinked. Lenny’s face turned more solemn. “It means a lot that you told us the truth, that you’re going home, if you can. You should come back here, when you return. Whatever Da decides, my house is always open to both of you.”

“That is very kind of you,” Diana told him and then, smiling: “Steve was not going to stop writing unless you told him to.”

“He does seem determined,” Lenny said. “He’s already promised Jane postcards from Boston.”

“If it is only a postcard I will be shocked,” Diana said.

“I will too,” Lenny laughed. “And I’ll talk to Da some more. He’ll come around, stubborn Old Man. You’ll see.”

“I believe you,” Diana told him, truthfully.

Steve seemed drained and drawn by the time they reached Boston. Diana had been intrigued and excited to see the place he had grown up — to see the places from the stories he had told her about his family. But from the moment they landed, Steve seemed more ill at ease in his own skin than he had in all the time Diana had known him. At first, Diana thought it was just exhaustion, or that he was getting ill, but rest did not help — it only served to make him more restless.

It was her confusion that propelled him to try and explain.

“I’m fine,” Steve told her and at Diana’s skeptical expression continued: “It’s just strange being back here. I don’t know if I can explain it. I knew it would be different but...”
He looked at her with a melancholy expression on his face. “I never really found a place I fit here before I left the first time. I can't shake that feeling and...I loved this city, I did but, in the end, I lost so much I couldn't stay.”

Diana went and sat beside him on their hotel room bed — they had not made it far from their hotel room since they arrived two days ago. She put his arm through hers and rested her head on his shoulder. He turned and pressed his lips against her hair, inhaling as deeply as he could, before brushing it back and kissing her forehead.

“We can leave early,” Diana said. “We still have to prepare the boat.”

“Do you want to leave early?” Steve asked.

“I wanted to see the places that helped make you who you are,” Diane answered truthfully. “But not if it hurts you to be here.”

“It doesn't hurt, not exactly,” Steve said. “It's like...I don't know. A failed expectation. Or something. I don't think I can explain it.”

He nuded her arm and smiled, small but genuine. “We'll go see my old house. Get that out of the way. And then go find something just tourists visit and think of how snide Ed’s notes in the margin would be.”

They headed out into the brisk morning air. It was not so far that Steve could not walk there so long as they stopped on the way back somewhere. There was a moment where Steve thought he had gotten turned around but they were going the right way in the end. The neighbourhood had just changed that much.

When they arrived, Diana's heart sank. Steve had described the location so well she did not need him to point out the corner where his family's house should have been. She could practically picture it from his stories.

That house was gone. So was the neighbouring house. The corner lot where it has stood has been turned into a drug store but most of where Steve’s house would have stood was a parking lot.

Steve stared at it, dumbfounded. Diana squeezed his hand, looking at him in worry.

He started to laugh. He laughed until it made him clutch at his chest and he had to stop because it was making him wheeze.

“Oh, that's...” Steve rubbed his thumb over his forehead, licked his lips and grinned.

“That is not the reaction I was expecting from you,” Diana said. She felt a little disappointed. She had wanted to see where Steve's family lived.

“Well,” Steve said, smiling more truly than he had since they arrived. “I can either take it as a kick in the pants or...There were a lot of happy times in that house but it's also where my sister died, where my mother was sick and died. It's almost a relief, having it gone. Having the expectation it came with gone.”

Diana wasn't entirely sure she understood that but this had been Steve's home, not hers. The anticipation and joy she felt when she thought of stepping onto the shore of Themyscira again had never been Steve's experience.

Steve turned to her and there was more lightness in his eyes, even as they went soft and tender, his
whole focus shifting to her. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, though it was perfectly placed and he did not need to, before leaning even closer to kiss her briefly.

“I know you wanted to see it,” he said quietly.

“I did,” Diana replied. She took his hand. “I wanted to see if it matched your stories. I have this picture of it in my mind.”

Steve grinned again and tilted his head. He stepped away and gave her hand a tug. “Come on. I’m pretty sure I can find one like it.”

They did, a few streets over and away from the main road. It was a little brown-bricked house, three storeys high, squashed up against its neighbours on both sides.

“I don’t know what it’s like inside then now,” Steve said. “But ours was all squashed little rooms. The kitchen was tiny, it always made my grandma grumble.”

“So she insisted on having lace curtains on the window over the sink,” Diana finished for him. “And made you learn how to make Scottish Fancies when you wouldn’t stop sneaking in and stealing them.”

Steve laughed, a little. Diana grinned at him and he kissed her smile.

“Right. Although, half the time I was stealing them for Nellie,” Steve complained. “But I wasn’t about to snitch on my little sister.”

He glanced at the house again, his smile dimming around the edges. Diana remembered the stories he spoke of more rarely, about his sister and her illnesses, about burying her only to have to bury his father and then his mother in quick succession in the years that followed. About being alone in what had been his home until he couldn’t stand it any longer and had left it behind entirely.

“It feels strange, sometimes, because I haven’t had anything like the life I thought I would have. Everything is so different I can’t even tell what they would think. It’s like it was a different life altogether,” Steve said. “And that’s hard because...because there’s no one left to remember them but me.”

He looked at Diana, kissed her cheek. “Except you.”

Diana brushed her fingers over his cheek. “You have started telling the children stories about your sister recently. You didn’t before.”

“That’s just the fun stuff. It’s not the same,” Steve said. “You have all of me. You have right from the start.”

Diana cupped Steve’s face in her hands. She had not known until much later that Steve even mentioning his family was a rare, rare thing. He tucked those things away and held them close to his heart. But he had told her about his father after knowing her less than a day.

It was more significant than he was saying that he willingly told their nieces and nephews stories about his family.

Diana kissed him briefly. “I’m glad we came here.”

“Me too,” Steve said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. He took a deep breath. “We should go get lunch and then do something fun. Tomorrow, we’ll go see Harvard. I’m sure they haven’t
bulldozed that.”

Diana took his arm. “You are always very dismissive of it. It has been the only thing about you to ever nearly impress Jonathan.”

“Jonathan went to Oxford. It didn’t impress him. It just surprised him,” Steve groused. “And I went for the wrong reasons, hated it and spent most of my time conspiring about how to get out to Ohio again.”

“You dislike Ohio,” Diana commented as they began walking back in the direction of their hotel.

“The Wrights moved to Ohio just about the time I was graduating. No one else was doing what they were yet,” Steve said. He did not look back at where his family’s home had once stood. “I set my sights on Paris later.”

They only had a few more days in Boston, before they had to move down the coast to collect the sailboat they had purchased and finalized it for the trip. But Steve had made an uneasy peace with the city by the time they left. Diana could tell it was still a complicated place for him but it felt less fraught than it had been when they first arrived.

They tested the sailboat they had purchased — it performed admirably. They stocked it with an excessive amount of supplies for the journey. Steve’s health was good and the temperature had warmed enough to be tolerable.

It would take two days to sail to the spot Themyscira should be. Once it was there, they would have twelve hours to find it. They were ready with time to spare.

The morning that they set out, Steve put the last of their postcards in the mail and Diana called Farah. They cradled the receiver between them.

“Hello?” Farah answered, tinny, over the line.

Steve put his hand over his mouth and closed his eyes. He had warned Diana before they called that he thought he might not be able to speak without weeping.

“Hello, Farah,” Diana said, her heart in her throat. “I hope it is not too late.”

“No, I was waiting for you to call,” Farah told her. “Are you all set?”

