Set Ablaze

by vondrostes

Summary

A sabotage mission was launched by the SOE in June of 1941, leading three British soldiers to reunite with those they left behind on the shores of Dunkirk one year ago.

Notes

I saw Dunkirk Saturday night and wrote this in three days. Curse you, Christopher Nolan.

I'm American but I tried to Brit-ify this as much as possible. Please forgive any glaring errors. I'm also not Jewish and I didn't know a whole lot about WW2, particularly the pre-US part, before writing this, but I did try to do my homework and make it more or less based in fact.

This is going to be pretty long by the looks of things; probably 5 meaty chapters. (EDIT: Past!me really was Boo Boo the Fool.)

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I. Farrier

It had been exactly one year.

One year, Farrier thought to himself, remembering the flaming carcass of his plane burning like a beacon on the beach. But no rescue had come. Even after everything he’d done, everything he’d given up for his godforsaken country, for this blasted war that seemed like it would never end—

Even the memory of all those men, cheering from the beach…worthless in the end.

He’d fancied himself over the bitterness now, after months of stewing in it. Before, there was little to distract from the whimpers and moans of the wounded in that cramped barn the Germans had stuffed him in for the first week, where he’d only glimpsed the sun during those rare moments when their captors deigned to deliver them measly scraps of food, or to change out the bucket they were forced to piss and shit in.

So Farrier had steeped himself in that bottomless well of anger at the back of his mind, losing himself in absurdist fantasies.

He dreamt with his eyes wide and staring of breaking free of the bindings around his wrists and charging the soldier who brought them food now and again—barely more than a boy—of seizing his rifle and bringing the stock down on his face again and again until there was nothing left but a mess of blood and bone.

He calculated the odds of escape, of swimming the Channel, of marching straight into London and busting open Number 10’s fucking front door and kicking the prime minister square between the legs. Maybe then, the prick would understand pain. Suffering.

And in the spaces between, he got lost.

At first, Farrier thought of Nell and wondered absently if they’d told her he was dead. It was almost pleasant to think of her, knowing that she would be safe and looked after in his absence. Because Collins had promised him.

Farrier screwed his eyes shut and repeated Nell’s name in his mind. He scratched Collins’s face out of the memories he needed to keep himself grounded, willing the aching pressure behind his eyes to dissipate.

There was another British soldier in the barn with Farrier who looked at him for hours on end without averting his eyes, even when Farrier finally stared back, meeting the boy’s unwavering gaze with a silent challenge of his own.

Farrier didn’t bother to ask why. He wasn’t sure he’d want to know the answer, if there even was one. Maybe the boy was lost in his own mind as well. By all accounts, that was the safest place for them to be now.

It seemed ironic, really, that the only way to stay remotely sane was to keep yourself company.

But there was something in the boy’s eyes that kept Farrier on edge. It was like the boy knew what Farrier was thinking, like he could see the gory fantasies swirling through Farrier’s brain as if they were being acted out on a stage right there in the middle of the barn: among the mud and hay and the bloodstains from the French sniper the Germans had executed in front of them on their second day of captivity.
Even still, it wasn’t until the ninth night that Farrier finally felt himself giving in to the empty void of hopeless resignation. This was his duty now. His destiny.

Sacrifice was in a hero’s blood, he told himself. Hollow victory, his birth-right. Every good soldier was a martyr wearing the face of a warrior, and sooner or later that mask would shatter and under it there would be nothing but darkness.

By the eleventh night, the anguished sounds emanating from the mouths of the more grievously injured men had ceased completely, leaving an oppressive silence in their wake. The boy with the dark hair and the sad eyes no longer stared at Farrier during his waking hours but at the sliver of light between the barn doors instead.

Farrier had taken to watching him instead now—albeit with more subtlety—as he lay on the ground opposite the boy, who appeared to have fallen asleep some hours ago. Farrier had grown accustomed to the laboured breathing and delirious mumbling of his fallen comrades since his capture but without their ambient suffering to distract him from the eerie silence of the French countryside, there was little hope of falling asleep.

It was then, for the first time, that he felt truly envious of the dead.

Farrier was not a man who believed in much, but faith and delusion both had a way of filling in cracks, and Farrier’s psyche was like a broken teacup. He regretted not turning toward the water when he’d still had the chance. Perhaps the sea would have taken his life as payment and allowed some poor sailor, some unfortunate soldier, to pass unharmed; a life given, a life owed.

And if the sea was alive then so was this land, which had soured Farrier’s almost divine luck since the very second he’d set foot on that beach. Dunkirk, he decided, was cursed.

It was as Farrier mulled restlessly over these thoughts that he heard it. The crackling of flames; and then the smell of smoke rising into his nostrils. Farrier sat bolt upright, each of his senses on high alert even after days of disuse.

Underneath the rising orchestra of fire, Farrier could hear gunshots in the distance and muffled screams. And then those sounds echoed from right outside the barn. The commotion was loud enough that he could pick out individual words here and there amongst the maelstrom of shouting from the German soldiers outside.

They were being ambushed, he realized. And from the ground, not the air. But who the hell would be foolish enough to attack a German encampment now?

Farrier’s attention was diverted by a sudden movement in his peripheral vision: the boy who had stared at him for so long during their entombment had suddenly catapulted to his feet as if he’d been lying on a springboard.

“Get down,” Farrier hissed. The boy turned but just looked at him blankly. “Down,” he repeated, motioning toward the ground. The kid was practically asking to get hit with a stray bullet.

Farrier watched as the boy slowly descended onto his hands and knees. Farrier nodded approvingly before doing the same. He crawled quickly over to the opposite side of the barn where the boy had been sleeping.

“If you stay low,” Farrier told the boy, “you’ll avoid the worst of the smoke.” That was already starting to become a problem, it seemed, as Farrier could hear faint coughing coming from the rear of the barn, where the rest of the soldiers had chosen to sleep.
“Name’s Farrier, by the way. I’m RAF—well, obviously.” He waited, but the boy continued to stare as if he hadn’t heard. Farrier sighed and scooted closer, balancing on his elbows just long enough to yank the kid’s fibre identity discs out from under his shoulder so he could get a look at them. There was a metal chain tangled up with the cotton cord but Farrier wasn’t interested in the boy’s jewellery, just his name. “Gibson, eh?”

The boy—Gibson—blinked twice at him before very enthusiastically nodding in response.

“Great,” Farrier replied, making his first attempt at a smile since he’d been captured. “Glad we could share this moment. I’ll go round up the others. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather take a bullet than sit in here and wait to suffocate.”

Farrier turned away without waiting for a response but before he’d made it even five meters, there was a loud crack from overhead and suddenly a large portion of the barn’s roof was crashing into the ground right in front of him and exploding into a ball of bright orange flame.

Farrier rolled out of the way just in time. “Fuck…this…” he muttered to himself between panting breaths as he stared at the mountain of burning debris blocking his path. “I’m not risking my arse for anymore sodding brown-jobs.” But when Farrier turned back toward the doors, there was Gibson staring right at him, wide-eyed with terror.

Farrier gritted his teeth and shook his head, and prayed he wasn’t about to make another heroic decision he’d live to regret.

“Move!” he barked, hauling himself forward using what little momentum he could muster by dragging his elbows through the muck.

Farrier had almost crawled back to Gibson by the time the command seemed to finally register with the boy. Farrier sighed, following just behind him as they moved together toward the doors.

Once they reached the barn doors, which were barred from the outside by a plank of wood unless food was being brought in for the prisoners, Farrier slowly climbed to his feet. He motioned for Gibson to stay down when the boy tried to do the same. Farrier covered his mouth and nose the best he could with his hands still bound together, blinking furiously as the smoke that was quickly filling the structure stung his eyes.

His boot collided with the centre of the doors, at its weakest point. There was a loud thud, but no give, not like he’d been expecting given that the whole place had seemed in danger of imminent collapse even before the fire. Farrier kicked again, and again, his movements growing clumsier and more frantic with each passing second as the smoke around him thickened and scorched his throat.

Farrier didn’t even notice until a second boot struck the doors beside his own that Gibson was standing next to him, shoulder to shoulder.

On their second combined strike, Farrier felt the wood beneath his foot splinter. He only kicked harder.

There was a cry of triumph from Gibson when the doors finally broke open to reveal the Germans’ camp, destroyed and deserted. The victorious yell was cut short, followed by a hacking cough.

Farrier turned toward the boy to find him bent over double, trying to empty his lungs of smoke, but there wasn’t time. He reached out with both hands and grabbed Gibson’s uniform, dragging him out of the barn just as another ominous crack sounded from above their heads.

Farrier didn’t pause to watch the barn collapse, nor did he look back to see if any of the other soldiers
had made it out.

He didn’t stop to rest until they’d made it to the relative safety of the treeline near the top of the hill overlooking the burned-out camp. Upon letting go of the boy’s clothes, Gibson dropped unceremoniously to his knees and resumed coughing and sputtering.

Farrier felt like doing the same, but took a few deep breaths and composed himself. “You all right?” he asked instead. Gibson didn’t respond, but he was still conscious, so that was something at least.

Farrier leaned with his back against the nearest tree and sighed, trying to savour the first real moment in more than a week where it didn’t feel like death was literally biting at his heels.

The moment was short-lived.

A force like a brick wall suddenly struck Farrier from the side and sent him sailing. He landed flat on his back, all the air punched out of his body from the impact. A face swam into his vision while he lay there, temporarily immobile, but it wasn’t Gibson’s wide-eyed visage. Before Farrier had a chance to try to catch his breath, there were hands encircling his throat in an iron grip.

Farrier struggled limply against his surprise attacker. He felt like a rabbit writhing in a snare, unable to suck in enough air through his constricted windpipe to make his muscles do what he was telling them.

And then just as his sight was beginning to fade, Farrier could breathe again.

Farrier sat up, no longer pinned to the ground by his assailant, and rose awkwardly to his feet. He blinked away the remaining black spots clouding his vision and ignored the sound of static buzzing in his ears as he lumbered toward the two bodies rolling around in the leaves.

Farrier could just make out Gibson by the muddy brown of his uniform but couldn’t hear him, if he was making any noise at all, over the furious German vitriol spewing from the mouth of the man who now had Gibson in the same stranglehold he’d originally used on Farrier.

The stream of words was delivered too quickly for Farrier to pick out anything at all. The man’s anger made him sound less than human.

Farrier leaned down to pick up a branch as he approached. He snapped it in half and allowed the lesser portion to fall back down to the forest floor, gripping the thicker component between his bound hands.

The man didn’t notice Farrier standing over him, too intent on his violent monologue. There was spittle glistening on Gibson’s face from the other’s man’s explosive speech. Gibson was staring vacantly up at Farrier as his face rapidly turned blue from lack of oxygen.

Farrier stared right back as he grabbed the German by the right shoulder and jammed the splintered end of the branch into the man’s jugular, grimacing in disgust as blood spurted onto his hands before he had a chance to let go of the makeshift weapon.

Farrier’s interference had given Gibson just enough time to scurry out from underneath the attacker’s body before it fell limply from Farrier’s hands.

Farrier glanced up after wiping his hands off on the German’s clothes—not a Wehrmacht uniform, like Farrier might have expected, but plain black civvies—amidst the man’s death throes to find Gibson sitting with his back to a tree on the other side of the clearing, clutching his throat protectively as he stared back at Farrier with a horrified expression.
“What?” Farrier said defensively, still trying to catch his breath. “I just saved—”

The icy chill of a blade pressed against his throat stopped Farrier in his tracks.

“Nicht bewegen,” said a raspy female voice in heavily French-accented German.

Farrier splayed his hands wide, a universal gesture of surrender. “Anglais,” he told her. The edge of the knife dug into his skin as he swallowed. “Anglais,” he repeated urgently.

“The man you killed?” the woman asked, pulling her weapon a centimetre so away from Farrier’s neck, giving him just enough room to breathe normally. Her English was even harder to decode than her German, if anything.

“German,” Farrier replied. “He attacked us after we escaped their camp.” He wanted to look back at the woman but didn’t dare try anything while her blade was still at his throat.

And then just like that she lowered it, without explanation, and stepped forward to examine the body. She was small in stature, dark hair, dark skin, dressed in men’s garments clearly not intended for someone of her size.

“You said he was German?” she asked, carefully skirting around the halo of blood surrounding the upper half of the body.

It was a fair question, Farrier supposed, considering that the other man was dressed like a civilian, but he was sure.

“He attacked me first,” Farrier explained. “He didn’t say anything, just took me by surprise. When Gibson stepped in to help me, the man attacked him instead and started yelling something in German. I’m not sure what it was. I didn’t recognize it.”

“He was one of ours,” the woman replied.

Farrier couldn’t help the small exclamation of surprise that escaped his lips at hearing that, but the woman ignored it.

“We planned an ambush,” she explained. “We received word recently that a high-ranking official was stationed in Dunkirk because of the troubles with your soldiers. We figured we could take advantage of the false sense of security after the evacuation and catch them by surprise.”

“We?” Farrier questioned.

“La Résistance.”

Farrier raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You lot sure work fast.”

The woman laughed, but there was little humour behind it. “We’ve known this was an inevitability since the night they launched the northern assault. We’ve been preparing for weeks.”

“Good to know the French have so little faith in us Brits,” Farrier quipped.

“In hindsight, that seems for the best.”

He couldn’t really argue that point. “You said this was meant to be an ambush,” Farrier said, moving forward to the very edge of the trees to look down at the base of the hillside where it appeared as if the entire countryside was on fire. “I’m guessing it didn’t go as planned.”
When Farrier turned around to face her again, the woman was staring at him quite intently, as one might if they were trying to solve a particularly difficult maths problem.

“Someone warned those bastards we were coming,” she replied after a moment. “Someone who, it seems, was killed by you.”

“You’re welcome,” Farrier replied coolly.

The woman didn’t respond as she turned and circled the body once more before stopping to look down at it one last time with her hands balled into fists at her sides. “Putain de traître,” she said, and spit on the corpse. “Grab your quiet little friend and follow me,” she said, looking back up again to meet Farrier’s eyes. “I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

She whirled around without waiting for confirmation from either Farrier or Gibson and headed deeper into the trees. Farrier hurried over to Gibson, who still hadn’t moved, and hauled him to his feet.

“Let’s go,” Farrier insisted, pushing the younger man out in front of himself, where he’d be in the least danger as they continued their trek through the woods led by this mysterious Frenchwoman that Farrier still wasn’t altogether sure he could trust.

He assumed she felt the same, considering she’d not offered to cut the ties around either his or Gibson’s wrists.

It was almost pitch black as they walked, neither the light from the moon nor the blaze ravaging the pristine French landscape penetrating the thick copse of trees. This didn’t seem to bother the Frenchwoman, who walked silently and confidently at the head of their line, while the two soldiers following stumbled and tripped over every leaf and twig in their path.

They carried on in that manner for at least an hour, if Farrier’s internal timekeeping could still be relied upon, and then the Frenchwoman stopped short without issuing so much as a word of warning. Farrier had to yank Gibson back by the collar to keep him from running straight into her back.

“What is it?” Farrier asked quietly after the silence had dragged on for far too long for comfort.