“We are,” Diana told her. “We are going to the ship after this. We just wanted to hear your voice again before we set out. And to send our love to you and to everyone.”

“I love you too,” Farah said. “Tell Steve...”

“I’m here,” Steve choked. He scrubbed at his eyes harshly and then put his arms around Diana, holding on tight. “I’m here. I’m here.”

Farah was quiet for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was thick. “Good. That’s good. I love you both. Okay? I already know you’ll take care of each other but you do that, okay? And I...I’ve got years left in me yet. So I’ll see you when you get back. I promise. I will be here.”

Diana swallowed. Tears stung her eyes. Farah meant it, completely. She could only hope that the world would not make a liar of her.

“We love you too,” Steve said, voice rough. “And we’ll see you when we get home.”
“You take care of yourself until then,” Diana said. Steve wiped the tears from her cheek.

“I will,” Farah promised.

They all fell silent. It was too hard to say anything more but none of them wanted to hang up.

“You have to go,” Farah told them, finally. “You’ll miss the tide or some such nonsense.”

Steve laughed, the sound painful. “We do. We’ll miss you.”

“You’ll enjoy every minute of it,” Farah said, firmly, as if issuing an order. “And I’ll talk to you when you come back.”

“We will,” Diana said. Her voice wavered. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

The line went dead. Diana turned and buried her face in Steve’s shoulder. He held on to her tightly for a long time but it was Steve who pulled away first. He wiped his face and squeezed her hand.

“Okay,” he said, trying for a smile that did not quite reach his red rimmed eyes. “Let’s get you home.”

They checked out of their hotel room and made their way down to the marina. Diana had left most of her clothing behind. She had what she was wearing — her armour underneath — a change in case they could not find their way to Themyscira, and an outfit to wear when they left again.

She did not plan to wear the trappings of man’s world when she returned home.

Steve boarded the boat. Diana undid the lines and followed.

They pulled away from shore.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this has taken so long to update! It's the second longest chapter so far and in a lot of ways it was harder to write than the Charlie chapter was -there are a lot of transitions/changes happening in this chapter!

I also did not mean to kind of make is a examination of grief when I started writing it but that kind of happened. Sorry for killing almost everyone off?

If you're wondering why this all suddenly got way less historically in depth it's because we're clear of the time period I study most closely. I know a bit about certain things but I'm actively trying to avoid conflicts that I suuuuper don't know enough about to write about in a way that does them justice. And also, there are things I don't know how to include while keeping Diana's character intact because people are awful to each other and World history is kind of horrible a lot of the time.

We're going to get more in depth about Napi in the next chapter, promise. I am not an Indigenous person and the little bit of history I know about Indigenous peoples in Canada is mostly about the Anishinaabe since I live within the Dish With One Spoon
territory and have mostly learned (an incredibly small amount of) Ojibwa history and known a few Ojibwa people.

This is another area that I have no idea how to write about while doing justice to the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada (I am Canadian so I'm sticking to that) and also keeping Diana true to character so, if you're so inclined, here are some things you can read about Canada's incredibly terrible history with its Indigenous people including the Sixties Scoop, which is still ongoing, the Residential School System and, more currently, the boil water advisories and basically starving people in the North due to insane food prices.

Anyway, Napi will be back next chapter.
Early 1980s

The telephone ringing intruded on Steve’s consciousnesses slowly, something he probably could have rolled over and ignored if Diana hadn’t slipped from his arms to go answer it. The noise he made in response to that was entirely undignified. Her low chuckle in response, and the way she smoothed his hair back and kissed his temple, only mollified him for a moment after she was gone.

The ringing stopped a minute after she got out of bed, replaced by the low murmur of her voice from the other room. Steve flopped onto his back, sighed, and then forced himself out of bed to follow her.

Diana was perched on the kitchen table. She did not look surprised when Steve shuffled in after her, only nudged one of the kitchen chairs back with her foot. Steve sat in it and curled over, feeling more foggy than he would have liked, and rested his head on her thigh. Diana threaded her fingers through his hair, nails scratching his scalp gently.

Steve honestly could have fallen back asleep right there. He forced himself to listen to her half of the conversation instead.

“When was the first sighting?” Diana asked. “And no one else has seen it in that time?”

There was a pause. “No. No, I think that was the right choice too. Yes, I understand. I’ll book my ticket in the morning.”

There was another pause. Diana laughed. “It is rather early here. No, don’t apologize. It’s fine. I’m glad you called. Yes. Yes, I’ll see you soon. Yes. Goodbye.”

They were too far away for Diana to hang up the phone but Steve heard the dial tone from the other end. He lifted his head enough to look at her blearily.

“Where are we going?” Steve asked.

Diana stroked his hair. “Back to bed right now.”

“Not urgent then,” Steve said.

“Somewhat urgent,” Diana corrected. “But we’ll have to travel to get there so it will have to wait until morning.”

Steve dragged himself up. Diana put the phone back in it’s cradle and took his arm. Steve didn’t bother to pretend he was doing anything but slumping into her side as they walked back to the bedroom. “Where are we going in the morning then?”

“Alberta,” Diana answered. “That was Lenny. There have been several incidents of something causing trouble.”

Steve frowned, forcing himself to be more alert. “Is anyone hurt?”

“No humans have been targeted yet,” Diana told him. “Though there have been close calls.”
“Livestock?” Steve asked, sitting on the edge of their bed. They had some experience with this now. If something didn’t target humans first, it was either livestock or pets.

“Yes,” Diana told him. “Lenny is sure it isn’t native to the area. He thinks they could probably kill it themselves but he suspects it may simply be lost. He thinks it may be connected to me by past association.”

“Past association?” Steve repeated, distracted. It was late and Diana had taken her robe off again. They were at home, neither of them had made it into pajamas that night.

“He thinks it might be something from before the other gods died,” Diana replied. “Something from my people’s history. If it is, he wants me to weigh in on it’s fate.”

“Oh,” Steve said.

Diana nudged him. Steve got the idea and let his own robe drop, sliding back into bed. He curled against her side, sliding his hand over her abdomen and kissing her shoulder.

Diana turned her head to kiss him slowly. “You’re tired and still half asleep.”

“Mmm,” Steve said, not able to disagree but not agreeing either.

“If you fall asleep on me I will be cross,” Diana told him, a hint of laughter in her voice. She kissed him again, lightly. “Go back to sleep.”

Steve thought she was probably right. But still.

“Rain check for the morning?” He bargained as if, now that he was warm and comfortable and her arms were around him, his eyes weren’t already too heavy to keep open.

Diana chuckled. “I am going to hold you to that.”

They did not get out of bed until nearly noon the next day.

Steve called to book their flights and Diana called Lenny back to confirm when they were coming and go over the details again. There was not an entirely clear picture of what it was they were going after. The people who had reported seeing it described different things and half of those who had seen it, even if it was only a glimpse, had some disaster befall them shortly after. The deer and cattle they had found remnants of looked like they had been eaten by a large cat but the teeth marks did not match any of the species that lived in the area.

It hadn’t even killed anyone yet - though at least one farmer who had seen it had died later, when his motor boat capsized on a fishing trip a few days later. Two other men, one of whom reported seeing it had been swept away in a flash flood.

It wasn’t the weirdest thing they had heard of since they came back from Themyscira.

Steve wondered at his life sometimes.

They landed in Calgary in early afternoon. Steve was groggy and his head was pounding, Diana’s surreptitious support only just keeping him on his feet as they waited in arrivals. He closed his eyes for a moment - the dizziness was starting to fade, at least. There were some flights he was fine on but others...

“Well?” Steve heard Lenny asked.
“He will be,” Steve answered for himself, forcing his eyes open even though it made him feel less steady again.

Lenny looked worried. He was already coming forward and took Steve’s other arm.

“There were smokers on the plane,” Diana said.

Lenny glanced at someone - and for a moment Steve thought...but no, he just couldn’t see who it was properly and he had to focus too much on putting one foot in front of the other. He had no idea where they were going, the car, he hoped. “You weren’t in the no smoking section?”

Lenny had been a pilot during WWII. He hadn’t taken to it the way Steve had but he understood enough to know how Steve felt about it and he knew Steve already had trouble with longer flights.

“We were. It makes little difference,” Diana answered. Steve could tell she was scowling. It had been an unpleasant flight for both of them. “I wish they would ban them.”

“I’ll be fine in a few hours,” Steve said, hoarsely.

“He may be well tomorrow,” Diana corrected. “But he will have to take it easy for a few days.”

Steve grunted but he was too relieved by the sight of the car to argue. He would be functional in a few hours, if he had to be. He and Diana just had different definitions of fine sometimes.

It was a relief to sit down. Steve tilted his head back against the back of the car seat, his eyes closed. If he just concentrated on breathing the rest of his faulty body would fall into line sooner than if he tried to push himself through it. In another few minutes, Diana slide into the seat beside him. All four of the car’s doors shut in quick succession. Steve frowned - that was one more than there should be.

But then Diana was guiding his head to her shoulder and if Steve was being honest, the trip from the gate to the parking lot had taken up all the strength he could muster for now. For a few minutes, he felt like he was drifting, aware enough to know the car had started and they were leaving the airport and to understand the low murmur of voices around him, but not enough to open his eyes again.

By the time they hit the highway he was deeply asleep.

Steve woke up alone late the next morning, the sun streaming through the window. He felt groggy still but better - enough that Diana would have probably even said he was fine. He had no memory of getting to the cabin let alone getting to bed, which probably meant Diana carried him. He could tell she hadn’t been in bed with him for at least a couple hours so she had judged him well enough or the situation urgent enough to leave him.

He was just glad, as he put his brace on and got ready for the day, that he hadn’t managed to throw his hip out as well. That would have been a nightmare.

Lenny was sitting at the kitchen table when Steve made it downstairs. There was a map in front of him. He looked older than Steve expected. He didn’t know if it was because they didn’t see him as much or just because they were getting older, his friends’ children. All of them. It made Steve’s heart lurch a little.

Lenny looked up and grinned when he saw Steve. It eased some of the years on his face.

“Feel any better?” He asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said, coming to join him. His throat was still sore from coughing and his chest felt
tight and achy when he breathed too deeply but it felt like it was getting better, not worse. “Hopefully I’ll avoid a chest infection.”

Lenny winced in sympathy. He gestured to the kitchen counter before Steve could sit down. “There’s coffee.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, diverting his course. “You want some?”

“No thanks,” Lenny said.

Steve poured himself a cup. Lenny watched him as he turned around and came back to sit at the table with him.

Lenny gestured toward him with his pencil. “Your limp changed.”

Steve took a sip of the coffee. It helped wake him up just not as much as he would have liked. “They made me a brace on Themyscira. Took awhile to get used to it but wearing it means my hip goes out less.”

“Hey, that’s great,” Lenny said. He smiled, looking genuinely pleased to hear it.

“It really is,” Steve agreed. He nodded at the map. “Are those sightings?”

“Mmm,” Lenny answered. He glanced at the map and then back at Steve. It almost felt like he was hesitating. “New one came in this morning. Diana went to check it out. Took a friend of mine with her. He’s a pretty good tracker. Doubt they find anything though.”

“It disappears that fast?” Steve asked.

“Haven’t had more than the first people that spot it see it,” Lenny told him. “That’s all we’ve had to go on. That and the remains we found. Goes after deer mostly.”

“Diana mentioned the bite marks looked like a big cat’s,” Steve said.

Lenny nodded. “Too big for a lynx and not the right shape for a cougar. That’s not the strange thing though.”

“Oh?” Steve asked.

“The carcasses we’ve found, they’ve always had a second set of bite marks,” Lenny said. “Not scavengers, either. They’re small, just two punctures, like a set of fangs.”

“Like a snake?” Steve said, frowning.

Lenny shrugged. “Never seen a snake go after a deer like that before.”

“Huh,” Steve said.

“Think we got a range for it when it’s in the area, though,” Lenny said. Steve looked at the pencilled in circle on the map and the marked sightings all clustered together in a few distinct spots. “Looks smaller than a big cat’s should be. And then there are times when it just up and disappears. There’s no sightings, no incidents for weeks. We think it’s lost. It’s not from here. We’re sure of that.”

“Diana will figure out what to do with it, whatever it is,” Steve said, then grudges: “Just once I would like to deal with an escaped Amazonian armadillo and not whatever the Greek gods left behind this time.”
Lenny paused. “Amazonian armadillos?”

“Yeah, they scamper around Themyscira like...well, like raccoons but less annoying and less likely
to overturn your garbage can,” Steve said. “I found it weird. Diana finds it weird that they aren’t
more abundant here.”

Lenny grinned, looking amused. “Yeah, I’d take that instead too.”

Steve smiled. He’d always liked Lenny. “If we ever get that lucky, we’ll swing by with it before we
take it back to Themyscira.”

“Might have to make a pit stop in Toronto too,” Lenny said. “Jane always loved anything roley
poley like that. Used to bring home potato bugs by the handful in the summer.”

Steve laughed. “Of course. How’s she doing, anyway? Her letters to us are...sporadic.”

Lenny beamed, proud and loving and just a little sad. “School kept her busy. It was a tough program,
you know. And now she’s clerking for some big law firm.”

He fumbled for his wallet, pulled out a picture of his daughter and handed it to Steve. “Sent me that
just last week.”

Jane looked very serious in the picture, it looked like she had had it taken professionally. It didn’t
quite match up with the little girl Steve remembered. He wished they had managed to stay in closer
touch with Chief’s family. The letters and sporadic phone calls weren’t the same as seeing them.

After they returned from Themyscira, Steve and Diana had made the point of travelling more but that
wasn’t enough. They hadn’t seen Lenny’s daughters in over ten years.

“You should drop by on your way home,” Lenny said as if reading his mind. “Maybe call first
though. Jane spends a lot of time working and Cathy is coming up on exams.”

“We should,” Steve agreed. “Our flight home isn't booked yet. It's easy enough to add a stop over.”

“Good.” Lenny said, smiling again. He got up to refill his coffee mug. “Cathy’s coming home for the
summer. She’s angling to get an internship here. I’m glad. Been hard, having both of them away.”

Steve looked at the picture of Jane again. He couldn’t get over how different Jane looked and he
couldn’t pin point exactly why. There were still physical traces of the chubby cheeked little girl and
energetic teenager in her face.

Steve cleared his throat. “Are George’s boys still in the Montana?”

Chief’s oldest son, George, had died in a car accident before Steve and Diana got back from
Themyscira. They had been young men, when their father died, and they were even older now.
Steve had managed to keep up a correspondence with one of them. But he hadn’t seen them since
they were teenagers.

Lenny nodded, coming to sit down again. “Yeah. With their Mum. She’s not doing so well. Cancer.”