“Nothing,” the Frenchwoman replied. “We should hurry.”

Their brisk walk then became a jog, leaving Farrier to ensure that Gibson didn’t get left behind—a rather difficult task, as it seemed that Gibson could barely even walk without falling over. Maybe he was injured in some way, Farrier thought. That struck him as odd, though, because the boy hadn’t made any noise at all; certainly nothing to signify that the trek was unduly paining him.

They must have been close to their destination the first time they stopped, because it was only a few more minutes before they reached the east boundary of the forest and emerged in a field of long grass, at the other end of which lay a solitary farmhouse. The windows were all dark except one, near the thatched roof, where Farrier could just make out the flickering glow of a kerosene lamp.

“This is the hideout for the French Resistance?” Farrier asked, unable to hide the scepticism in his voice as they marched toward the unimpressive wooden structure.

The Frenchwoman cast a sharp glance over her shoulder at him. “There are hundreds of cells like ours across the country. We found it best to keep our numbers small, so we compartmentalized. It’s easier to remain inconspicuous.”
The Germans weren’t taking over Europe by being inconspicuous, Farrier thought to himself, but even he had to admit that fighting fire with fire hadn’t worked well for even his own countrymen, whose military power had vastly surpassed that of France. Guerrilla warfare then, would be the sand they used to suffocate the smouldering embers keeping the Axis forces alight.

Farrier mulled over his options as they walked across the field, options he hadn’t thought he would ever have just hours again when he’d been rotting in a German POW camp, waiting for death or worse. He came to a decision just as the Frenchwoman approached the farmhouse with both soldiers in tow and steeled himself, knowing it wasn’t the easiest path, that if he went through with it, there was every chance he’d end up right back where he’d started.

The woman knocked a peculiar rhythm on the door and then turned to face Farrier and Gibson as she waited. There was no response at all for a long moment, and then the door creaked open just an inch to reveal the face of a heavily bearded man through the small sliver.

“Simone?” he questioned, followed by something in French that Farrier didn’t understand.

She turned her head toward the man to reply and shook her head. “Scattered,” she replied in English, presumably for Farrier and Gibson’s benefit. “There was a mole.”

“And them?” he asked, glaring suspiciously at the two English soldiers. The accent accompanying the man’s response, unlike Simone’s, could have passed as belonging to a fellow Brit, which took Farrier by surprise.

“Escaped prisoners,” Simone replied. “Bertrand attacked them; the pilot killed him.”

The bearded man glanced down at Farrier’s hands, which were still bound and flecked with blood. “Get them inside and untie them,” he said. “I’ll make some chocolate.”

Simone didn’t appear pleased by the order, but she obeyed without protest. She led the two inside and gestured toward the table just inside the doorway, adjacent to a small kitchen. Farrier took a seat in one of the little wooden chairs without hesitation, grateful to be off his feet again. Gibson sluggishly slumped into the chair to his left. Once both men were seated, Simone walked over to them with her knife and cut the ties around their wrists unceremoniously.

Farrier watched as she leaned against the cabinets on the far wall and tapped her fingers impatiently on the wood, waiting as the bearded man hovered over the stove for several minutes without saying a word. Finally, he finished and poured the concoction into four mugs, handing one to Simone before bringing the others to the table.

He sat across from Farrier and pushed a steaming mug toward him. “Name?” he asked.

“Farrier. Squadron Leader Jack Farrier.” It was true enough after the death of Fortis Leader during battle, even if it hadn’t been officially sanctioned.

If the other man was impressed by Farrier’s rank, he didn’t show it. “And you?” he asked, turning to Gibson, whose face immediately turned to that of a man facing a firing squad.

“Gibson,” Farrier interjected hastily. Simone and her companion’s heads both swivelled back to him. “Something happened to him,” Farrier lied. “He won’t speak.”

Their French hosts exchanged a look that Farrier couldn’t decipher. The man turned back to face Farrier and his expression seemed carefully neutral as he spoke. “You can call me Leclair,” he said. “I’ll show you where the two of you can sleep after you’re finished, and then we’ll decide what to do with you in the morning.”
Leclair stood and grabbed his mug from the table before walking over to Simone. She scowled up at him as he crowded her into the corner of the tiny room and began speaking in rapid French at a volume just above a whisper.

Farrier, who could barely understand a word of French when it was written, was utterly lost. He turned to look at Gibson instead, only to find that the boy was now staring intently at Simone and Leclair, his brows furrowed in concentration. Farrier glanced back at the two but couldn’t puzzle out what Gibson found so interesting.

Farrier finished his hot chocolate just before Leclair and Simone parted, their secret conversation over almost as soon as it had begun. Neither had seemed to pay any attention to the Englishmen in their kitchen, so Farrier assumed the discussion wasn’t to do with them and therefore nothing he needed to worry about—not right then, at any rate.

“Had your fill?” Leclair asked, holding out both his hands to take their empty mugs.

“Yes, thank you,” Farrier replied politely. He stood up and while Leclair had his back turned to take care of their soiled dishes, he gestured for Gibson to do the same. The movement did not escape Simone’s notice, however, and she pointedly narrowed her eyes as the younger man. Farrier was going to have to do something about Gibson, before his…condition, or whatever it was, got the two of them killed.

After taking care of their mugs, Leclair nodded for the two soldiers to follow him out of the kitchen and up the stairs at the rear of the house. They passed the second story landing without pausing and continued to a solitary door at the very top of the stairs.

Leclair pulled a keyring from his pocket and unlocked the door. He held it open, waiting for the other two to go ahead before stepping inside. “There’s no wiring up here,” he explained, “but the lamp should serve you till morning.” The lamp in question was the same one that had been the only visible source of illumination when Simone had led them to the house. “I’d offer to show you gentlemen the latrine before you lie down, but it’s separate from the main house, and I feel it would be safer for you to remain inside until after sunrise.”

“I think we can manage, thank you,” Farrier replied. Aside from the chocolate, he was fairly certain they hadn’t had anything to eat or drink in at least twelve hours, maybe more. Taking a piss was currently among the least of his concerns.

“Right,” Leclair continued, sounding slightly miffed, as if Farrier’s response had interrupted him. “Well, there’s a commode if the urge overwhelms you,” he said, pointing to the far right of the window, where a little wooden box was perched in the corner. “But you’ll be the ones cleaning it in the morning.” He paused for breath, but Farrier said nothing this time, unsure if he was really finished speaking or not. “I’ll fetch some linens and quilts for you to sleep on,” he added before turning back around to go down the stairs.

The door was left open, so Farrier assumed it wouldn’t be long before Leclair came back. There was something that Farrier still wanted to settle before they bunked down for the night, however. He turned his head to look at Gibson, who was staring awkwardly down at his boots.

“You’re not deaf, are you?” Farrier asked. He pointed to his own ear meaningfully when Gibson looked up, even though the gesture itself was really the only answer he needed. Gibson shook his head anyway.

“Well, I don’t suppose you were mute before the war,” Farrier mused, waiting for some sort of emotional response to the words in Gibson’s face, but there was nothing. “Is it shellshock?” There
was enough of a pause before Gibson hesitantly shook his head once again that something finally clicked in Farrier’s mind.

Gibson could hear him just fine. He just couldn’t understand him.

Farrier looked the boy up and down, noticing how the army uniform just seemed to be ever-so-slightly too small, and how, when they were walking through the trees, Gibson had considerably more trouble maintaining his balance, like his shoes weren’t quite the right size.

Gibson wasn’t an English prisoner of war at all. He was just dressed like one.


Gibson shook his head frantically. “Français,” he blurted out, surprising Farrier, who hadn’t really thought he would get a verbal answer out of the boy at all.

Well, Farrier thought, that at least explained why he’d seemed so intent on listening to the others during their private conversation downstairs. Thank God. Farrier found himself taken off guard by the surge of relief he felt in response to the news. He’d grown fond of Gibson, and maybe that was just the military solidarity in him, but an Allied deserter would be easier to mind than a spy.

Farrier glanced down the stairs again, and once he was satisfied that Leclair was not coming back up within the next fifteen seconds, he turned back to face Gibson.

“You found an English soldier?” Farrier guessed. “He was already dead? Morte? When you found him? You took his clothes?” He mimed along with the words, trying to make sure Gibson understood. It was unclear how much English he understood, if any.

Gibson nodded eagerly. “Sur le plage,” he said, tugging at his shirt. “After…bombs.”

Farrier shook his head exasperatedly. Well, that was one mystery solved.

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“Simone et Leclair,” Gibson added in a lower tone.

Farrier looked at the boy quizzically, waiting for him to finish, but Gibson just touched his fingers to his lips, glancing between Farrier’s face and the open doorway with a terrified expression. Farrier guessed it wasn’t the first time Gibson had been caught out like this. The evacuation had taken over a week; who knew how long Gibson had been…Gibson.

“It’s fine,” Farrier tried to reassure him. “I won’t tell.” He mimed sealing his lips, like he’d done as a child, vowing to keep another’s secret.

It was then that they heard footsteps on the stairs again. Farrier took one look at Gibson and stepped in front of him, hoping that Leclair wouldn’t notice the blatant anxiety plastered all over the boy’s face.

Leclair ascended the stairs with a large stack of quilts and pillows, and handed them off to Farrier, who passed them to Gibson, who promptly staggered under the weight.

“I hope you don’t take insult if I lock you in for the night,” Leclair said, one brow arched as if challenging Farrier to argue.

“No,” Farrier replied, “of course not. I understand completely.”
“Then good night to the both of you,” Leclair said as he backed out of the room. “I’ll have Simone come fetch you in the morning.”

After Leclair shut the door, the sound of the key turning in the lock ignited an unexpected burst of primal fear in Farrier’s chest. He swallowed it down and turned to Gibson to take back the bedding from him, carefully laying it down across the floor to create a suitable sleeping area for the two of them.

After the day’s events, preceded by the seemingly endless amount of time spent in the German camp, all Farrier wanted now was a good long rest.

Gibson sat cross-legged on the pillow placed closest to the window, still fully clothed. He was staring again, but Farrier was past the point of caring as he quickly stripped down to just his undergarments before lying down on the portion of the bedding nearest to the locked door. Gibson was looking down at his feet when Farrier rolled over to face him. It was hard to tell in the flickering light, but his face seemed redder than it had before, like he was embarrassed by something.

“You should sleep,” Farrier advised him through a yawn, his horizontal position already taking its toll on his weary body and mind.

Gibson glanced up at him briefly, but didn’t move otherwise.

Farrier let his eyes slip closed, too exhausted to worry about Gibson’s strange behaviour any longer.

Farrier wasn’t sure how long he’d slept—or if he’d even really slept at all, still feeling trapped in a dreamlike haze when he opened his eyes again to find that the room had gone dark. It took him a second to determine what had woken him.

“…lekh ha’olam, hagomel lahayavim tovot.” Gibson was sitting cross-legged in the same spot he’d been in when Farrier had drifted off, but now his head was bowed, and he had both hands tucked under his throat. “Sheg’molani kol tov.” The words were spoken softly, but they’d pierced through Farrier’s sleeping mind, into memories long-forgotten.

“Mi sheg’molkha…kol tov,” Farrier replied drowsily, clumsily stumbling through the answering prayer as he scoured his mind for the right words. “Hu yigmolkha kol tov. Selah.”

There was a long pause after, and Farrier wondered if Gibson had even heard him. Maybe all of this was just a dream.

And then suddenly, Gibson scooted closer to him and placed something in his right palm, laying open near his head on the pillow. Farrier closed his fingers around the small metal object. A metal chain, still warm from Gibson’s body heat, and a pendant, familiar in shape as the same symbol his mother had worn when he was still a child.

“You speak Hebrew?” Gibson asked hopefully, in kind.

“Little,” Farrier replied, struggling to remember the language he’d all but abandoned by the age of fourteen. “Most…forgot.” There was no response from Gibson. Farrier groped blindly for the boy’s hands and pushed the necklace back into them. “You…teach?” he asked.

“Oui!” Gibson replied excitedly before reverting to Hebrew. “Yes, I will teach.”

“Good,” Farrier replied as he closed his eyes once more. “Now sleep.”

When Simone came in the morning to unlock their door, Farrier found himself operating with
renewed vigour. He dressed himself again shamelessly as she watched from the doorway with cold eyes. There was an entire congregation of people waiting to greet Farrier and Gibson in the kitchen when they came downstairs, most of whom were crowded around the table where Leclair was seated with various documents strewn about before him.

“We can get you as far as a private port,” Leclair said without introduction or preamble. “After that, you’ll be on your own to make it across la Manche. I’ll warn you now, it won’t be an easy trip.” When Farrier didn’t respond, Leclair looked up at him with narrowed eyes. “I assume you and your man want to go home, yes?”

“What if we want to stay?” Farrier replied.

There was a low murmur from some of the others in the room at his words, but Leclair silenced them with a glance.

“By stay,” Leclair clarified, “you mean you want to work here, with us? As part of the Resistance?”

“It’s more or less the same job I was doing before,” Farrier pointed out.

Leclair glanced back down at the documents scattered across the table and hummed contemplatively. This was apparently too much for Simone, who leaned toward Leclair and began speaking rapidly in French.

“Tais toi,” Leclair replied sharply, interrupting whatever she had been staying. He turned back to Farrier. “An officer we can use, though it seems you’ll need to brush up on your French. A foot soldier, however….”

“He stays with me,” Farrier said firmly. “I’m not sending him out there alone.”

Leclair considered this for a moment. “Very well. Let’s get started then, shall we?”

The months passed relatively quickly at the Resistance’s safehouse, though most of it was spent with only Gibson for company, and Farrier discovered that the boy was the quiet type even when they shared a language.

But by May of 1941, Farrier was competent in both French and Hebrew, though his French accent remained just as atrocious as it had been before Gibson’s coaching. Gibson had fared much better with English, taking to it like a duck to water once Farrier had managed to acquire a French-English dictionary from Leclair.

Even so, Gibson still rarely spoke in the company of his countrymen, under the guise of trauma, though Farrier suspected it wasn’t so much a guise at all but merely a convenient truth. As promised, he kept Gibson’s secret. He realized now it was Gibson’s best option for escaping the occupation, should that opportunity ever arise.

That possibility slowly flickered out month after month, dwindling like the oil each night in the kerosene lamp they left lit in the attic window while they slept.

Then May once again turned to June, and Leclair received a message from Britain.

“The Prime Minister has established a covert military force,” he said, reading through the letter as Farrier, Gibson, and Simone sat with him at the kitchen table, “to conduct delicate operations in Nazi-occupied countries. They’re asking for our help with a sabotage mission in Dunkirk.” He looked up and met Farrier’s gaze unflinchingly. “I want the three of you to go to the drop point and safely escort the agents they send back to the farmhouse.”
They arrived on the night of June 6, 1941.

It had been one year since his countrymen had fled Dunkirk’s shores, escaping the inescapable. A year since Farrier found himself stranded on that very same beach, awaiting help that would never come.

Farrier stared up in solemn silence at the dark shapes in the sky overhead, illuminated only by the light of the full moon as they slowly descended.