Steve looked up sharply. “Do they need anything?”

Lenny shook his head. “Da left us enough. They’re using it to take care of her but didn’t seem like
there was much to be done, last time I talked to them.”

Steve winced. “Yeah, that’s...the way it goes, sometimes, I guess. If there is anything we can do...”
“I’ll tell them,” Lenny said, looking at Steve closely, a question in his eyes.

Steve answered it, without being asked. “They just called it a canker, when my mother died, but it was probably cancer. There wasn’t really anything they could do. It took her two years to die.”

“You took care of her,” Lenny said.

It wasn’t really a question. Steve answered anyway: “Yeah.”

His mother had been older, at least, and not in too much pain until near the end. His sister had been too young when she died and his father’s death had been completely unexpected. They had all been gone within three years.

“I think George Jr. is having the hardest go of it,” Lenny said. “Dunno how he would react to you trying to sympathize though.”

“It’s probably been about a year since I had a letter from him,” Steve said. It wasn’t that surprising. George’s correspondence had been as sporadic as his sons’ was. “I’ll try giving him a call.”

Lenny nodded. “I’ll let him know. He’s not taking many calls, these days.”

Steve nodded. He understood that feeling. “Can’t say I blame him.”

There was a hesitation in Lenny’s face and for a moment Steve thought he might say something more. But in the next moment the front door opened and they both looked over as Diana came striding in. She was wearing a cloak but it was open at the front, revealing her armour and she was carrying her sword and shield.

She smiled when she saw them and sheathed her sword. “It is the Chimera. You were right to call.”

Lenny blinked. “You saw it?”

“No,” said a man, coming in behind her. “We couldn’t track it. I showed her the carcasses.”

Lenny was nodding. Steve stared. He was sure he had never seen the man before - Lenny’s tracker friend, he assumed - but Steve just...he knew him, he was sure.

“This is my friend,” Lenny said. There was a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Bob.”

The man gave him such an unimpressed look that Steve would have known that wasn’t his name even if he hadn’t felt such an intense sense of familiarity.

“Hi,” Steve said, staring at him for a moment. He cleared his throat. “Have we met before?”

“Last night,” the man - Bob, which definitely wasn’t his name - said.

“I was out of it last night,” Steve said. But he knew himself and his limitations well. He had not been that out of it.

“How are you feeling now?” Diana asked.

“Fine,” Steve said automatically, even as she came forward and brushed his hair back. “Not 100% but fine.”

Diana kissed his forehead. Steve closed his eyes for a moment, little more than a blink, leaning into her closeness. When he opened them again “Bob” was gone.
Lenny noticed his surprise and shrugged, that hint of...something back in his eyes. “He does that. Good tracker though.”

Steve got the feeling Diana was resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

“So,” Lenny said. “A chimera?”


“I don’t know much of that lore,” Lenny said. “Head of a lion, butt of a goat, snake stuck somewhere on the back there?”

He spoke with his hands, drawing a much clearer picture of a lion’s mane, goat’s hooves and snake with them then Steve would have expected.

“Close. The goat head sticks out of it’s back in most depictions,” Steve told him. “The snake is the tail.”

Diana nodded. “I will have to speak to me uncle.”

Lenny and Steve both looked at her, faces still. It was Lenny who spoke. “Your uncle?”

“Yes,” Diana answered.

“Which uncle?” Lenny asked. He looked slightly baffled.

“She’s only got one uncle who survived the battle with Ares,” Steve replied. “Hades.”

“You can not kill the God of the Dead,” Diana told him. “The Underworld holds too high a claim on him.”

Lenny took that in stride. “Okay. I’m guessing it’s not as easy as a phone call.”

Diana smiled. Her hand had drifted to Steve’s shoulder. “No. I will need a place of burial.”

Lenny suddenly looked wary. His hands tightened around his coffee mug. “Why?”

“It is easier to get his attention there,” Diana said. “Any graveyard will do.”

“Are you going to yell at the ground or bury a letter?” Steve asked.

Diana gave him a look. Steve didn’t waver. He wasn’t wrong. Those were the two options.

Dealing with Diana’s other relatives always seemed strange to him, even the ones that were, theoretically, on their side. Steve did not think he would ever be friends with Hippolyta but they understood each other and he respected her.

Hades was another thing all together.

Diana wrinkled her nose before she answered, not entirely happy to concede it. “A letter, I think. It would take too long to explain otherwise.”

“And people generally don’t like it when you start shouting in graveyards at midnight,” Steve said, seriously.

Diana narrowed her eyes at him. Steve couldn’t help but grin. It didn’t take more than a moment for
her to smile back. She brushed his hair back again. It didn’t need it but she thought it was too long and wanted him to cut it.

“Wait,” Lenny said. “You’re serious?”

“It does not have to be at midnight,” Diana said. “The time of day does not matter.”

“There are usually fewer people around then to notice the ground start shaking, though,” Steve said and admitted. “I don’t always understand it, the god stuff. But I’m in no position to complain.”

Lenny’s grin was strangely knowing. “Can’t argue with that.”

He looked at Diana. “You’re sure any burial place works?”

“I know Père Lachaise works,” Diana said. “I have never had to test another. I have not had much cause to seek out my uncle.”

“Why would it matter?” Steve asked, honestly confused.

Lenny looked at him patiently. “The gods of those people might take issue. The people buried there might not take so kindly to it either.”

Steve stared. “Uh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Lenny grinned and took a sip of his coffee. “I’d hate for the message to get lost because of a break in the line.”

Diana looked thoughtful. Steve considered the deceased population of Père Lachaise.

“I don’t know if there would be any, uh, actual worshippers of the Greek Gods buried in Lachaise,” Steve said. “But...at least some of them would have known their stories and taken some kind of truth from them. I don’t know. Would that make a difference? Are there any Greek cemeteries around here?”

“We may have to drive away,” Lenny said. “But they’ll be one with at least some of that sort.”

“It is worth being sure,” Diana decided. “If necessary we can make a test of it later, to see if the type of burial ground matters. But that can wait until time is less pressing.”

“Can’t you just ask?” Lenny asked. Diana looked at him, confused. “You said you were writing him a letter, right?”

“I have not thought to trouble the God of the Dead with such things,” Diana said solemnly. Steve had to hide his grin. No one realized it when Diana was pulling their leg. Lenny just blinked at her. After a moment, Diana let herself grin. “I will. I can see no harm in asking.”

Lenny scouted around and found a cemetery that had, at least, Greek surnames adorning some of the headstones. It was not particularly close by and early evening found them piling into Lenny’s car again, a slim envelope tucked in Diana’s pocket.

“Bob is going to meet us there,” Lenny told them as they pulled onto the highway.

Diana raised an eyebrow at that. Steve rolled his eyes. “I know his name isn’t Bob.”

“I know,” Lenny said with a grin. “But if he’s not going to give you his name, that’s what I’m going to call him.”
Steve found that interesting. Lenny seemed just a touch annoyed that his tracker friend was...keeping things from them. Or at least Steve.

“He did not need to come,” Diana said. “In all likelihood, it would have been swifter and easier if I had done this on my own.”

“I wanted to see this,” Lenny said, tipping his head in her direction and smiling still. “Steve made it sound interesting.”

Diana snorted and caught Steve’s eyes in the rear view mirror to give Steve a look. Steve stifled a grin and shrugged. “I’ve been cooped up all day.”