After one long year, this was Britain’s answer to the threat lurking on their doorstep. There would be no army, hundreds of thousands strong, marching through the streets in the name of liberation. No food to feed the hungry, no medicine to cure the sick, no weapons to fight back the scourge.

But this was enough. These three soldiers, falling from the heavens like angels from the holy book he no longer believed in, were more than a call answered. They were a reminder, a promise, of things he had once thought lost—of home.
I. Tommy

Chapter Notes

This is an absolutely massive chapter and this whole fic has completely escaped my control. So enjoy.

I'm trying to tag for anything major, but I'll probably miss a few things. Let me know if you see something I should add. Thanks!

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Tommy awoke the same way he always did—confused, shaking, unable to remember where or when he was.

Peter’s father had assured him the feeling would pass after he’d gotten settled in at the Cottage. It hadn’t. Six months later and he was the same quivering mess he’d been when Collins had first recommended him for SOE. Of course, he knew he was safer in Weymouth than he would have been in the Home Guard or awaiting deployment to South Africa, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of an axe hanging over his head, like his body was still in Dunkirk, and all of this was just a dream from which he’d soon wake.

A loud snore interrupted his musings. Tommy rolled over in his bed and blinked wearily over at Alex, whose arms and legs were practically spilling onto the floor. If Alex ever had less than a good night’s sleep, he was damn good at hiding it. And Tommy’s nightmares, well, even they paled in comparison to whatever compelled Collins to scream throughout the night, sometimes for hours on end, from the room just above theirs.

Thankfully, Collins had been in London for the last week and a half, which meant that the only nightly disruptions came from inside Tommy’s own head. Well, that and the baby.

Tommy sighed and sat up wearily. Even when he didn’t remember his dreams he woke up exhausted, like he’d been running sprints in his sleep. He checked the watch on his nightstand; nearly half-past-eight. He contemplated waking Alex for breakfast, but decided against it after considering Alex’s state of intoxication upon stumbling into their room late last night.

Maggie was halfway through breakfast when Tommy walked into the kitchen and sidled up alongside to help clean the dishes she’d already finished using.

“No fruit, I’m afraid,” she said conversationally as she fried four eggs simultaneously. Tommy wondered who exactly she was cooking for. With Collins gone and Alex hungover at least three days a week, they’d be lucky if they could fill half the chairs at the dining table.

“That bad?” Tommy replied.

Maggie hummed noncommittally. “We’ll make do.”

“Is Peter coming down?” Tommy asked after a few more minutes had passed, in which Maggie had started to transfer all the food she’d made onto larger serving plates.
“I’m not giving him a choice,” Maggie told him. “He’s been up all night locked in his study reading god knows what. He hasn’t eaten since lunch yesterday.”

“And Nell?”

“Asher will bring her round sooner or later.” Seeing the surprised expression on Tommy’s face at the mention of Collins, Maggie clarified: “He got in this morning. Seemed in a foul mood—you might want to keep your distance.”

Tommy nodded. That was advice he abided by regardless if Collins was in a foul mood or otherwise. Even though he and Alex had been specifically recommended for SOE after Collins had been appointed a training officer at STS 96, Tommy still found himself intimidated by the other man.

Alex didn’t seem to have the same issue, and the two had become unexpectedly chummy within a matter of days after they’d first settled in at the Cottage. Tommy had hated that, at first, and perhaps that resentment had damaged his chances of ever feeling at ease in Collins’s presence.

Tommy helped Maggie set the table and then washed up before taking a seat in his usual spot between Peter and Alex, provided either of them showed up for mealtimes. The remaining chairs were empty as Maggie walked around the table, humming softly to herself as she rearranged the courses so they were exactly the way she liked.

Abruptly the humming stopped. Tommy looked up to find Nell standing in the doorway, alone, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot as she clutched her knitted shawl protectively around herself.

“You’re right on time,” Maggie said with a taut smile as she pulled out a chair for the other woman. Tommy privately thought that Maggie didn’t get enough credit for her attempts at kindness toward Nell, who wasn’t exactly easy to get along with.

“Is Asher still asleep?” Maggie asked as she sat down next to Nell, directly across from Tommy, and started doling out food for the two of them.

“No,” Nell replied, staring blankly at her plate as Maggie added an extra helping of beans before passing it back. “He’s feeding the baby.”

So it was to be that kind of day.

“I’ll set out a plate for him after I fetch Peter, then.”

Nell nodded, but it looked like she hadn’t heard a word Maggie had just said. Tommy flicked up his eyes periodically as he ate, watching as she picked at her own food with all the enthusiasm of a dying dog. But this wasn’t the only mood that reminded Tommy of an animal; she was just as likely to snap with barely a moment’s notice, lashing out at anyone who so much as dared to look at her with all the manic ferocity of a rabid cat.

He preferred that though, to this. Better to eat across from a lit fuse than a walking corpse.

Maggie walked back in a few minutes later with Peter in tow. His hair was mussed, glasses still perched on the end of his nose. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a month and Tommy wondered what news he’d received in advance of Collins’s return that one night had seemed to sap the life right out of him.

“Morning,” he said stiffly to the others.
Tommy nodded, forced a smile. Nell didn’t acknowledge him at all.

Peter sighed and took a seat at the head of the table. He pulled Maggie down to kiss her cheek when she walked over to fill his plate. She smiled patiently, not one to squirm or giggle and bring undue attention to herself when Peter chose to be openly affectionate in front of their houseguests, and continued without a word.

After she’d made up a plate for Collins at the other end of the table, she looked over at the others. “Will Alex be joining us, do you think?” she asked Tommy.

He shook his head. “Doubt it.”

“I see.” She looked slightly disappointed, even though this wasn’t the first time Alex had missed breakfast; far from it. “Can I get anyone some more coffee?”

Peter raised a finger in affirmation, his mug already pressed to his lips as he downed the entire cup in one gulp.

Tommy stopped mid-bite to give the other man a worried look. “You all right?” he asked. “You look….”

Peter choked. The mug summarily slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor next to his chair. Nell finally looked up from her plate and gazed at Peter vacantly. “Sorry,” he muttered, shoving his chair out and crouching down to pick up the pieces of broken ceramic.

Maggie poked her head back in just as Tommy was getting up to help. “We got it,” Tommy said hurriedly. “It’s fine, just a little spill.”

Maggie was already stretching herself too thin. No need for her to keep cleaning up their messes.

She frowned worriedly, but after craning her neck to determine that the situation wasn’t too out of control, she retreated into the kitchen to finish up the second pot of coffee.

Peter gave Tommy a grateful glance and continued scooping up what he could in the palm of his hand, slowly, because of how badly his fingers were trembling. Tommy chose not to mention it, but wondered how many cups of coffee he’d had in the last twenty-four hours.

“You don’t….” Tommy started to say when Peter returned to the table after binning the broken mug.

Peter looked at him quizzically. “You don’t have to push yourself so hard,” Tommy finished lamely.

Nell laughed, a rare sound. Both men glanced over at her in surprise. “He hasn’t told you?” she asked, sounding borderline hysterical.

“Nell, please,” Peter murmured pleadingly.

She sniffed loudly and turned her head, taking a pointed bite of her breakfast.

Tommy looked from Peter to Nell, then back again. “What is she talking about?”

“Later.”

“But—”

“Later,” Peter insisted, slipping into the paternal tone he’d adopted since his own father had passed some months back, even though he was right around the same age as the two soldiers he was housing, and Collins’s junior by several years. “Alex should hear it too.”
Tommy nodded. He looked down at his food again, no longer hungry, barely noticing when Maggie came back in to refill their mugs and to finally begin eating her own breakfast.

Peter’s stress, Collins’s unexpected arrival, Nell’s foul mood…none of it boded well for Tommy and Alex, who were just waiting for the other shoe to drop, for SOE to be disbanded, to be re-integrated into the army as faceless grunts and shipped off to the front in North Africa.

He felt sick. “I’m going to go check on Alex,” he said, abruptly pushing out his chair and wincing when it squeaked loudly.

“Are you feeling all right?” Maggie asked. “You look a bit peaky.”

“Fine,” Tommy replied quickly, “just—I’m fine, really.”

“Well, if you need anything—”

“Yes, of course,” he said, cutting her off as he hastily exited the dining area and practically bolted back to his room.

Once inside, he shut the door and leaned his forehead against it, trying to catch his breath. It had been years, since his early childhood, since he’d had an asthma attack and this was the first time since training where he was truly afraid he might be in danger of relapse.

“What’s going on?” Tommy heard from behind him. He turned to find Alex sitting up in bed, shirtless, the sheets pooled around his waist as he rubbed at his eyes. His hair was mussed from the pillow and Tommy felt his eyes drawn to a strand that stuck down past his ear, like an arrow pointing to a small oval-shaped bruise on his jaw.

“Nothing,” Tommy replied as he retreated to his bed. He sat cross-legged next to his pillow, lying back against the wall to watch Alex as he stretched and tried to wake himself up. “Finished breakfast is all.”

“Fuck,” Alex groaned. “It’s that early?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“S’fine.” Alex laid back down but didn’t close his eyes. “Got more sleep than usual, honestly. I don’t suppose Nell let Maggie finally—”

“No,” Tommy told him. “Collins got back sometime this morning. That’s why it’s been quiet.”

“Oh,” Tommy could see the dread threading through the lines in Alex’s features as the news sunk in. “Have you…talked to him?”

“Not yet.”

Alex nodded, and for a moment it looked like he might drift off again, but then suddenly his face blanched and he shot up out of bed. He flung the door open carelessly and sprinted out of the room, leaving Tommy to follow belatedly after, just catching a glimpse of Alex in just his pants as he darted into the loo at the end of the corridor.

Tommy skidded in after him just in time to watch as Alex bent over the toilet and began to heave.

“Oh, Christ,” he muttered, squinting as the smell of vomit wafted into his nostrils, triggering an urge to gag that he had to force down as he crouched next to Alex and put his fingers into the thick curls
at the base of his neck. It was a practiced gesture now, with how often Alex drank himself into near-
unconsciousness at the pub just up the road.

Alex was crying when the heaving finally subsided, shallow choking sobs that produced no tears,
only an anguished look on Alex’s face that twisted Tommy’s stomach into knots whenever he saw it.

“Do you want some water?” Tommy asked. “Tea? I can ask Maggie to make some.”

“No,” Alex murmured, letting his head fall onto Tommy’s chest. “Scotch. For my head.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“Tom, please.”

Tommy sighed and let go of Alex, steadying him until Tommy was sure he wasn’t going to fall over
the second he stood up. “I’ll be right back,” he said, as if Alex was capable of moving anywhere on
his own.

He sidled past the door to the dining room, which was open just an inch, but enough that he could
hear the faint voices of Peter and Maggie from within. He was familiar enough with the Cottage now
that when he got to the stairs he knew exactly which steps to avoid because of how loudly they
creaked. It wouldn’t do to wake Henry on one of the few mornings they had a reprieve from his
wailing.

The scotch, along with almost all the alcohol in the Cottage, was in a cabinet in Peter’s study.
Unlocked, but Tommy was sure that Peter wouldn’t be pleased to know his father’s stock was being
raided to treat Alex’s chronic hangovers.

He’d almost made it to the study when an unpleasantly familiar figure emerged from the door
immediately adjacent.

“Morning,” Collins said casually. The Scottish accent was grating in a way that Tommy had
forgotten, more often than not a harbinger of bitter tidings.

Tommy stopped dead in his tracks. “Ah…yeah. Morning.”

“Looks like you’re in a bit of a hurry there.” Collins leaned up against the door he’d just come out of,
to the room he sometimes used when he and Nell were…on less than good terms, which was more
and more often lately.

“Um. I need something out of the study.”

“By all means.” Collins held out an arm, gesturing for Tommy to go past him.

Tommy did so, not expecting the officer to follow him into the room. He stopped short again, staring
at Collins helplessly, unable to think of a good excuse for what exactly he’d come in for now that
he’d been caught out by the older man.

“Might as well pour me a glass while you’re at it,” Collins said nonchalantly as he slumped down
into the armchair at Peter’s desk. He glanced over at Tommy expectantly after the younger man
continued to stand stock-still in the middle of the room. “I know you’ve been sampling the wares, as
it were,” Collins informed him. “I assume on Alex’s behalf, since you don’t really strike me as the
type.”

“Thought Nell didn’t like you drinking,” Tommy remarked as he opened the cabinet and reached for
the bottle of scotch, which hadn’t been moved since the last time he’d taken it off the shelf.

“Nell doesn’t like anything I do.” The reply felt incomplete, like Collins had aborted the thought only halfway through, but he said nothing further as Tommy poured him two-fingers from one of the glasses on the desk. “Cheers,” he said finally, raising the glass to Tommy, who lifted the bottle instinctively though he had no plans on partaking himself. Collins downed the liquor rapidly and made a face as he swallowed. “Been a while. Almost forgot what it tasted like. It’s shite. No wonder Peter sticks to gin.”

Tommy said nothing. Collins looked up at him after a moment, his brows raised. “Don’t deprive yourself on my account,” he said, reaching for the bottle to pour himself a second glass.

“Like you said before,” Tommy replied slowly, unsure if this was test of character, “I’m not really the type.”

“Aye,” Collins said, closing his eyes as he swallowed. “It’s a pity though. The viceless are usually the first to blow their own brains out.” He opened his eyes and glanced immediately over at Tommy, as if to gauge his reaction.

Tommy didn’t have one. It was easier now, to keep himself a blank slate in the presence of others, wiped of any potential emotion. Alex was one of the few exceptions, even if he didn’t know it.

“Can I go?” Tommy asked finally, when the silence between them grew too heavy to endure.

Collins nodded. He opened his mouth again when Tommy was halfway through the door, his hand clasped once more around the neck of the bottle of scotch. “Bring Alex up with you in a couple hours when he’s feeling up to it. We should talk soon.”

Tommy paused, glanced back at Collins once, trying to read the impending news in the other man’s face, but to no avail. He nodded once and then shut the door behind him.

Alex was exactly where he’d left him in the loo downstairs, but he was passed out now, his head slumped against the tub as he snored loudly. Tommy shook him awake, all-too aware of the chill of Alex’s bare skin under his palms.

“Wassit?” Alex slurred, his eyes opening but just barely.

“How’s your head?” Tommy asked him. He’d try to avoid enabling Alex, if he could.

“Feels like one of those Nazi bastards put a bullet through it,” he replied.

Tommy sighed and pressed the bottle of scotch into Alex’s hands. “Not too much,” he warned, taking the bottle back by force when it looked like Alex might overdo things. “C’mon, let’s get you back to bed.”

He propped up Alex and walked him back down the corridor to their room. He tried to lay him down as gently as possible, but Alex was deadweight and dropped onto the mattress with a loud groan as it bounced underneath him.

“Sorry,” Tommy murmured, tucking in the blankets around him before retreating to his own bed, watching carefully as Alex’s eyes slowly drifted closed again. A few minutes later he was back to snoring, but softly now.

The sound had become comforting to Tommy now, and he settled himself back against the headboard after reaching into the nightstand to grab the book Peter had loaned him a few days ago, a
hefty study on the history of mechanical warfare.

Tommy read for hours while Alex slept, and the light through the window, bright from the east in the morning, had started to fade when Maggie finally poked her head inside to check on them around lunchtime.

“Should I bring you boys a tray?” she asked, taking care to keep her voice low so she wouldn’t wake Alex.

Tommy nodded. “Maybe just some toast for Alex,” he then amended. Alex needed to eat, but it wasn’t the best idea to start with a full-course lunch.

After she’d left, he hopped off his bed and crouched next to Alex’s to try and coax him awake. It took some doing, but there was more colour in his face this time when he opened his eyes, and he didn’t seem in immediate danger of vomiting again.

“What time is it?” Alex asked.

Tommy checked his watch. “Just after one. Maggie’s bringing us something to eat, but I need to get you ready to go upstairs. Collins wants a meeting.”

Alex shoved him away. “I can get myself ready, Christ, I’m not a child.”

Tommy backed off without fighting him. It wasn’t worth it.

Maggie came back in with the tray a few minutes later, while Alex was standing in the middle of the room, shirtless, struggling to do up his belt. Her face reddened slightly, especially once she noticed the obvious kiss-marks dotting his pale torso, but she did her best to ignore him as best she could while crossing the room to hand off the plates of food to Tommy, who was sitting on his bed reading again.

“Try to get him to have some soup while you’re at it,” she said to Tommy, without seeing the sharp glance Alex cast over his shoulder at her. “Should I tell Peter you’ll be up when you’re done?”

“Yes, thank you,” Tommy replied, going straight for the tea, hoping it would act as a preventative in the face of whatever news they were going to receive from their superiors.

Alex swiped a piece of toast from the tray without bothering to finish dressing first. He chewed loudly, obnoxiously, staring straight at Tommy like he was daring the other man to complain. It was a futile effort, and both knew it.

“Have a little soup,” Tommy said quietly when Alex had finished his toast.

Alex made a face but complied without arguing.

They ate fairly quickly, the both of them in silent agreement that there was no point in trying to postpone the inevitable. After they’d finished and Alex was fully dressed and finally presentable, Tommy led the way upstairs.

It felt like gravity itself was increasing exponentially with every step he took. He wondered if Alex felt the same—if under all the bluster and boasting, the drinking and the careless fucks, Alex was every bit as scared as he was that this was all about to come to a sudden screeching halt.

Neither had dared voice it aloud, but Tommy knew what terrified the most: being alone again.
They made it to the third stair from the top when they heard the voices. Tommy put out a hand to stop Alex, and then slowly crept forward, trying to find the source of the noise. It was coming from the master bedroom, which Peter and Maggie had graciously offered to Nell when she’d come to live at the Cottage so she’d have plenty of space for Henry and his cot.

When Tommy peeked through the crack in the doorframe, nearly an inch wide at the highest point, so that if you stood on your toes you could see right into the room, the baby was nowhere to be seen, and inside his parents—one of them ostensibly more legitimate than the other—were standing on either side of the bed from each other as they hurled angry pleas at the other.

“You can’t do this to me,” Nell was saying.

“It’s not my call,” Collins responded. He was speaking at a normal volume, but Tommy knew the man well enough that he could hear the strain in his voice. He was holding himself back, trying to spare Nell a full-fledged argument, but it was unlikely his attempt would succeed.

Tommy was aware of Alex drawing closer, the length of his body pressed against his back as the taller boy stretched to peer inside as well.

“I need help, Asher,” Nell pleaded through tears. “Henry needs you. He needs his father. And you’re never fucking here!”

“You can’t keep blaming me for not being Jack!” Collins roared, his face bright red from anger.

Nell laughed, bitterly. “Oh, that’s real rich coming from you.”

For a brief moment, Collins’s features shifted into something almost savage, animalistic, but he seemed to get himself under control again before he replied. “I don’t know what you mean by that,” he said quietly.

“Like hell!” Nell crossed her arms, her hands already balled into tight fists, and when Collins just stared at her without responding, she only seemed to grow angrier. “I know. We both knew.”

Collins looked like he’d been blindsided by a tank. “I’m off to have a fag,” he said slowly, sounding almost far-away as he spoke. “I’ve got a meeting in a few.”

“Asher,” Nell protested as he turned away from her. “Asher, I’m sorry.”

He ignored her, heading straight for the door behind which Tommy and Alex were still standing.

Both boys scrambled back toward the stairs, tripping over each other in their haste to pretend that they hadn’t been eavesdropping. Collins pushed open the door a few seconds later, a cigarette already hanging out of his mouth. He didn’t spare them a second glance as he passed by, his shoulders practically brushing against theirs on the narrow staircase.

“The…the meeting?” Tommy questioned.

Collins stopped on the stairs, but didn’t turn his head. “I’ll be up in just a mo’. Have Peter get you caught up.”

He continued down after that, taking the remainder of the stairs at a near-run while Alex and Tommy stared after him.

“I guess we should—” Alex started to say.
“Yeah,” Tommy replied.

Walking into Peter’s study for the second time that day felt more like marching out to meet a firing squad. The tense set to Peter’s shoulders as he leaned over his desk were no comfort.

“Collins?” he asked, sounding drained, as he turned to see Alex and Tommy in the doorway.

“Went out for a smoke,” Alex replied, throwing himself onto one of the armchairs near the fireplace. “Said to start without him.”

“Brilliant,” Peter muttered. He slowly sank down into his own chair, rubbing circles into his temples with his left hand while he used the other to steady himself against the desk.

Tommy wondered if he’d gone the same route as Collins and lubricated himself in preparation for the meeting. “Henry?” he asked Peter. He didn’t sit, but leaned against one of the bookcases instead. There was no real point in trying to get comfortable if the news was what he feared.

“I had Maggie take him downstairs. Once they—well, you know.”

“Nell’s not going to like that,” Alex pointed out.

“Nell,” Peter replied sharply, “is not a member of SOE and is subject only to the extent of my charity, and that is beginning to wear thin. Now if you don’t mind?” He gestured to the smattering of notes and maps spread out across the desk.

Alex, looking properly chagrined for once, sat up to get a better look. “That’s…that’s not—” His face was whiter than it’d been than just after he’d emptied his stomach earlier. “What the fuck is this about?”

“Collins will have to fill you in on the finer details,” Peter replied as Tommy craned his neck to try and figure out just what had disturbed Alex so greatly.

“The SOE, myself included, have been reviewing communications from resistance cells in German-occupied Europe,” Peter explained, meeting both Tommy and Alex’s eyes as if to make sure they were listening before he continued. “They’ve put me on relays coming primarily out of France and I’ve been working remotely with a few professors out of Oxbridge who were close with my father. Engineers, linguists, historians, the like. We’ve been going over what we’ve learned in the last year about the German foothold, trying to best determine where to strike first and land the biggest blow.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Alex asked. He was sitting up straight now, but looked like he wanted to curl in on himself to escape the answer to his own question.

Before Peter could reply, the door to the study opened and Collins slipped inside, looking no less haggard than he had when he’d left Nell’s room, and reeking of smoke. “All right?” he said in greeting before heading straight to the liquor cabinet and pulling out a bottle, this one brandy.

“Mind waiting till we finish before you start celebrating?” Peter said, a bit testily.

Collins paused. He slammed the bottle down on the desk next to Peter’s left hand and backed up, retreating to the bookcase opposite Tommy. He gave the man a meaningful look and waggled his eyebrows, as if to remind Tommy of their conversation in the study earlier.

“I gave them the basic run-down,” Peter informed him. “Just my part, nothing else.”

“Ah. Well lads,” Collins said, his tone dripping with false cheer. “How’d you feel about taking a
little holiday?”

Tommy furrowed his brow in confusion. Alex narrowed his eyes. “Sounds too good to be true,” he said sarcastically.

“That’s because it is,” Collins replied bluntly. “I wasn’t called to Baker Street for your run-of-the-mill briefings, chats with the council, the usual piss. No, it was an interview.”

“I assume you aren’t up for a promotion,” Alex interjected, earning him a warning look from Collins, who clearly hadn’t finished.

“Aye, if only,” he continued, shaking his head. “No, they wanted to highlight potential field agents for an upcoming operation,” he explained. He pointed to Tommy, and then Alex before folding his arms back over his chest. “You’ve both fought in Dunkirk before and they wanted a team with at least one agent who can speak French.” Collins was still staring at Alex, who was pointedly looking down at his own shoes when Tommy glanced over to him.

“You—what?”

“My father,” Alex replied bitterly. “That’s why they kicked me out of Intelligence, put me in the BEF instead. I wasn’t even supposed to be there.”

And maybe if he hadn’t been—if he hadn’t dragged them up the beach to wait with the others in that little Dutch fishing vessel—

Tommy wasn’t allowed to think of such things. He wouldn’t permit it. It was the only way he could—that they could stay like this, the way they were.

Suddenly the maps of coastal France spread out across Peter’s desk made perfect sense, and it was like his world was being flipped upside down. Of all the possible outcomes, all the imagined fates, he’d never dreamed that he would be subjected to this.

“They want to send us back,” Tommy said, the words sounding awfully finally once they’d left his lips.

“Aye,” Collins replied, and when Tommy looked back at his commanding officer’s face, there was a hollowness in it that Tommy hadn’t seen before.

As far as he knew, Collins had never set foot on the shores of Dunkirk, but the void behind his eyes said otherwise.

“When?” Alex asked, sounding near tears.

“Due at the airfield on the morn’s morn,” Collins replied. As if reading the question on Alex’s face, he clarified: “The official summons calls for three agents. Peter has graciously offered to transport us to Chivenor where we’ll board the Lysander and be flown to the DZ.”

“We’re landing on the beach?” Alex asked incredulously. “Jerry snipers’ll pick us off like flies!”

“They won’t know you’re there,” Peter explained patiently. “You aren’t going in without support. A resistance cell out of Free France will be there to clear the beach and escort you back to their headquarters.”

“The mission?” Tommy inquired, still numb from the news that he was going back—back—to the place he’d tried so hard to escape.
Peter looked to Collins for approval before answering. “Sabotage. There’s reports of experimental tanks being manufactured and tested out of Dunkirk that if employed on the front could spell disaster for the Red Army.”

Alex muttered something Tommy couldn’t hear, but could guess was probably derogatory regarding the Russians.

“They want the three of us,” he said slowly, not sure he was fully understanding, “to take out a bunch of tanks.”

“Eventually,” Peter replied. “But like Collins said, you’ll have support from the French.”

“Wonderful,” Alex breathed, making it clear he found it anything but.

“The two of you will remain under my command,” Collins added, “but we will defer to the French when necessary. It’s their turf; they bear the consequences if we fuck this up. Understood?”

Alex and Tommy muttered their assent, Tommy particularly grateful that these meetings were more relaxed than briefings from his commanding officers had been in the BEF, mostly for Alex’s sake.

“That all?” Alex asked, starting to push up out of the recliner as he looked to Collins for permission to leave.

Collins nodded stiffly. “You’re dismissed.”

Alex stood and cocked his head toward the door, signalling for Tommy to follow. A hand on his shoulder stopped him before he could pass Collins. “What?” he asked impatiently, adding a pointed, “sir” afterward as if to highlight his own impropriety.

Collins sighed. “I get it, laddie, but try not to overdo things, all right? I don’t want to be loading you on the plane in a stretcher.” He patted Alex on the shoulder before letting him go.

Alex gave him a two-finger salute on the way out of the door and Tommy practically shoved him the rest of the way out into the corridor, not wanting to end up as an observer of yet another row involving Collins.

“I don’t understand why you do that,” he hissed at Alex as they approached the stairs, taking care not to be too loud as they passed the master suite just in case Nell was still inside.

“Oh, fuck off, Tom. Not all of us can be goody-two-shoes like you.”

“I’m not—” Tommy started to protest, struggling to keep up with Alex, who decided to take the stairs two at a time before leaping over the last few to land at the very bottom with a smug smile.

“Then prove it,” he challenged.

Tommy stopped short on the second stair and narrowed his eyes. “How?”

“Come out to the pub tonight.” Alex was practically pouting. “You always hide in your bed, reading your fucking books. You’ve never gone out with me, not once the entire time we’ve been here.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, unimpressed by Alex’s dramatics. “Don’t you think you want to give it a rest for tonight?”

“If not tonight, then when? We’re dead men walking already.”
That thought was particularly sobering. “Fine,” Tommy said finally. “After supper.”

Alex grinned, and Tommy remembered again why he sometimes let Alex get his way even when he didn’t deserve to. He followed Alex into the parlour, where Maggie had Henry laid out on a wool blanket on the floor and was dangling various knitted baubles above his head for him to reach out and grab.

“How’s my little lad?” Alex asked, plopping himself down on the floor next to her.

Alex was always good around the baby in a way that Tommy envied. He kept his distance, choosing instead to watch from the sofa as they played with Nell’s son, trying to keep him occupied until Nell decided she wanted to be a mother again.

Tommy knew that it wasn’t really her fault, that as Peter had explained, sometimes a mother giving birth could be every bit as traumatic as a soldier surviving a war, that she needed time and space to heal. But he couldn’t help but be reminded of his own mother every time he looked at her, and the childhood he’d been so desperate to escape that he’d enlisted in the army under false pretences when he was just barely seventeen.

In Dunkirk he’d regretted that, but after transferring to SOE, things had gotten better, if only a little. And now…. Tommy resigned himself to not think of such things on the last day he had to savour his freedom. He cleared his mind, watching with a lukewarm smile as Alex played with the baby, letting himself fall into reckless fantasies he knew he’d never admit to out loud.

They ate a scant supper later, trying to make the best of what Maggie had been able to pick up at the shops this morning, which hadn’t been much at all.

Tommy was all-too aware of Alex casting furtive glances at him while they ate, and he did his best to maintain focus on his food. The danger of letting his eyes stray was that he might unintentionally catch those of Collins, or Peter, or Nell, and after the disastrous afternoon, he wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Alex finished first and excused himself with barely a by-your-leave. Tommy ate a little quicker and left the table a few minutes later. When he reached their room, Alex was slicking his hair with grease, and glanced at him just once as he entered.

“Change,” he ordered, eyes locked on his own reflection in the mirror.

“What?” Tommy asked.

“Borrow some of my clothes,” Alex insisted. “I’ll not have you ruining my chances because you don’t want to spend your pocket money on a proper cardie.”

Tommy frowned but went over to the bureau and began rifling through Alex’s steadily growing collection of civvies, trying to find something he found suitable. They were close enough in height that he wasn’t worried about the fit, though he might have to roll up the trouser cuffs.

“Satisfied?” he asked, after changing into a pair of tan trousers and a lightweight cardigan, as per Alex’s request.

Alex, who was looking slightly more extravagant in a wool coat and scarf made a face as he assessed Tommy. “It’ll do, I suppose.”

“Very encouraging,” Tommy muttered.
“Chin up,” Alex replied chipperly. “This is our last chance to have some fun.”

“You constantly bringing that up isn’t exactly helping,” Tommy pointed out.

Alex shook his head and grabbed for Tommy’s arm, pulling him closer so he could run his fingers through his hair in an attempt to improve the mess that Tommy had given up on trying to tame years ago. “You should go shorter,” he said, seemingly unaware of how close they were standing.