Diana attempted to look displeased but she couldn’t hide the smile that played around her lips. Steve had the sudden urge to kiss her. It was an impulse he knew well.

“So’s Hades going to show up?” Lenny asked. “Like, rise out of the earth or something?”

“No,” Diana said. “Or it is unlikely. From my understanding, he has not left his own realm since the battle with Ares. He sends...notes when he needs to.”

Lenny was silent for a moment. When he spoke, he sounded baffled. “How?”

“They just appear,” Steve said.

“It has not happened enough for us to discover the mechanism behind it,” Diana explained. “We have only done this twice before and he has only contacted me once of his own volition.”

But Lenny was nodding as if that made sense to him. “I have heard of stranger things.”

There had been a point in his life when that would have baffled Steve but the last sixty years of his life meant he rarely dismissed anything out of hand. And Lenny knew Diana, an actual demi-god, and Steve, still looked like he was in his thirties when he should have died of old age years ago...and that wasn’t even taking into account the explosion that should have killed him.

And they were trying to trap a chimera. *The C himera*, as Diana had said. Steve was pretty sure that was supposed to be dead too.

Letters that simply appeared didn’t seem so outlandish when all of that was considered.

The graveyard visit was almost anticlimactic. “Bob” met them at the gates, greeting them with a silent nod. They waited nearby, keeping a look out, as Diana ventured further inside, right to the heart of the place.

She knelt down, made a fist and pounded it against the ground so hard the earth shook. She dug into the nearly manicured grass with her bare hands and buried the letter under the earth before standing, wiping her hands on her pants and beginning toward them again.

“That’s it?” Lenny asked.

Steve shrugged. “She did say we didn’t have to come.”

Lenny huffed good naturedly. “I just expected something...more.”

“The first time she yelled at the ground instead of, ah, sending a letter,” Steve said. “That was...it was more ridiculous anyway.”
Lenny chuckled and patted Steve’s shoulder before squeezing once. “I know a place we can stop for a bite to eat on the way back. So we didn’t drive two hours for-”

“There!” “Bob” shouted suddenly, pointing behind Diana.

Diana whipped her head around and they both took off at a run in the direction of the woods near the back of the cemetery. Steve saw a blur of motion fading into the trees but couldn’t make out anything more than that. In another moment, Diana and “Bob” disappeared in the same spot in pursuit.

“Well shit,” Steve said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

He looked at Lenny and was taken about at how pale he suddenly seemed. Lenny looked back at him and didn’t make any attempt to pretend he wasn’t shaken.

“That’s the closest I’ve come to it,” Lenny told him.

“I didn’t really see it,” Steve admitted. “It’s that grotesque?”

Lenny shook his head. “I didn’t get a good look either. It’s a bad omen.”

“Of shipwrecks,” Steve said. “And volcanoes. I think we’ll be okay.”

Lenny did not look convinced but he didn’t say anything more. They stood there in the dark and silence. It was too quiet. The cemetery was on the edge of town but it was early Spring and there should have been the sounds of...birds or animals or something.

There wasn’t.

After twenty minutes or so, Lenny broke the silence. “Should we wait?”

“Diana would tell us to go back to the cabin,” Steve said. “Will your friend be all right, though?”

Lenny blinked as if he had just been reminded of “Bob’s” presence. After a moment, he nodded. “He found his own way here. He’ll be okay getting back.”

Diana and Bob had not returned when Steve and Lenny got back but to the cabin they could see a trail of smoke rising in the distance. Lenny stopped on the front porch to stare at it. Steve felt a strange sense of foreboding.

“The Chimera,” Lenny said. “It breathes fire, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does,” Steve answered.

“Picked up a police scanner when this all started. I brought it with me when we were setting up here for your visit,” Lenny said, still looking at the smoke. “Should probably have a listen now. See if anyone’s reported it. It’s not ideal conditions for a forest fire but they can get out control awful fast.”

They went inside. Lenny stopped abruptly. There was a crisp white envelope sitting on the kitchen table.

“That usual?” he asked, looking at Steve.

Steve shrugged. “It’s not unusual.”

The envelope was addressed to Diana in a neat, precise hand. They looked at each other. It was immediately apparent that neither of them was going to open the letter - not when it wasn’t addressed
to them. Steve wasn't sure Lenny would have opened it even if it had been addressed to them.

“Scanner’s in the front room anyway,” Lenny said, jerking his head in that direction.

They left the letter where it was.

From what the could tell, the fire was under control, though two houses had been destroyed. No one had been killed, which was lucky because one family hadn’t had working fire alarms. They were being treated for smoke inhalation because they were claiming a woman had busted into their house and carried them outside. Police suspected arson.

The police were speculating whether the arsonist could have come back to get the family out when Lenny’s phone rang. Steve hauled himself up and followed when he went to answer it, worried that it was Diana.

“Hello?” Lenny said. Then he grimaced and looked at Steve. “No. No, Georgie, of course I have some time for you.”

He didn’t look away and Steve could see the wariness and conflict on his face. Steve took the hint and gestures vaguely towards the front door before stepping out onto the porch to give him some privacy.

It wasn’t a bad night. Cloudy but not too cool and the smoke seemed to have cleared up. Steve avoided the Muskoka chairs sitting on the porch, getting in and out of them always made his hip twinge, and leaned against the wooden railing instead.

He hadn’t been out there long when he heard a sound behind him. He would admit he turned with some trepidation but it was Diana and “Bob” walking out of the forest.

“No luck?” Steve called.

Diana shook her head. She looked surprised to see him outside by himself. “Is everything all right?”

“Lenny’s on the phone,” Steve told her. He jerked his thumb towards the door though. “There’s a letter waiting.”

Diana only hesitated a moment before ducking inside to get that letter, which told Steve all he needed to know about how the pursuit of the chimera went. Steve was surprised when “Bob” didn’t take the opportunity to disappear. He was watching Steve carefully.

“We heard the fire was under control. That there was a fire,” Steve said, just for something to say. “So, I guess the part about the chimera breathing fire is true.”

“It is,” “Bob” replied.

“Did you come close to catching it or...?” Steve asked.

“Close enough that it felt threatened,” he said. He hadn’t blinked or looked away from Steve even for a moment. “But not close enough to catch.”

“Right. Well, hopefully Diana’s, ah, uncle will have something.” Steve said but he was distracted. He couldn’t shake the sense that he knew this man, the intense familiarity that overtook him if they spent more than a minute in each other’s company.

“Are you sure we’ve never met before?” Steve asked.
“Bob” was silent for a long moment. “Last night when you got here. I was there.”

Steve shook his head. “No, that’s not it.”

“Bob” didn’t answer. After an even longer silence, Steve realized he wasn’t going to.

Steve rubbed the back of his head and sighed. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. Maybe he just...missed his old friends.

Maybe...

Lenny stuck his head out the door. He glanced at “Bob” with a frown and then looked at Steve. He looked tired and sad.

“How’s George?” Steve asked. He was looking at Lenny when he said it but he felt “Bob” look at his sharply.

“Hard to say,” Lenny shrugged. “Diana’s opened the letter. You should come in.”

Steve didn’t have to be told twice but Lenny looked at “Bob” pointedly. Steve wanted to get to the bottom of what was going on with him but the Chimera seemed more important and he trusted Diana and Lenny to know what they were doing.

Diana was sitting at the table reading her uncle’s letter. She looked up when they came back inside, first Steve, then Lenny and “Bob” following.

She frowned at Steve. “You should sit down.”

“I’m fine,” Steve said but he did sit down gratefully. He nodded at the letter. There was a single page and not a lot of writing. “What’s he say?”

Diana sighed. “Very little. He says that the Chimera will not be caught tonight but we are likely to have more luck soon. If we can lure her into the graveyard again, he should be able to reclaim her - apparently she has been missing for some time and Cerberus misses his sibling.”

“How do we lure it?” Lenny asked.

“After, I will be a draw. You are right that she is a stranger here and she will find me familiar,” Diana said. “There is little left of the world she knew.”

“After what?” “Bob” asked.

Diana shook her head. “He does not say.”

Steve rubbed his forehead. “That’s not foreboding or anything.”

Lenny snorted. They shared a smile. With a glint in his eye, Lenny asked: “Does it have to be the same graveyard or will any do?”

Diana grinned a little. “He does not know. I do not believe it is something he has ever considered before. He says that the only people who ever try to write with him now are over dramatic poets or me.”

Diana frowned at the piece of paper: “I cannot tell if he finds the first annoying or amusing.”

Lenny and Steve both laughed. Even “Bob” smiled a little. Diana grinned but then she put the letter
down, sighed and stretched.

“There is nothing more to do tonight,” she declared. “The Chimera disappeared during the fire. We could find no trace of her. We will have to begin again tomorrow.”

“It would be helpful if we knew what after meant,” Steve said.

“I suspect we will know it when we see it,” Diana said.

There was no sight of the Chimera the next day or the next. On the third morning, Lenny rushed into the room when Steve was making breakfast.

“It’s happened,” he said. “It’s on the tv.”

Diana and Steve followed him back out into the front room.

On the television, there was grainy footage of smoke billowing out of Mount St. Helens.

Lenny and Steve looked at each other. Lenny said grimly: “Volcanoes and shipwrecks.”

Steve remembered that the first person to die after having seen the Chimera had drowned after a motorboat long accident.

Diana got up abruptly. Her sword and shield had never been far from her reach since they arrived. She grabbed them both.

“I have to go,” she said.

She stopped very briefly to touch Steve’s face.

“I love you,” Steve told her.

Diana smiled and to kissed him gently. “I love you too. Be careful.”

They saw her begin to run as she left the cabin, faster than should have been possible. She leapt - and then she was gone.

“You should call your friend,” Steve said after a moment. Lenny looked at him, clearly confused. “The tracker. Call it off until Diana’s back. I know he’s not what you’re telling me he is but we don’t know if Hades will respond to anyone but Diana. We don’t want anyone to get hurt trying to catch the Chimera before we can actually trap it.”

Lenny stared at him and then, strangely, Steve thought, smiled. “I’ll let him know.”

They spent most of the day drifting between the television - they left it on just in case there were updates - and the kitchen table. Lenny had laid out all the information he had gathered and started trying to piece together where the Chimera might have been when it had disappeared. He had kept a stack of newspapers from the last couple months and they started slowly going through it, trying to find what they hadn’t realized was connected at first glance.

Steve wasn’t sure there was much point to it. The local papers had some international coverage but didn’t go far enough afield with natural disaster and flooding reporting to track the Chimera’s movements outside of the province. It was tedious, uneventful and it felt fruitless. The only useful thing Steve felt like he did was when George Jr. asked to speak to him on the phone, briefly. They had stuck to pleasantries and George Jr. sounded awful but at least that door was open if only a crack.
Diana came back three days after the initial eruption, so grimy and covered in ash it made Steve cough just to be near her until she went to wash up.

“I have not heard the death toll,” was the first thing Diana said after she had come downstairs again.

“They don’t have an exact count yet,” Steve said. “They think around sixty.”

Diana sighed, nodded and went outside again to sit on the porch. Steve didn’t wait even a moment before following her.

Diana was looking out at the forest. She didn’t look up when Steve joined her - she had expected him to. She waited until he settled beside her and then rested her head on his shoulder. Steve laced their fingers together and they sat there watching the sun go down.

“How bad was it?” Steve asked.

Diana shrugged. “I have seen worse destruction. I have even seen worse natural disasters. But the thought that I might have prevented it if we could have captured the Chimera more swiftly...”

Steve tucked her hair back behind her ear. “You showed me Hades’ letter. It didn’t sound like you could stop it.”

“There should always be a way,” Diana said.

“The thing is, my understanding of the Chimera was that it was a portend of natural disaster but that it wasn’t usually the cause,” Steve said. “It was there because of the eruption. It was drawn there because it was going to happen already. The eruption didn’t happen because of it. But that’s just my understanding of it.”

Diana looked at him, impossibly fond. She stroked her hand over his jawline and then kissed him briefly. Steve grinned crookedly for a moment and his fingers drifted up and down her arm as she rested her head on his shoulder again.

“The thing I really don’t understand is why it’s here,” Steve wondered aloud. “Why it kept coming here instead of staying at Mount St Helens.”

Diana sighed. “I have an idea of that.”

Steve frowned slightly. “Oh?”

Diana looked up at him. Steve could tell there was something she wasn’t saying. He almost asked but there were headlights turning up the road, out of the woods and in the next moment “Bob” pulled up in what Steve was sure was Lenny’s truck.

He looked wary when he got out and saw them there. He and Diana shared a look but Steve couldn’t tell what it meant. Diana stirred, sitting up to say something.

A noise - a horrible noise - came from the forest beyond. Steve felt goosebumps break out over his entire body.

Diana rose from her seat immediately. Lenny banged out the front door in the next moment. He mused have heard the noise, Steve realized. Diana held her hand out for him to stop, to stay still. “Bob” backed up onto the porch.

The Chimera materialized from between the trees. It was somehow smaller than Steve would have
thought and not objectively frightening but there was something about the way it moved, the way it was put together - it was seamless, strangely perfect and yet also utterly not meant to be. And there was...a sense, an energy to it, that portended doom.

A bad omen, like Lenny has said, and it was staring straight at them.

It made that sound again. “Bob” was standing in front of Lenny as if to shield him. Diana...

Diana was moving forward, her sword drawn, a challenge in her eyes.

She darted forward, the Chimera retreated back into the trees, and before Steve could even get to his feet they were gone.

“Hell,” Steve said, getting to his feet anyway. He only went as far as the porch railing. There was nothing else he could do.

“If I never have to see anything like that again, it’ll be too soon,” Lenny said, a little shaky.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. Thinking about it too closely made Steve shiver. It was easier for keep his focus, his worry, on Diana.

Lenny looked at him. “Will Diana be okay?”

Steve nodded. “There’s no reason to think she won’t be. Even if she confronts it head on, she’s a god. I don’t think the Chimera is that powerful.”

“It’s not,” “Bob” said.

Steve looked over at him, surprised to hear him speak. He seemed to avoid it, at least in Steve’s presence. Steve wanted to press, to ask again and again why “Bob” felt so familiar it was painful. He did not like not knowing and he was frustrated by everything he couldn’t do, as he always was when Diana ran toward danger and he couldn’t follow.

But he didn’t. He had asked twice. If the man wanted to keep his secrets, Steve supposed he had a right to them.

Steve just nodded at him instead, bracing himself against the railing and looking out into the night. He would wait out here awhile, he thought.

He felt more than saw, “Bob” shift on the stairs and heard Lenny take a step closer and ask: “You leaving?”

“No,” “Bob” said. “Think I’ll stay awhile.”