“Maybe after we get back,” Tommy remarked, trying desperately to concentrate on making the words come out of his mouth.

Alex’s hands paused, and then withdrew. “Well, we should get going. Curfew and all.”

“Right.”

Tommy followed Alex out and exhaled deeply when they left the Cottage and walked onto the front drive, a little gravel path that trailed through the grass and weeds for a good half-kilometre before connecting with the main road leading into the village. Alex whistled an unfamiliar tune as he led the way, his hands tucked into his coat pockets as he swayed in time to the music. Looking at him, you wouldn’t have guessed that he was a man facing almost certain death in just two days’ time. Maybe less.

Tommy’s unwavering sense of dread peaked as they approached the little pub perched on the outskirts of the village, just far enough that the inevitable fighting and fucking wouldn’t disturb the more sensible folk who wanted no part in it.

Alex looked at home as they walked inside and took a couple stools at the bar. Tommy felt anything but, and huddled in on himself as much as possible, not wanting to draw any attention from the other patrons—something Alex seemed to thrive on.

Maybe because his discomfort was obvious, or maybe Alex just wanted to throw caution to the wind now that their fate had been signed away, but Tommy soon found himself surrounded by shot glasses, with Alex eagerly cheering him on as he attempted to down each one.

There were a couple girls there by the time he’d made it through the round, and Tommy smiled sloppily at the one perched on his right, a petite brunette with a lipstick smudge visible on her front teeth each time she smiled.

She was either an excellent conversationalist, or Tommy was even drunker than he felt, because before he knew it, the bartender was kicking them out.

“C’mon,” Alex said, grabbing Tommy by the back of his borrowed cardigan and pulling him bodily off his stool. The girls followed them out of the pub and back down the path, which Tommy didn’t find strange until his brain finally caught up with his feet.

He stopped abruptly, jerking Alex back unexpectedly. “We can’t bring them back to the Cottage,” Tommy pointed out.

Alex rolled his eyes. “We’re not going to the Cottage, you div. Just follow me.”

Sure enough, they passed the path that would have led them back home, and continued on to a collection of fishermen’s huts around the docks that had been all-but abandoned after the war had started.

Tommy turned up his nose at the stench of salt that permeated the air like incense this close to the
shore, but followed Alex wordlessly to one of the larger huts. Tommy squinted at the darkness inside as Alex opened the door and fumbled around in his pockets for his matchbook to light the lamp hanging against the doorframe.

Once the hut was illuminated, Tommy could see that inside were a couple of mattresses lying on the wooden floor and piled together with a bunch of sheets and linens that Alex had very clearly pilfered from the Cottage. He gave Alex a disapproving look as they entered.

There was no time to wait for a response. The brunette (Joan?) was on Tommy before he knew what hit him, and then suddenly he was horizontal, her dressed hiked up around her hips as she straddled him. He glanced over to find Alex in a similar position with his blonde, though the two of them had made considerably more progress in undressing.

Tommy, though overwhelmed, was still coherent enough to hear Alex’s voice over the sound of Joan’s heavy panting against his neck.

“You said that you—ah, fuck, Dottie, stop—you said that you could get some.”

“It’s not that easy anymore,” the girl replied.

Tommy twisted his head again to look at them just as Dottie reached down to cup Alex through his pants. He looked pained, not like he should be, and she didn’t seem anymore pleased with the results.

She scoffed and sat up, prompting Joan to pause in her efforts and do the same. “Well, don’t tell me you need drugs to get a fucking lob-on, yeah?”

Alex said nothing, just grew redder in the face as the seconds ticked by in dead silence.

“What do you mean…drugs?” Tommy asked, regretting the words just as soon as he’d said them.

Dottie scowled and stood up to straighten out her clothes. “It’s been lovely,” she said icily, “but Josie and I really need to get home. Maybe we’ll see you around, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tommy replied lamely, propping himself up on his elbows to watch as the two girls walked back out into the night, the door swinging shut behind them. “See you.”

When he turned to look, he found that Alex still hadn’t moved from where he’d been lying flat on his back on the other mattress. Tommy thought about asking him if he was all right, but decided to leave it alone for the time being.

“Fuuuuck,” Alex said a few moments later as he stared up at the ceiling, drawing the syllable out until it was almost a yell.

Tommy gave him fifteen seconds exactly to calm down before he asked, “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Alex breathed. He glanced over at Tommy and let out a barking laugh. “You’re not, though.”

Tommy glanced down at himself and then immediately grabbed a fistful of the sheets underneath them pulling them up just enough to cover his groin. Alex tended toward tighter-fitting trousers, making his situation abundantly obvious, Tommy realized belatedly.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Tommy asked, hoping to distract both Alex and himself from the embarrassing predicament he’d found himself in. Thanks to Josie, not Joan, as it turned out.
“Do you?” Alex shot back.

“No,” Tommy admitted. He wouldn’t even know what to say. Sorry? That he was here for Alex? Everything was either too trivial, or too melodramatic. There was no right thing to say.

“Good,” Alex said as he rolled over and got up onto all fours. “Then. Don’t. Talk.” He emphasized each syllable with his movements as he crawled onto Tommy’s mattress and laid down next to him, far too close to be mistaken for anything other than what it was.

Tommy’s hand shot out to grab Alex’s wrist once it reached the waistband of his trousers. “What are you doing?”

“A favour,” Alex replied, easily shaking off Tommy’s grasp.

“You don’t owe me any favours,” Tommy told him a low voice.

Alex lifted his eyes to meet Tommy’s. “For once,” he said quietly, “don’t overthink things.”

Tommy closed his eyes and tried to take Alex’s advice, focusing only on the sounds of shifting fabric, heavy breathing; the smell of the oil in Alex’s hair and the bitter hint of sweat; the feel of calloused palms against slick skin.

It was over almost before it began.

Tommy opened his eyes to find Alex wiping his hand off on part of the sheets, his nose mildly wrinkled in disgust. “Sorry,” Tommy told him, his face heating as Alex turned back to face him again.

Alex arched a sceptical brow. “You know, I’m not usually expecting an apology to follow my performance in bed. Not that this is much of one.”

“Sorry,” Tommy said again, reflexively. “I just meant that I guess I can’t really…reciprocate.”

If Alex was embarrassed that Tommy had brought up his…issue, however indirectly, he didn’t show it. Tommy watched as he flipped over onto his stomach, peering up at Tommy through his one visible eye. “It’s not so much a problem when I’m having a wank,” he said casually, as if they were merely discussing the weather. “Only when…you know.”

“Do you know why?” Tommy asked cautiously, not really expecting a straight answer.

Alex sighed into the pillow. “I asked Collins about it actually, a while back. Right humiliating, but he said it’s more common than you think. Just something that happens sometimes, with the war and all. I suppose you don’t…?”

Tommy felt a violent blush spread across his face again. “Ah, well. I guess I wouldn’t really know, I mean—”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never—”

“Once,” Tommy managed, acutely aware of how red he must be. “Before.”

“Christ, how are you even alive?”

“I haven’t had many opportunities,” Tommy replied defensively. “I’m not exactly—”

“What?” Alex asked, looking confused.
You, is what he had been about to say. “Nothing,” he said instead. “It’s stupid.”

Alex didn’t have a response to that, and Tommy wondered what he was thinking about as the minutes dragged on. He glanced over periodically, to make sure Alex hadn’t fallen asleep, but each time his eye was still open, focusing on nothing in particular as they continued to lie there without moving apart.

Tommy wasn’t aware that his own eyes had begun to droop under the weight of his exhaustion, and the added effects of the alcohol, until Alex suddenly spoke again.

“You didn’t even notice,” he said.

“What?” Tommy asked, taken off-guard by the statement that had emerged from seemingly nowhere. “The way he looked at you.”

Tommy’s lips had already formed the beginning of the question when he realized just who Alex was referring to. His stomach dropped like a stone into the pit of his stomach. “He didn’t—I—how would you know?” he finished pathetically.

“I was watching him,” Alex replied. “And he was always watching you. I know you never noticed, or—” He paused for a long time, but when Tommy didn’t respond, he continued on without finishing the thought. “I never told you what happened.”

“I didn’t ask you to. I wouldn’t.”

“I know!” Alex said sharply. “But I know what you must think.”

“I don’t think anything, Alex.” It wasn’t a lie. Tommy did his best to never think, about anything at all, but especially this.

Alex scoffed, lifting his head slightly to focus both his eyes on Tommy. “Bullshit. You think I left him there on purpose. To die.”

“No,” Tommy said flatly, “I don’t. And maybe if you stopped beating yourself up for something that wasn’t your fault, you wouldn’t be such a bloody wreck all the time.” The words escaped before he could think better of them, and he barely had time to regret them before Alex reared back, looking furious.

“Fuck you,” he spat. “Fuck you. You really think you’re better than me?”

“That’s not what I said,” Tommy protested. He sat up and reached for Alex, only to have his hand slapped away unexpectedly.

“I wish I’d stayed,” Alex muttered to himself. “I wish I’d made him go instead. You’d have been better off without me.”

Tommy stared at the back of Alex’s head for a moment, trying to come up with something to say, something that wouldn’t sound like pity or judgment. There was nothing. “I’m going back,” he said finally, clumsily staggering to his feet before opening the door.

For once, Alex didn’t follow.

Maggie was awake when Tommy returned, though it was well past midnight. “Sorry,” he said as he took off his shoes and placed them neatly with the others. “I know it’s late.”
“Are you drunk?” she asked, looking up from where she’d been sitting on the sofa in the parlour to get a better view of him. Tommy stood stock-still under the dim light illuminating the front entrance. If she’d been about to reprimand him, she must have changed her mind after looking at his face, because suddenly Maggie was standing in front of him and wrapping her arms around his slender frame.

Tommy didn’t cry, though he felt like it would actually help for once. Between the two of them, Alex was the crier, even if he’d never admit it.

“You’ll be okay,” Maggie said quietly, the words muffled with her mouth pressed against his shoulder. “All of you, you’re gonna make it back, you know? You’ll look out for each other, won’t you?”

Tommy nodded. “Of course.”

Maggie pulled back with a sad little smile and ruffled Tommy’s hair. “Off to bed with you then. Have to make sure you’re plenty rested before the afternoon.”

Tommy stumbled back to his room in a daze. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow. He never heard Alex come back in, but when he woke late the next morning, the other bed had been neatly made, like the other boy had never once slept there at all.

When Tommy finally emerged from his room nearly an hour after regaining consciousness, all of the others were packed into the tiny kitchen, even Nell and Henry. He gave her a tiny nod of acknowledgment as he walked in. She looked a little better than she had yesterday.

Alex continued to ignore him even when Tommy took his place at his side.

Peter seemed frazzled, but Tommy’s entrance appeared to re-invigorate him slightly, and he gestured for Alex, Tommy, and Collins to follow him into the dining room where he started to go over all the last-minute details of their rendezvous with the Free French resistance cell in Dunkirk.

“The mission is being referred to as Operation Souris,” Peter explained. “We’ve sent all the relevant information to the French so that any necessary reconnaissance can be carried out in advance or on their terms. Remember your place.” His gaze lingered on Alex as he said the last bit.

Maggie soon finished lunch and the entire Cottage ate together for the first time in a long time, but there was no cause for celebration. The food, which Tommy knew he should have enjoyed, held all the flavour of a stale biscuit; a last meal unable to be enjoyed.

After another few hours in which Tommy failed to gain Alex’s attention and reverted to sulking miserably in the corner while Peter and Collins discussed strategy over countless blueprints and maps, none of which Tommy had any interest in looking at for fear it might make him sick, they finally departed the Cottage in the little car Peter had inherited from his father, and rarely drove.

Tommy watched morosely from the backseat as Peter and Collins said their goodbyes to Maggie and Nell before getting in themselves. When they set off, Tommy glanced over at Alex, but he was looking out the opposite window, staring at nothing. Tommy wondered if this was how things were to be for the entirety of this operation, what he was supposed to do to make Alex forgive him, to make Alex forgive himself.

At some point during the drive, Tommy must have fallen asleep, because suddenly it was all dark outside and Collins was being interrupted mid-sentence by a loud snore from Alex.

“—admirable, really,” Collins continued, “but if you really want my advice—”
“I’m sure you’ll give it regardless,” Peter interrupted dryly.

Collins sighed. “Look, you don’t have to try so hard to be your father, Peter.”

“My father was a good man.”

“I know,” Collins replied quietly. There was a lengthy pause before he resumed speaking. “But so are you. I know you made him proud. You would’ve made your brother proud too.”

There was no reply from Peter, at least not while Tommy remained awake, and the next time his eyes opened the car was stopped and Alex was getting out next to him. He abruptly came to and quickly jerked open his own door, swiping at his eyes to try and clear away the sleep-blindness as he stepped out onto the airfield.

The Westland Lysander, a plane he hadn’t seen up close since the early days in the SOE when Collins had first taken them through their parachute training, was all matte-black, with little to mark it as belonging to Allied forces, let alone RAF. Tommy hoped their clandestine mission wouldn’t be prematurely cut short because of friendly fire.

“About ready?” the pilot asked from beside the cockpit.

“Just about,” Collins replied. He’d already put his pack on and was getting Alex similarly strapped in. After making sure everything was secure, he moved over to Tommy, who did his best to hold perfectly still with his arms straight out as Collins adorned him with his own chute. Then Collins guided them into the rear of the plane, buckled them in, and then took his own seat next to Alex.

Tommy waved at Peter just before the door closed, feeling a little foolish as he did so, but better when Peter waved back with a smile. He liked Peter, and Maggie, and even Nell sometimes, and he hoped he’d get to see them all again when this was over.

He glanced over at Alex, who was gripping the straps on his pack with bone-white knuckles. Collins followed his gaze and reached over to give Alex’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Just a wee jump,” he said, “just like we practiced. It’ll be over soon.”

Alex swallowed heavily, and finally looked up to meet Tommy’s eyes. “I know,” he said, the words barely audible over the sound of the turbines whirring as the plane readied for take-off. He said nothing else, but Tommy could read the thought in his eyes, a luminescent pale green visible even in relative darkness. That’s what he was afraid of.
I. Gibson

Chapter Notes

Gibson POV this time. This chapter took some turns. I had many an existential crisis while writing it. You're welcome.

Also disregard what I said about this fic only being 5 chapters it's probably going to be at least double that now. Oops. (EDIT: Past!me was still Boo Boo the Fool at this point.)

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first time Gibson walked in on them, it was six months into their stint at Château fort de Dunkerque—a name meant to be humorous, as the tiny farmhouse they were operating out of was nothing like its similarly named counterparts throughout the French countryside. He didn’t even notice them initially, intent only on making it to the kitchen where he knew there would still be a few stale tarts left for himself and the other recruits on patrol that night.

He’d almost made it to the platter sitting by the oven when his brain finally caught up to his eyes, and he backed out of the kitchen slowly to get a second look.

“Farrier?” he exclaimed in surprise, recognizing the other man only by the back of his head and the slight glimpse of his back visible from behind the sofa.

Farrier’s head popped in response, immediately followed by Simone’s. He looked slightly guilty; she, merely annoyed.

“Ah, Gibson,” Farrier said stiffly. “Didn’t realize the scouts would be back so soon.”

Gibson just stared as the two of them scrambled up off of the sofa. They were both partially undressed—Simone more so than Farrier—but it was the latter whose body Gibson’s eyes lingered on the longest before he forced himself to look down to give them a minute to make themselves decent again.

“The word?” Simone asked sharply, drawing Gibson’s eyes upward again to meet hers.

“Clear,” he replied in English, with an accent that would have convinced any stranger that he and Farrier must have grown up together in London. Harder had been trying to master a mangled version of his natural accent to match Farrier’s own, but even Gibson—who had recently discovered in himself a surprising talent for imitating sounds and voices not his own—couldn’t quite achieve Farrier’s unfortunate inadequacy.

It would help, Gibson thought, if Simone didn’t insist on coddling Farrier so much by defaulting to English every time he was in the room, but he’d long since learned his lesson about trying to suggest that the woman do anything she wasn’t already determined to do.

Farrier looked worriedly from Simone to Gibson and then back again throughout the brief, but terse,
exchange. When it was clear that was to be the end of it, he finally spoke again. “Just you back, then?”

Gibson nodded. “Leclair wants the recruits to run a full rotation before the morning.”

Simone scoffed. “Absurd.”

Gibson shook his head and turned back toward the kitchen, catching only the beginning of Farrier’s argument that Leclair was right and the patrols should have the day off for Christmas to improve morale.

He headed toward the covered platter sitting back in the far corner by the oven, and opened it to find just two tarts left. Gibson sighed gratefully and reached for one, only to be interrupted mid-grab by a familiar cough.

“Care to share?” Farrier asked with a wry smile.

Gibson peered behind him carefully. “No Simone?” he asked.

“She went out to The Tower.”

Gibson frowned. “Does she really think she’s going to convince him at this point?”

“No,” Farrier replied, “but she’s too stubborn to admit otherwise.” He walked over to Gibson and took the remaining tart, stuffing it all into his mouth in one bite.

They ate together quietly, or relatively so—the sound of Farrier’s chewing lasting nearly as long as it took for Gibson to nibble his own tart into nothing.

“Thought you were married,” Gibson said finally.

“I was,” Farrier replied, swallowing before hastily amending, “Am.”

Gibson raised an eyebrow.

Farrier frowned. “It’s not that simple, all right? I’ve been away for a long time. I’ve got—a man’s got needs, you know?”

Gibson had to bite back a laugh. “Can’t say I do.”

“Well, surely you had a girl back home, right? In Belfort?”

Gibson stared at the other man. Even though they were the same height, there was something about Farrier that made Gibson feel like he was always looking up at him somehow. “No,” he said slowly, carefully. “No girl.”

“Ah,” Farrier replied, leaning back against the stove. He didn’t meet Gibson’s eyes. “Well that would complicate things, I suppose. Does anyone else know?”

Gibson shook his head, surprised Farrier even needed to ask. He hadn’t told any of his countrymen that he was one of them, even, still sticking to his assumed identity after all this time. Why would he trust them with something like this?

“I see,” Farrier said. “I appreciate you telling me, at least. You know…when I was—”

Whatever he had been about to say was abruptly cut off by the sound of yelling from outside. Farrier
and Gibson exchanged a confused glance before both darting to the front door. Farrier flung it open
to reveal Leclair and Simone with an injured scout hanging between them, blood pouring from a
gash in his forehead.

Farrier rushed forward to help, leaving Gibson standing alone in the doorway, at a loss for what to
do.

“Va chercher un peu d’eau,” Simone barked.

Gibson darted off in the direction of the pump outside and grabbed a bucket from the side of the
house. He waited impatiently as the slow trickle of water slowly filled the bucket to a level he
thought Simone would be satisfied with before heading back inside at a near sprint.

Everyone was talking at once when he walked back into the kitchen to find the injured boy—
Nicolas, Gibson realized now—laid out on the table. It was clear that in addition to the nasty cut on
his head, he’d been stabbed in the side, and was losing blood quickly.

Gibson froze.

Simone, noticing him after a few seconds, darted forward and ripped the bucket of water away from
him with a cold glare. She turned back to the injured boy and began soaking towels in the water,
attempting to staunch the bleeding as best she could while Leclair cut through the blood-soaked shirt
to reveal the worst of Nicolas’s wounds.

Gibson had to stifle a gasp at the sight of the gaping rend in the boy’s flesh, through which he could
see the sickening glisten of entrails. “What happened?” he managed to choke out.

“I found him on my way back from the Tower,” Leclair said, sounding oddly calm all things
considered.

“And Pierre?”

“We won’t know anything unless we keep him alive long enough to get an answer,” Simone
snapped before turning back to the boy, who was, Gibson suddenly realized, going to die.

He watched as the others did their best to stabilise Nicolas, feeling acutely helpless in a way that he
hadn’t since—he stopped himself from proceeding with that thought, the brief flash of memory
making his stomach churn.

Farrier was holding the boy’s head between his palms, hovering close and keeping his eyes locked
with Nicolas’s. “Stay with me, all right?” he said in stilted French. “Just keep looking at me and
you’ll be all right.”

Eventually Leclair seemed to realize there was nothing more that he could do, and he moved out of
the way to let Simone take over his job of staunching the bleeding. He stood next to Farrier, looking
down stone-faced at the dying scout.

“Nicolas,” he said evenly, not a hint of emotion in his voice to betray the boy’s inevitable fate, “can
you hear me? I need to know what happened to you and Pierre out there. It’s very important.”

Nicolas’s mouth opened as he struggled to answer. Gibson watched as a small trickle of blood
slowly oozed out and slid down his jaw toward his ear to meet the river of blood still flowing freely
from the headwound.

It wasn’t the first time he’d seen a man die. It wouldn’t be the last. But each of them felt like a brutal
punch at the base of his spine, sending a shockwave through his whole body that left him feeling hot and cold all at once.

“Pierre,” Nicolas choked out. “It was…Pierre….”

“What was—?” Simone started to ask, but before she could finish the question, Nicolas’s whole body seized and it took all of Farrier and Leclaire’s strength to keep him from rolling straight off the table as he thrashed around wildly.

Gibson stepped forward to help, occupying the space between Simone and Farrier as he put his hands on Nicolas’s shivering body. He half-hoped Nicolas would pass soon, just so that all of this would be over. Sometimes it wasn’t worth it to keep fighting.

Eventually, after long seconds that felt more like hours, Nicolas finally stilled. His eyes fluttered closed on their own, his chest sank and did not rise again. It was only of the few deaths that Gibson had witnessed that he could have called graceful, and he felt thankful that Nicolas could have that, at least.

Leclaire was the first to back away from the body, doing so with a prolonged sigh. He wiped a stray lock of hair away from his eyes, leaving a bloody streak across his own forehead in its wake.

“Simone, Gibson: I need the two of you to head back to the Tower and bring the others back here. Farrier and I will round up anyone else still out on patrol.”

Simone looked like she might protest, but one look from Leclaire quelled the argument before it could begin. “Let’s go,” she said curtly, nodding at Gibson.

He followed her out, but not before casting one last glance at Farrier, who was staring down at the ground with an expression Gibson knew too well, for he’d seen it on the face of his commanding officers each and every time they lost a subordinate. Farrier hadn’t been responsible for Nicolas’s death, but he would undoubtedly blame himself for it anyway.

“We need to hurry,” Simone said as they left the farmhouse they used as their base of operations and headed out across the fields toward the abandoned windmill they’d dubbed the Tower after securing it as a secondary observation point.

Gibson didn’t reply. There was no need.

Simone seemed to take his silence as a personal offense, finally rounding on him after they’d been walking without a word for several minutes. Gibson, who wasn’t expecting the shove, nearly fell, just barely managing to catch himself before hitting the ground.

“We’re supposed to be—” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“Ta gueule,” she spat. “Keeping your mouth shut’s the only thing you’re good for, anyway, isn’t it?”

Gibson stared back at her, open-mouthed and struggling to find a suitable response, but he didn’t have a chance. She was on him before he realized, her lips suddenly and violently pressed against his own.

He tore himself away with an exclamation of surprise. “What—?”

“You don’t like women, do you, Gibson?” she asked.

Gibson felt his face turn scarlet. “I—”
Simone snorted. “That’s what I thought. I’ve seen the way you look at Farrier. You don’t hide it as well as you think.”

“Farrier and I are friends,” Gibson replied cautiously, fully expecting Simone to interrupt him yet again. “That’s all.”

“As long as things stay that way, we won’t have a problem.” Simone continued to stare at Gibson, as if challenging him to argue.

He wasn’t about to take the bait. “Shall we continue, then?”

She huffed and turned back around to head to the Tower. Gibson followed at what he decided was a safe enough distance, just in case she changed her mind and physically accosted him again.

Within the span of six months, the Resistance cell in Dunkirk had grown and shrunk and grown again until they numbered fifteen total, six of whom had been young Frenchmen rescued from a POW caravan being marched to Germany, where they would have been put to work out in the fields or the factories or the mines. Among that group had been both Nicolas and Pierre.

Gibson had never liked Pierre, especially after Leclair had him run patrols with the new recruits to get them up to speed on the rotations. He’d been too brash, too loud, too fond of the attention he got from the others when he mocked Leclair or the other cell leaders behind their backs.

Gibson had kept all of this to himself at the time, but now he wished he hadn’t, because if what Nicolas had implied were really true, then…. But there was no use dwelling on choices he hadn’t made.

When they finally reached the Tower, Simone knocked and waited for the ladder to drop down so the two of them could ascend to the higher level. Gibson went up and was surprised to find that the only people currently inhabiting the windmill were Jean-Marie and Dominique.

Simone seemed similarly surprised. “Where are the others?” she demanded.

“Francois and Hugues started their shift just before we saw the flare,” Dominique replied helpfully. “Leclair decided to go on his own to investigate, but I had Yves and Moussa go out to look for him when he didn’t come back.”

“Merde,” Simone muttered. “You’re to come back with us to the Château. Leclair’s orders. Come on, no time to waste, let’s go.”

Gibson looked on as Simone shepherded the two of them—who weren’t soldiers at all but civilians who had ended up helping the cause through extenuating personal circumstances—out of the Tower with a certain delicacy he would not have believed her capable of had he not witnessed it firsthand.

She went down after, and Gibson had just barely put a foot on the first rung of the ladder when a bright light caught his eye. They all turned their heads in unison to watch as another flare shot upwards above the trees to the south.

“I’ll go,” Gibson called down to Simone, who was waiting at the bottom of the ladder with the others.

She hesitated for a minute before nodding. She had already started to walk away when she turned and said unexpectedly, “Be careful.”

Gibson nodded, surprised by the admonition. “Yeah. Thanks.”
He headed in the direction he’d spotted the flare at a near sprint, familiar enough with the countryside now that he wasn’t worried about the trees or abandoned farm equipment that littered his path. It was hard to pinpoint exactly where the signal had originated from, but the area they patrolled in was small enough that Gibson was confident he could find the source without too much trouble.

He found the flare gun first. The body second.

A brief examination was all he needed to determine that the corpse wasn’t one of their own. But it wasn’t the typical German grunt they encountered on occasion either. And by the looks of him, he’d been lying there for at least an hour, which meant that he’d been killed prior to the altercation that had left Nicolas mortally wounded.

Gibson quickly scanned the area around himself, looking for any immediate threat. Upon finding none, he began to pat down the body, opening the heavy wool jacket to find a nametag or badge of some sort on the inside.

His grasp of German wasn’t the best, but he knew enough to piece together the most important words, typed out in large bold capitals. ‘Weapons Technician’. But what would a German weapons technician be doing in the middle of the woods outside Dunkirk?

Gibson didn’t have much time to sit and ponder this, however, as a rustling in the leaves behind him put him on high alert once more. He darted behind the closest tree and tried to slow his breathing as much as possible while he waited for the source of the noise to reveal itself.

He wasn’t expecting Moussa to come stumbling through the trees before collapsing to his knees, holding the side of his head as blood trickled through his fingers. Gibson paused just a moment before darting to his side to assess the extent of the damage.

Moussa groaned in pain as Gibson peeled his hand away to reveal that his ear had been sliced nearly in half, the cut continuing along his cheekbone before finally fading into a small scratch.

“Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé?”

It wasn’t until Moussa lifted his eyes to give him a quizzical look that Gibson realized he had forgotten to butcher his own natural-born accent when he’d asked the question. He hoped it would be easily forgotten due to more pressing concerns, and made a mental note to be more careful in the future. Being discovered now would only serve to injure his relationship with Leclaire, who still seemed to be his best hope for getting out of France alive, provided he lived long enough for the opportunity to present itself.

Things didn’t seem promising at the moment.

“Yves and Pierre were plants,” Moussa said, wincing as Gibson wound a strip of fabric, torn from the inside of his own jacket around Moussa’s head to slow the bleeding. “We were looking for Leclaire when Yves and I found the German, dead, and he turned on me.”

“He told you about Pierre?” Gibson asked, confused.

Moussa looked suddenly defensive. “No,” he replied, “I ran after he attacked me, but I heard him calling out to Pierre before I found you.”

Gibson nodded. “Well, we should get back to the Château and tell the others what—”

A closed fist struck the side of his head before he’d finished speaking. Gibson didn’t even remember hitting the ground.
The first thing Gibson realized upon waking is that he was cold, much colder than he should’ve been if he’d been holed up in the attic with Farrier at the Château.

The second was that the voices he could faintly hear were not doing so in French or in English, but in German.

Gibson opened his eyes slowly. He looked around himself, just able to make out in the dark that he seemed to be inside some kind of warehouse, filled with dusty wooden pallets and hunks of metal twisted into indecipherable shapes.

Looking over at the large windows opposite where he was lying, he could make out the shapes of three people standing amongst the larger shadows, just barely illuminated by the moonlight still coming in from the east, the only indication Gibson had that not much time had passed since he’d been knocked unconscious in the woods.

They were far enough away, and it was dark enough inside the warehouse, that Gibson felt confident enough to sit up. His hands had been tied behind his back, but clumsily; he began to pick at the knot with the thumb and index finger of his right hand, gritting his teeth against the excruciating feeling of frustration that washed over him as soon as he began the task.

As he did so, he tried to make sense of what had brought him here.

He’d been talking with Moussa, and then there was a jolt of pain—of which the only trace was a hollow ache in his jaw and temple.

Clearly Moussa had been lying about Yves and it was really he and Pierre that had been German spies. Or they’d been mistaken about what had happened to Nicolas and it was really he who had been the plant, and not Pierre. Gibson hoped it was the former, if only to feel justified in his past dislike for Pierre.

Once free of his bonds, Gibson edged slowly around the perimeter of the warehouse, rounding the pallets lining the center in a checkerboard pattern to the left of where the trio of figures were standing. Their voices faded as he moved away and then rose in volume again as he carefully darted behind a large stack of metal plating up near the windows. Through the glass he could just make out the ocean, and a thick fog rolling in from the north.