“Oh. Oh, okay,” Lenny said and Steve could hear the smile in his voice. “Well. Can’t say I’m not glad to hear that.”

The door opened and shut with a soft bang. Steve looked over surprised. Lenny had gone inside. “Bob” was studying him.

Steve got the impression he was being weighed. He remembered, suddenly and vividly, the first time he had met Chief. He had just come off a trench raid - a bad one, though they were all bad. A flare had gone up and they had been stuck in no man’s land for hours. Half his guys had been killed and their prisoner and the two wounded men they had tried to bring home had died in a shell hole, waiting. Steve had been freezing, his lips turning blue, and numb from so much more than cold by
the time they staggered back to the British lines.

He hadn't known what to make of the tall smuggler he found selling cigarettes and booze to the boys when he had been debriefed and was heading back to the reserve trench. There were a few furtive glances in his direction, he was an officer, after all, but Charlie was there and knew him well enough to know Steve wasn't about to begrudge the men any comfort they could find.

The smuggler looked him over and Steve got the sense his worth was being weighed but there wasn't the strength left in him to straighten his spine and put up a front. Anything he needed a smuggler couldn't give, not in that moment, but Steve had never been one to spur a potential contact and...he didn't know. There was something else and Steve was too worn to do anything but trust his intuition.

“The name’s Steve,” Steve said, inclining his head and offering his hand. “Lieutenant Steve Trevor. Thanks for...” he nodded his head, the men seemed lighter, despite everything. “Well. Thanks.”

The man didn't smile but something changed in his eyes. He took Steve’s hand and grasped it firmly. “They call me Chief, friend.”

Steve had found Chief at a fire back of the line later that night, after he spent too much time on the phone with intelligence. The warmth and the man’s quiet company providing what he needed in the end, after all. A blessing, in a long and terrible war.

Steve knew something of that memory must have shown on his face “Bob”, who was definitely not Lenny’s tracker friend, reached out and clapped him on the shoulder as if to steady him.

“You always did see too much,” the man said amiably. “Even if you didn’t always know what you were looking at.”

There was a moment of strange stillness and then something shifted. Either his face changed or something fell away from Steve’s eyes so he could see him properly for the first time...since before they left for Themyscira, Steve thought.

Steve blinked, suddenly looking into the face of one of his dearest friends.

“Well, that’s neat,” he said, unable to think of anything else.

Napi laughed at him and the sound made Steve smile. Something in his chest felt looser as if a loneliness he hadn’t even know he was carrying with him was suddenly cut free.

“Shit,” Steve said and hugged him because what else was he going to do?

Napi hugged him back, thumping him on the back. He had always been stronger and taller than Steve but Steve noticed the difference more now that he was thinner and less steady on his feet.

“What the hell?” Steve said. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“You’re taking this well,” Napi said. He pulled back but kept a hold of Steve’s shoulder, looking at him from an arm’s length. Steve got the impression that he had wanted to do it since they had arrived but kept himself from it.

“Diana knew,” Steve said because he was absolutely sure of that. There were several things that suddenly made sense, a puzzle coming together because he had the final piece. “I want to know why, of course I want to know why, but Diana knew so I can imagine there was a good reason.”

He still felt the idea that Napi wouldn’t want him to know he was still alive like a short, sharp punch
low in his gut. But he couldn’t imagine there wasn’t a reason for it and besides, it wasn’t everyday he found out one of the friends who truly knew him wasn’t as dead as he thought.

Napi nodded. “Diana knew. Diana always knew. It took her awhile to realize no one else did.”

He let go of Steve and gestured to the chairs. “You should sit down. I’ll explain what I can.”

“You’re as bad as Diana,” Steve said but he did sit. His hip twinged but he ignored it. “So Diana always knew. I’m not completely clear on what she always knew.”

“That I am like her but also not like her,” Napi said.

“So a demigod?” Steve asked.

Napi did not nod or shake his head. “Diana is a god without a people. She is of her Amazons, they are not of her. I am Napi, the Old Man. I shaped this land and the people that were first created here and the animals that used to roam here. And then I rested for a while and when I woke...”

Napi shook his head. “It’s different when you have a people.”

Napi glanced over his shoulder. Steve looked. He could see Lenny through the window with his back to them. He was on the phone.

“That’s why I said nothing to you. Above all, I have to do what’s best for my people. I’m not sure you knowing is for best,” Napi said. “Sometimes I think I slept for too long.”

Steve digested that. Or he tried to. He couldn’t think of what to say except: “Lenny knows?”

Napi nodded.

Steve realized something else. “George didn’t.”

Napi sighed. His shoulders slumped, barely perceptible, but Steve saw it. “Sometimes he almost did. He wanted to. But he hadn’t yet when he died.”

The thought of that made Steve unspeakably sad. George had always been quieter, more wary and serious than Lenny but that didn’t mean it would have meant any less to him.

Napi smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. There were over two centuries of sorrow in it. “They are all my children, you know. Lenny and George...there was no one else to take them, when they were orphaned. But they are all my sons and daughters and they have suffered so much pain. But we are still here. And I will do nothing that endangers them.”

He said it with a fierceness that made Steve swallow and feel vaguely ashamed. He knew a little about what happened to Napi’s people but by no means did he know everything. Napi, his family, they had rarely brought it up directly and Steve had never pushed. He knew enough to know that a part of him didn’t want to know the whole truth of it.

“I don’t think I can know what that’s like but I can see why you made that choice,” Steve said carefully. “Why tell me now?”

Napi was quiet for a moment. “It was never a fair thing to ask of Diana. She hated it from the moment she knew she was keeping a secret from you.”

Steve smiled a little. “That’s Diana. I can’t say I liked it much when I realized she was but I understood it. I’ve no right to demand that of her.”
“Mmm. It’s not something I like asking of her,” Napi said. “And you’ve never meant any harm. I learned a long time ago that does not mean you will never do any harm, but you haven’t yet in word or deed. When Lenny called, you came, and I know you have tried to be a friend to them.”

Steve shook his head. “It hasn’t been enough.”

“Your actions alone never could be,” Napi said, gently, as though that would take the sting out of it. “And I hope I am making the right decision, that my trust is not misplaced. I have missed my friend.”

Steve felt a pang of longing for Etta and Charlie. Sameer. His family. He couldn’t imagine how much worse it had to be for Napi, who must have experienced it before, again and again.

Steve opened his mouth and then hesitated. He had always called him Chief. They all had, except for Diana. But that was the name Napi had used during the war, it was the common name given to many Indigenous soldiers. It wasn’t a name he had given himself.

“What would you prefer I call you?” Steve asked.

Napi smiled brilliantly. “I am Napi. That is my name and what I am. I suppose that will do.”

He clapped Steve on the shoulder and Steve could not help but returned the smile for a moment before he swallowed and glanced down, thinking of what Napi had said.

“I hope I’ll be worthy of your trust,” Steve said quietly after a moment. “I’ll try to be.”

Napi nodded. They sat together quietly for long moments, looking out into the night. The last of the evening light had passed, the stars were gathering brightly above the tree line and the breeze was turning cold.

Napi squeezed his shoulder. “We should go inside. Lenny will be pleased. He has been bothering me about this for years.”

Steve chuckled. “I’ll have to thank him.”

Steve winced a little getting up and Napi caught his elbow, steadying him until he got his hand on his cane. They went inside together.

Lenny grinned, seeing Napi’s face the way Steve did. For Lenny, it was the face of his father but young and unlined.