He still couldn’t make out the features of any of the men, and their German was beyond his grasp, but the voices were loud enough now that he could recognize the two men arguing with each other as Moussa and Pierre. Gibson found himself almost relieved before remembering that spy or not, Nicolas was still dead.

Gibson scanned the surrounding area, looking for a way out. His heart sank when he saw the door on the far side of the warehouse, past where the three figures were standing.

He tensed, preparing himself for the slow crawl around the back to reach the opposite wall when a third voice suddenly interrupted those belonging to Moussa and Pierre, and Gibson paused.

It was a woman, he realized, quickly attributing the newer voice to the shorter of the three, though her stature was still impressive compared to Pierre and Moussa, both of whom measured over one-hundred-and-eighty centimeters.

Neither her height nor her sex seemed to be a deterrent as she lectured the two with enough bridled ferocity that the sheer force of her authority would have impressed even a Maréchal.

Gibson watched as the woman jabbed a finger toward the door he had just taken note of and then he
realized there was one word in her speech, repeated again and again, that he did recognize: Panzer.

Gibson paused, unsure now if his desired escape route was really the best option. His inaction turned out to be a blessing, as shortly after she had finished speaking, the woman started to walk toward the day. Gibson waited for the three of them to go through before standing up to get a better look at his surroundings. To his disappointment, the door the others had just walked through remained the only viable exit.

His heart raced as he slowly tip-toed toward it, his blood pressure steadily rising until it felt like someone was sitting on his chest even as he moved across the warehouse. Finally he reached the door, and opened it with a trembling hand.

It was brighter inside. Overhead there were electric lamps, and illuminated beneath them were dozens of Panzer corpses, the tanks lying half-disassembled or in pieces throughout the immense space. Gibson was so startled by the sight that he forgot at first to look for the trio who had come in before him, and by the time he realized his mistake it was too late.

Gibson felt the barrel of a gun pressed into his temple as a forearm encircled his chest. Pierre’s breath was hot in his ear. “Looks like our little rat escaped,” he said in French. “Moussa!”

Afraid to look either left or right, Gibson stared straight ahead until Moussa appeared in his view, looking rather put out by Pierre’s summons. “Merde,” he said upon seeing Gibson. “Should we tell Madame Sevard—?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Pierre retorted, the gun pressing harder against Gibson’s skull as he spoke. “He’s seen. We should just kill him now.”

“Well, you can’t shoot him,” Moussa pointed out. “She’ll hear from the factory.”

That was all Gibson needed to hear. He hurled himself upward, bashing the top of his head into Pierre’s chin and sending the gun flying from his captor’s hand onto the floor.

Moussa was slow to react, caught off guard by the sudden attack on his companion. He scrambled toward the gun but Gibson beat him to it. He raised his arms in surrender and started to back away as Gibson toggled the safety and pointed the weapon at him. Pierre was behind him, still groaning uselessly as he lay on the ground.

“You wouldn’t—” Moussa said, and then stopped as the bullet went straight through the center of his throat.

Pierre bolted upright at the sound of the gun going off just in time to watch as Moussa collapsed the ground, his mouth still hanging open in death.

Gibson got to his feet while alarms began to blare from the surrounding buildings. He considered Pierre for a moment and then shot him too, less cleanly than Moussa, but he wasn’t likely to survive long with a nine-millimeter bullet lodged under his ear.

He ignored the thrashing of Pierre’s body as he reached for him first and began rifling through the dying man’s pockets, looking for something, anything, that might be useful. He found an envelope folded in half and sealed, and decided it was enough. The alarms were still going and he could hear a commotion coming from his right. He decided he’d taken enough chances and sprinted for the door he’d come in through, pulling it shut behind him and pushing a nearby pallet in front to barricade it. It wouldn’t give him much time, he figured, but it might buy him a few minutes.

Once again he was back in the warehouse with nowhere to go but back. Gibson felt his eyes drawn
to the windows and he stared out at the sea below. He realized now that he was on the docks, and that there was nothing but water below him.

He shot the window twice, the first merely sending a spider web crack through the thick glazed panes, the second finally shattering it. And then he took a deep breath, and jumped.

The combination of the force of impact from hitting the water and the frigid winter temperature rendered Gibson paralyzed for several long seconds, as he floated helplessly underneath the waves. For a moment he was transported back into the little Dutch vessel where he had nearly died, his feet caught in the chains as water rushed in and pinned him to the interior of the hull, unable to follow Alex up the ladder.

Like he’d done then, he conjured a memory of his father, who had told the story of getting caught in a fisherman’s net when he was a young man and had almost drowned.

“Panic,” his father had told him, “is what kills you. Men are more suited to the water than they believe, and this fear leads them to their deaths. You must be calm, be patient, act with purpose if you wish to stay alive.”

Gibson forced himself to relax, remembering that almost as soon as he had stopped struggling, the chains had come loose from around his ankle as if pulled free by the hand of God. It was minutes that he’d been submerged, minutes that seemed at the time like entire hours, but even with his lungs on fire and his brain screaming at him to draw in a breath, Gibson could still move, could still swim, could still think and fight and stay alive.

When he’d broke the surface then, in the midst of the evacuation, he could see ships in the distance and planes up above, and the surface of the water covered in burning flames, like an image of Hell depicted by a medieval Christian.

When he broke through this time, he could see nothing at all but a dense fog hanging low and heavy over the sea. He knew the biggest threat now would be the cold. If he didn’t find his way back to shore soon, if he didn’t get dry, he’d likely succumb to hypothermia within less than an hour.

Gibson slowly rotated in a circle as he tread water, trying to listen for anything that would indicate the proper direction in which he should swim. But he could hear nothing, see nothing, except…. He peered through a patch of fog that seemed lighter than the rest, hardly daring to hope it was anything more than just a trick of the mind. But there were no other options.

So he swam.

After what seemed like an eternity during which his arms and legs turned to lead, the water he was swimming through thick as jelly, Gibson was ready to give up. His head felt like it was swarming with hornets from the effects of the cold. His movements slowed.

And then his foot struck sand.

He still couldn’t see a damn thing, but he was standing in neck deep water now, which meant that he had through some miracle reached the shore. Gibson slogged forward, motivated by the knowledge that he had almost made it back.

When he reached the beach, he collapsed, landing with his face half in the sand. He stared out toward the ocean as the fog started to dissipate, realizing slowly that he knew this place. He was back at The Mole.

A visceral sense of remembered dread washed over Gibson, followed by another wave, this one
exhaustion.

He wasn’t sure how long he lay there or how much time had passed since he’d crawled out of the water, but by the time he felt hands scooping him up off the sand, Gibson was bone-dry and shivering so hard he felt like his teeth would fall out.

Someone was speaking, maybe to him, but he couldn’t tell anymore.

He was being lifted again, and then carried. Gibson watched as the sand turned to grass and then gravel as his rescuer walked away from Dunkirk Beach, into the wooded countryside. He might have fallen asleep at some point, or perhaps blacked out, for the next thing he remembered seeing was the inside of the Château.

He was lying on his back on the sofa with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He rolled onto his side to find Farrier sitting next to him in a chair borrowed from the kitchen, slumped back with his arms folded over his chest, fast asleep.

Leclair was standing behind him, facing the fireplace, but he turned around when Gibson rolled over. His expression remained static as he looked down at the younger man.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” he asked in English.

Gibson found he could understand all the words, but couldn’t think of his own to answer. He shook his head, feeling dazed.

Farrier came to with a start, which in turn made Gibson jump. “Sorry,” Farrier said, looking all around to find Leclair at his left shoulder. He smiled apologetically down at Gibson, who still couldn’t answer.

“Gibson,” Leclair continued, disregarding Farrier entirely, “I need to know the last thing you recall.”

Gibson opened his mouth and then closed it. He cast a desperate glance at Farrier, looking for help.

Farrier, who was strangely empathetic in a way that made Gibson feel like he was almost reading minds, looked up at Leclair beseechingly. “Look, he’s in shock, all right?” he said. “Let me get him warmed up and then we can talk about this later.”

Leclair frowned but nodded his approval. Farrier got out of the chair, stretched his arms up over his head, and then bent down to help Gibson up from the couch.

Gibson walked up the stairs feeling like he was wobbling on wooden pegs, still unable to feel his own toes. He assumed the water hadn’t been quite cold enough for frostbite to be an issue, else he wouldn’t have even made it to shore, but he felt like his extremities had been lopped off regardless.

Farrier was breathing heavily as well by the time they made it to the second floor. He sighed at Gibson’s questioning look. “Well, I had to carry you back here myself, didn’t I?” he said, sounding almost indignant.

“Th-thanks for that,” Gibson finally managed. He clutched the blanket tighter around himself and leant against the wall for support as Farrier finally let go of him to open the door to the bathroom.

It was rarely used; more often than not the men would wash themselves outside near the water pump, or in the nearby river if the weather was suitable. While the Château was equipped with indoor plumbing, absolutely nothing had worked right until Jean-Marie had come along and fixed the boiler downstairs in the kitchen so that his wife, Dominique, would be able to take a hot bath. But even
still, they were sparing about it—the coal needed to heat the water wasn’t exactly easy to come by with the occupation.

“I’ll let you get undressed,” Farrier said after helping Gibson down onto the stool next to the tub. “The water should start to heat up in a few minutes.”

Gibson nodded as he walked back out of the room, presumably to go back downstairs and scrape together what little boiler fuel was left. Farrier had switched the tap on before he’d left, and Gibson watched absently as water slowly trickled out of the mouth of the faucet and down the drain.

He must have lost time, for it seemed like only seconds later that Farrier was walking back into the bathroom with a stack of towels. He rushed over to Gibson, looking concerned.

“Can you hear me, Gibson?” he asked. “Can you count to ten for me? In English?”

“One,” Gibson replied sleepily. “Two,” he continued, barely registering the feeling of Farrier’s fingers like hot brands against his forehead and then throat. “Three.”

“Good,” Farrier encouraged. “Keep going.”

“Four.” Gibson was lifted slightly and the blanket pulled away from him. He started shivering again, just slightly. “Five.” His clothes were the next to go, and by the time he reached “Ten” he was sitting at the bottom of the bathtub with warm water just starting to creep up around him.

His head was resting against the rim of the tub and he turned slightly to look at Farrier, who was leant against the adjacent wall with his eyes closed.

“Je suis désolé,” Gibson murmured.

He hadn’t realized he’d spoken the words aloud until Farrier opened his eyes and blinked at him in confusion. “Sorry, what was that?”

Gibson cleared his throat before answering. “I said, I’m sorry,” he repeated, this time in English. “For what?”

Gibson shrugged. “For always being a burden.”

Farrier scoffed. “Come off it. You do your part, like everyone. Even Simone’s glad to have you around, and she doesn’t like anyone.”

“Except for you,” Gibson pointed out.

“Well,” Farrier replied after a brief pause, “even that’s up for debate, I think.”

Silence fell again after that, but Farrier kept his eyes open this time, watching as the water level slowly rose. When it reached Gibson’s shoulders, he finally stood again and turned the tap off. The sound of the remaining droplets hitting the surface of the water echoed loudly in Gibson’s ears, and he flinched, suddenly reminded of the sound of the pistol going off in his hand.

Farrier looked down at him with a tense frown. “We don’t have to do this if you’re uncomfortable,” he said, apparently misreading Gibson’s reaction. “I could get Simone, Dominique….”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” Gibson stared unflinchingly up at Farrier. “Are you?”

“No,” Farrier replied, seating himself on the stool this time and picking up one of the washcloths
from the stack of linens he’d brought in. “Of course not. You don’t mind if I clean you up, then? There’s blood on your face.”

Gibson shook his head in permission. “It’s fine.”

He closed his eyes while Farrier dabbed delicately at his face with the damp cloth, wincing as the fabric brushed against a cut on his cheek, most likely from the broken window, though he wasn’t sure if the injury had occurred when he’d shot it or jumped through.

“You know,” Farrier said after a long moment had passed, taking Gibson by surprise, “you’re not entirely…I mean, when I was younger, I—what I mean is, you might grow out of it.”

Gibson felt like vomiting suddenly. He opened his eyes slowly and stared at Farrier. “I’m twenty-four years old,” he said. “Not sixteen.”

“But still young,” Farrier replied, the faux-casualness in his voice blatantly obvious. “You have time, still, to change your mind.”

Change his mind, Gibson thought angrily, letting the phrase repeat itself again and again in his own thoughts. As if he’d wanted this to begin with.

Gibson waited until Farrier pulled the blood-stained cloth away and discarded it before speaking again, catching Farrier’s attention as he sat back down on the stool next to the tub.

“What exactly is it that you like about women?”

Farrier seemed flummoxed by the question, though Gibson thought it was a very simple one. “The way they look, their bodies, I don’t know. It depends on the particular woman, I suppose.”

“Well,” Farrier replied, seemingly unequally flustered by the query, “she’s very…capable, and strong. She knows herself. She’s not afraid to speak her mind.”

“And those qualities, surely they’re not exclusive to women.”

“No,” Farrier agreed, speaking more slowly now, almost hesitant, like he knew he was being led into a verbal trap. “I suppose not.”

“So the issue is that you don’t admire men’s bodies the way you do women’s,” Gibson concluded, bringing a flush to Farrier’s cheeks. “Or at least, you don’t anymore.”

“Yes,” Farrier replied, though he sounded less sure of himself now than he had at the onset of their conversation. “I mean, that last bit.”

Gibson mulled that over for a minute. “Can I ask you another question?”

“Yes, of course.” Farrier looked half-asleep now, but he leaned forward as he answered to gauge Gibson’s temperature again by placing the back of his hand against the younger man’s forehead.

“When was the last time you slept with another man?”

Farrier started and quickly looked away, staring instead at the wood grain under his feet. “That’s complicated.”

“Not really.”
“It is for me,” Farrier shot back, meeting Gibson’s eyes again, but only briefly. “When I was still in school…well, we all get up to that sort of thing when we’re lads, don’t we? Even my father—he was the one who reassured me it would fade with time, and he was right. But you know, there…there were exceptions, from time to time.”

“I’m sure he loved being called that,” Gibson replied snidely.

He closed his eyes for just a second, but when he opened them again, Farrier’s face was inches from his own. There was fire behind the pilot’s eyes.

“Do not dare judge me,” Farrier said, the words edged with steel, “for something you know nothing about.”

Gibson nodded minutely, conveying with only his eyes a silent agreement to back off. Farrier was right in his own way, Gibson supposed, and it wasn’t impossible that he could be right about Gibson following in his footsteps.

Gibson closed his eyes again as Farrier retreated—thinking of Tommy’s face in profile against the endless stretch of Dunkirk Beach, serene only in sleep—and hoped for his own sake that Farrier was wrong.

Farrier wouldn’t let Gibson out of the bath until the water had gone tepid, and then practically smothered him in towels after helping him out.

“How about Leclair?” Gibson asked, allowing Farrier to help pat him dry with one of the towels.

“Where are the others?” Farrier replied. “Simone got everyone settled in while Leclair and I searched for you. He didn’t want everyone scouring the countryside,” Farrier added, and the note of disapproval was clear in his voice. “Said it’d be too risky.”

Gibson nodded. “And Nicolas?” he asked.