“I told you so, Old Man,” he said, looking pleased with himself.

Napi huffed. “Have you nothing better to do?”

“Not until Diana gets back,” Lenny said. He jerked his thumb at the radio. “That mountain exploded again but not hardly as much as the first time. I hope the Chimera didn’t up a disappear on her again.”

“It will be impossible to track until it comes back of

It has,” Napi said. “It is only easier for me to find here because it is not of this place and it feels like it is wrong for it to be here.”

“Diana said she had a theory about why it’s here,” Steve offered. “I would have thought it would have stayed near St. Helens instead of continuously drifting so far afield.”
Lenny nodded. “I found that strange as well.”

“It’s me,” Napi said. They both looked at him surprised. He looked unperturbed as he explained. “I do not know how it escaped its Underworld, and Diana assured me it was killed and sent there once before, but it is not where it is supposed to be. It is malicious, yes, but confused too. And while I am not a Greek god, there is enough in common between us that it is drawn to me.”

“But not as drawn as it is to Diana,” Steve realized quickly.

Napi nodded. “Whether that is enough to pull it away from the volcano if it is erupting again, I do not know.”

“Nothing we can do about it until Diana gets back,” Lenny said reasonably. He looked at Steve conspiratorially. “Coffee?”

It likely wouldn’t be enough to keep him awake if Diana was gone all that much longer but he nodded all the same. He always tried to stay up and wait for her. “Please.”

Napi looked between them and shook his head.

Steve woke with a start in the early hours of the morning. He was on the couch, a couple blankets piled over him. Lenny was fast asleep and snoring in the chair beside him.

It took Steve a groggy moment to figure out what had woken him. Diana was standing in the kitchen with soot on his cheek and scorch marks on her armour. Almost as soon as he had woken, she and Napi both looked over, aware he was awake.

They came into the room quietly but not soundlessly and Lenny woke up with a snort, rubbing at his eyes blearily. He took them in and guessed: “It’s done.”

Diana nodded. “The Chimera is back with my uncle, yes.”

Steve could see the question Lenny wanted to ask but did not. Instead, he asked: “How did that go?”

Diana smiled at him. “My uncle did not make an appearance. I do not believe there is anything that could make him walk in the mortal world again. He did leave this behind.”

Diana produced an envelope, which she handed to Napi. Napi raised an eyebrow at her but opened it. There was a very slim piece of paper inside.

“*It appears that any burial ground will do*,” Napi read. He paused and looked at Diana.

“I was pursuing the Chimera through the forest. I was trying to herd her towards the graveyard but she was not inclined to be lead there,” Diana explained. “We came to a clearing, her leading and myself in pursuit, but as she was reaching the other edge of the clearing she froze and let out a screech...”

Diana shook her head. “It was a sound I will find hard to forget. The ground seemed to swallow her whole. It did not take more than a moment before she was gone and only that remained where she had stood. I scouted around afterwards. Though there were no markers, there were traces of a home of some kind. They seemed very old and I could not tell what might have stood there before or whose burial ground it may have been.”

Napi and Lenny looked at each other. Lenny sighed. “If you can show me where you were on a map, we’ll go see if it needs to be looked into further. But if it’s that old...”
“I fear that may be the case,” Diana said. “Only faint signs remained and it took me a long time to find even that.”

Steve reached out and took Diana’s hand. When she glanced at him, he brushed some of the soot from her cheek. She smiled, a little sadly.

“The Chimera charred some more of the forest before she went,” Diana said. "But it did not spread. We were lucky."

“I apologize for the efforts you undertook to recapture something that should not have left my guardianship. It will not happen again,” Napi continued to read.

Lenny wrinkled his nose. “What does that mean?”

“The sightings,” Steve said, a thought occurring to him. “Did they begin in mid-March?”

“Thereabouts,” Lenny answered.

Diana groaned. Napi looked a little annoyed. Lenny looked confused.

“Persephone returns on the Spring Equinox,” Steve said. “If you wanted to escape the God of the Dead...”

“Do it when his wife is first returned,” Napi said.

Lenny made a disbelieving noise and looked at Diana. “I’m not sure I like your relatives.”

Napi laughed as he folded the letter up and handed it back to Diana. “My experience with them is limited but he seems to be the best of her father’s lot.”

“If he says it will not happen again, it will not,” Diana said firmly.

Lenny looked skeptical. Steve nudged him. “We prefer her mother’s side of the family.”

Lenny glanced at Diana as if expecting her to take offence. Diana only shrugged. “That is not incorrect. The Amazons have never tried to kill any of us.”

Steve cleared his throat. “They kind of tried to kill me the first time I crash landed on Themyscira.”

“No, they threatened to execute you,” Diana corrected, a twinkle in her eye. “You are alive. If any Amazons had truly wanted to kill you, you would not be.”

“I guess I can count myself lucky with at least half my in-laws then,” Steve replied.

They did not stay up much longer. As much as Lenny wanted to know more about the clearing Diana had found, he could not stop not stop yawning and Steve could tell Diana wanted to rest as well. She might not have needed sleep like they did but that did not mean it didn’t benefit her.

She was quiet as she joined him in bed. Steve thought it was more than the pursuit of the Chimera. He was about to ask but Diana spoke first.

“I’m glad Napi decided to tell you,” Diana said softly. “I did not like keeping it from you.”

“I’m glad you did,” Steve told her. It surprised her, he could tell. “If he hadn’t known he could trust you that much, we would have lost him completely, I’m sure about it.”
“I do not think you’re wrong,” Diana said. “But I still regret it. I know you miss them terribly sometimes.”

“Yeah, well, if Sami is immortal and hiding from me somewhere, I’m going to be pissed off about it,” Steve said and smiled at the snort of laughter he got from Diana. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I do miss them. But if that’s part of the price I have to pay to be with you...I’d pay it ten times over, Diana.”

She kissed him gently and curled tightly around his back the way she did sometimes, as if she could keep the world safe by keeping him close. He laced their fingers together and held on tightly.

Chapter End Notes

This was hard for me to write. I'm not Indigenous nor do I live in Blackfoot territory and I really didn't want to get things wrong or take too many liberties given that I'm not just dealing with a character, I'm writing an people's actual deity. If I've gotten anything wrong, please let me know and I'm happy to talk about why I've made the choices I made with the character.

As I said, I'm not Indigenous. I am Canadian and I live in the Dish With One Spoon territory and, guys, our history with Indigenous people is beyond awful. There's a ton I couldn't figure out how to include here because I don't feel like I'm in a position to write about it and also, I don't know how I would be able to stay true to Diana's character if she knew about it and didn't burn everything down. Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop are good starting points if you want to learn more and the CBC does a great podcast that covers both the Sixties Scoop and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that I would highly recommend.

In other news, I am off on vacation for the next three weeks so there will be no posting during that time and the next chapter might be a bit delayed because of that. And also because the next chapter is going to be looooooong. It's the Themyscira chapter. Finally.

And please excuse it if there are more than usual editing misses in this chapter. I'm literally leaving for the airport in an hour. It was right down to the wire with getting this posted!

End Notes

Title is from the Wilfrid Owen poem Futility." Maybe not the best example of his work but fitting.

Time stamps have been added at the beginning of each chapter to make things a little easier to follow. Please forgive any mistakes in my math. I am bad at it.

I have so many feels, particularly history feels, about Wonder Woman, guys. So many.
Come say hi on tumblr! Warning: I am absolutely terrible at tagging.

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