Farrier’s hands stuttered for a second in their movements before resuming as before. “The barn. We’ll give him a proper burial this afternoon.”

“What about Leclair?”

“What about him?” Farrier shot back, sounding angry at even just the mention of the other man’s name.

“Well, I suppose he still wants to know what happened,” Gibson pointed out.

“That can wait until you’ve had some rest,” Farrier said as he handed Gibson a clean pair of pants, only backing off when Gibson swatted at him for trying to help him dress as well.

“It can’t,” Gibson insisted.

Farrier shook his head but offered no more words of protest as Gibson finished getting dressed. Farrier helped Gibson back down the stairs, but departed just as soon as they re-entered the parlour where Leclair was still waiting by the fireplace, as if he hadn’t moved since they’d gone upstairs. Gibson was secretly grateful for Farrier’s apparent reluctance to be anywhere near Leclair; he’d rather have this conversation in private.

“Feeling better?” Leclair asked without looking up.
“Yes,” Gibson replied.

“Would you care to explain to me what this is, then?” Leclair lifted the hand dangling closest to the fire to hold aloft a folded and wrinkled parchment envelope.

Gibson had forgotten he’d even had it, and was surprised to find it had survived being submerged for so long. “Have you opened it yet?” he asked.

“No, I wanted to see what you had to say first.”

“I don’t know if it’s anything,” Gibson confessed. He hadn’t been lying about feeling better, but after standing for more than a minute, his legs started to sway again. He sat down on the sofa, finally spurring Leclair to glance back at him. “I pulled it off of Pierre but I didn’t have time to look at it before I jumped in the water.”

“Pierre?” Leclair seemed genuinely surprised to hear that.

“Yes, he and Moussa were—did you find Yves?” Gibson asked, interrupting himself when he remembered that Moussa’s companion had also gone missing.

“Dead,” Leclair replied flatly.

“Ah.” Gibson inhaled deeply through his nose before continuing. “I found Moussa first, in the woods. He was injured so I tried to help him, and he knocked me out. I woke up at the docks in a warehouse.” He closed his mouth after that, despite everything inside him that wanted to tell Leclair what he’d seen. The info was his only bargaining chip, one he desperately needed.

Leclair gave him a sharp glance, like he sensed Gibson was holding back. “Pierre was there at this warehouse?”

Gibson nodded.

“What happened to him?”

“I shot him,” Gibson said evenly.

“I see.” Leclair turned back to the envelope in his hand, and began to open it, doing so carefully, but without ceremony. He extracted the contents slowly and peered down at the sheets of paper, through which Gibson could see bleeding ink, with narrowed eyes.

“Anything?” Gibson asked, almost hoping against his own better judgment for a negative response.

“Hard to say,” Leclair replied. “It’s in German, what little of it is still readable. Dominique might be able to make something out of the rest, but that’ll have to wait until later.” He stared at Gibson for a long time. “I don’t suppose you have any idea what she might find?”

Gibson refused to flinch. “Perhaps.”

“And?”

“And I want something. In exchange.”

Leclair shook his head resignedly, and made a vague gesture, something Gibson took to be acceptance of his terms.

“I’ve heard Simone talking to you before,” he began, “about the SOE.”
Leclair turned slightly, arched an eyebrow. “What of it?”

“I want you to negotiate with them. For safe passage to England. In return, I can give you something big, something we can use against the Germans.” Gibson thought of the hollowed-out tanks, the warehouses on the docks, the dead technician; everything that pointed to a covert weapons manufacturing operation taking place on the shores of Dunkirk.

“You’re asking me to promise something I can’t guarantee.”

“I just need you to make sure they put British soldiers back on Dunkirk Beach,” said Gibson in a low tone. “Everyone knows by now that Churchill won’t abandon his own. If I have to tie myself and Farrier to the poor sons of bitches they send us and hitch a ride with them across the Channel, then so be it.”

Leclair was quiet for a long moment, and Gibson found himself suddenly afraid he would refuse. “You may have your kinsmen fooled, but do you think you can keep up this ruse forever?” he said finally. “What about Gibson’s family? The real Gibson.”

Gibson found that he was less surprised by the knowledge that Leclair knew he was using an assumed identity than he should have been. “Gibson didn’t have any family,” said the man who had become him.

“How do you know?” Leclair asked.

“Because he told me.”

Before Tommy, before Alex, there was Gibson: a scared Englishman just trying to get off Dunkirk Beach, like all the rest.

But Gibson, when his namesake had first found him, was lying unconscious on the sand with his eardrums blown out and a piece of shrapnel lodged in his gut. He’d come to with his successor hovering over him nervously, the first seeds of deception taking root in the French soldier’s mind as they sat alone together at the edge of the beach.

He struggled to pull his tags from around his neck and pushed them into the Frenchman’s hands. “Give…” he said, struggling to pronounce the word.

The Frenchman, not understanding, but realizing that trying to communicate with speech would be fruitless, quickly etched a word into the sand for Gibson to read. “Famille?”

The word was close enough to its English counterpart that Gibson understood, and swiped away at the sand with a shake of his head. “No, no family,” he replied. “Captain…Murphy,” he gasped. “I want him…..” He didn’t finish the statement, but the Frenchman wouldn’t have understood regardless.

The man who would become Gibson stood, willing to at least search for this English officer, or to pass on the errand to someone more capable, but Gibson’s hand around his ankle stopped him.

Having realized that he was not going to survive to see the sunrise, Gibson had scrawled a message in the sand, pulling the Frenchman back down to make him read it.

“Don’t leave me.”

The new Gibson wouldn’t understand what the words meant until much later, after meeting Farrier and joining the Resistance, but he’d engraved the letters into his mind. And the request, though
inaccessible in its current form, was plainly apparent in the dying Englishman’s eyes. So Gibson had sat with him, cradled the man’s bloody head in his lap, and stroked his hair as he gargled and gasped for breath before finally growing still just as dawn lit up the horizon on to the east.

“I’ll make arrangements,” Leclair said finally, as the silence between them grew so immense that Gibson had started to lose hope in his plan for escape.

Gibson breathed out a sigh of relief, releasing it slowly as he stood up from the sofa. “Thank you,” he said fervently.

Leclair didn’t look at him. “Best get some sleep,” was all he said.

Gibson nodded and rose to his feet. He headed up the stairs as quickly as he could manage, and when he reached the attic he had grown accustomed to thinking of as home, despite everything, Farrier was already in bed, though the rhythm of his breathing was a dead giveaway that he wasn’t yet asleep.

Gibson tried to avoid disturbing him anyway as he got ready to bed down as well, but then the lamp in the window caught his eye. The light had gone out.

It wasn’t a remarkable phenomenon; normally it wouldn’t have mattered, but Gibson remembered that tonight was December twenty-fourth. Christmas Eve. And the first night of Hanukkah. It seemed wrong then, to leave the lamp sitting unlit on this night of all nights.

Gibson got up from his makeshift bed, only peripherally aware of Farrier stirring from beneath his own nest of blankets as he did so, and carefully made his way over to the window.

Gibson’s fingers were trembling as he lifted the lamp out of the windowsill where it had sat since before they’d arrived. “There’s no more oil,” he remarked, examining the empty canister with a frown. He felt near tears, but couldn’t articulate why.

“We didn’t manage to get much on the last supply raid,” Farrier informed him. When Gibson turned his head, he could just make out Farrier’s form in the darkness, propped up on one elbow. “We’re short on candles too, so we’ll have to make do until next week.”

“Do you have a matchbook or something?” Gibson asked, turning to Farrier desperately. He watched as Farrier turned to rifle through his jacket, left discarded on the floor, before tossing the desired item back at him.

Gibson fumbled with the matches, clumsily striking one until it finally ignited in his hand. He sat on the windowsill and stared at the flame, trying to remember a blessing he hadn’t spoken since his sister had left for America more than three years ago.

“Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’olam,” he said quickly, trying to get through the words before the flame flickered out, “asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu l’hadlik ner shel Hanukkah. Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’olam, she’asah nisim l’avoteinu, b’yamim haheim bazman hazeh.” Gibson looked up, surprised, when Farrier’s voice joined in for the last bit. “Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’olam, shehekheyanu, v’kiyamanu vehegianu lazman hazeh.”

“First night?” Farrier asked, barely visible in the dim light emanating from the match.

Gibson nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, maybe we can convince Dominique to spare us a candle for the others,” Farrier said as he settled back into his bed again.
Gibson didn’t move from where he was sitting, refusing to let go of the match even when it began to burn his fingers. He gritted his teeth against the pain, finally letting out a quiet hiss as the flame finally died out. “Chag Sameach,” he said quietly.

He thought Farrier might have finally fallen asleep when there was no response, but the man spoke up again just as Gibson was getting under his blankets to try and get some much-needed sleep again.

“I don’t have anything to give you,” Farrier said. “And I expect you don’t either, but maybe we could trade something.”

“Like what?” Gibson asked, keeping his eyes glued to the rafters as he replied.

“Truths.”

Like with Leclair, thought Gibson, before immediately scrubbing the thought from his mind. No, not like Leclair at all. Farrier and he were friends. This would be an equal exchange, freely given. “What do you want to know?” he asked.

“What’s your real name?” Farrier asked.

The question was unexpected, the answer relatively unimportant, at least to Gibson, who had given little thought to his birth name since abandoning it for the sake of survival more than six months back.

“Philippe,” he said.

“Philippe,” Farrier repeated. “And your question?”

Gibson had to give it some thought. Farrier was open enough about most things, his wife, Nell, his family back home in London, his upbringing—torn between his mother’s heritage and his father’s strict adherence to Anglican tradition. But he knew now that there was something Farrier had kept close to his chest all this time.

“Will you tell me his name?” Gibson half-expected Farrier to feign ignorance, ask ‘who?’ as if it weren’t patently obvious.

“What makes you think there’s someone specific?” Farrier replied. It wasn’t a total deflection, but the reluctance was obvious in his voice.

“I’ve seen the pictures, you know, amongst your things,” Gibson confessed. It hadn’t been intentional, but he’d stumbled across the sketches nearly a month ago, not quite understanding till now what they’d meant.

“Those were private!” Farrier hissed, flipping over to face Gibson in the dark. “You had no right—”

“I wasn’t snooping,” Gibson explained. “It was an accident. I thought maybe your wife, but the signature…it’s an ‘A’, right?”

Farrier didn’t respond for close to a minute. “Asher,” he replied finally. “His name is Asher.”

It was a beautiful name, Gibson thought, if a rather unusual one. Gibson wondered what this Asher looked like, if he ever might meet him, if he and Farrier survived long enough to make it to England’s shores. He’d had his doubts at first, and wasn’t alone, about Britain’s ability to hold off the Germans, but things were different now that America had gotten involved. There was hope on the horizon, even more so now after securing Leclair’s promise.
It had taken him six months to make good on it, but the waiting seemed insignificant now that Gibson was standing on the beach, Farrier and Simone at his side, watching as three British soldiers descended from the sky, like literal representations of wishes made on a shooting star. Even now Gibson hardly dared to hope that it was real.

He closed his eyes for a moment, grounding himself in the feel of the wind scouring his cheeks, the smell of saltwater on the air.

When he opened them again, the first of the parachutists was coming to a graceful landing in the sand a dozen or so meters away. The second soon followed, tumbling forward into a near-somersault as he touched down on the beach. The two had just started to take off their helmets and goggles when the third finally landed, with more precision than the second, though nowhere near the ease of the first.

Gibson, who was still waiting for Simone’s okay to approach, couldn’t make out many details about the three, but the third looked to be around his and Farrier’s height, while the other two were a couple inches taller. All seemed relatively slender, though it was hard to tell beneath their jumpsuits for sure, but certainly nowhere near as broad as Farrier.

He looked to Simone, but she was still holding a hand up, signalling for them to wait.

Then the first soldier lowered his hood, and all hell broke loose.

No sooner did Gibson catch a glimpse of strawberry blonde hair and wind-chafed cheeks than did Simone start yelling Farrier’s name furiously, as he bolted across the beach. Gibson wasn’t sure what was happening, was worried Farrier was going to attack the man, but he seized him a tight embrace instead.

Gibson jogged after Simone, who was still yelling for Farrier to back off, apparently just as confused as to what was happening as he was.

The blonde man, whose features became visible as Gibson got closer, looked bewildered by the sudden presence of Farrier.

“What—?” he started to ask as he pushed the other man away so he could get some breathing room, giving Gibson just the slightest hint of a Scottish accent before he stopped speaking entirely upon glimpsing Farrier’s face. “I thought you were dead,” he said finally, sounding deprived of oxygen.

“No, no,” Farrier said hurriedly. “I’ve been—I mean, what are the chances, yeah?”

Gibson was so enraptured by the unexpected reunion between Farrier and his…Asher, he assumed, judging by the stark look of relief etched into Farrier’s face as he stared up at the other man, that he didn’t even bother to look over at the other two parachutists until one of them finally spoke up from a few yards away.

“Gibson?”

The voice, tinged with cautious disbelief, was one he hadn’t heard in a year, but not one he’d soon forget. It felt as if the voice itself was the force compelling his head to turn, leaving Gibson face to face with none other than Alex.

The boy looked more or less the same as when Gibson had last seen him, in the bottom of a Dutch fishing vessel just before it had sank.

Neither of them moved.
“You—you’re—” Alex stuttered helplessly, looking paralyzed with some indecipherable emotion even as Gibson’s eyes caught movement behind him, as the third parachutist finally stripped off his own head gear to reveal an even more startling face, this one lit up with a broad smile.

“Gibson?” he said, his voice deeper than Gibson remembered, the face a bit more filled out now as well.

Gibson had taken a step forward before he’d even realized, but it was Tommy who crossed the rest of the space between them, enveloping him in an embrace not unlike the one Gibson had just witnessed between Farrier and Asher.

He felt his eyes drift closed of their own volition as he breathed in the scent of Tommy’s hair, trying to burn it into his mind. But when he opened them, it was to find Alex staring at him, still standing frozen in the sand, his green eyes reflected in the moonlight like twin flames.

Gibson gazed back unflinchingly, refusing to let Alex’s presence sour this moment. He wouldn’t let Alex ruin things again. Not this time.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by @JokerPasSerieux on Twitter of the end of the chapter:
https://twitter.com/JokerPasSerieux/status/899461991928037376
I. Alex

The first place Alex went after the evacuation was home.

It hadn’t been an easy decision, certainly not like it was with the other lads, most of whom couldn’t wait to use their few weeks of leave to go back to their families across Britain. Tommy had been one of the few who’d kept quiet in the mess while the others traded stories and made lewd jokes about each other’s mums.

Alex hadn’t asked Tommy his plans, not wanting to disclose his own situation in return. He’d regretted that, once Collins had arrived to fetch Tommy on their last day together at the barracks.

Tommy promised to write him, like they were schoolmates or something. Alex laughed, and told him he was being bloody ridiculous, and secretly hoped he’d keep his promise.

It was raining when his train finally arrived in Cheshire, and raining harder still when Alex stepped out of the car that had been waiting for him at the station once they pulled up to the front gates of the manor. He liked the rain, preferred it really, but today his mood seemed to match the weather as he gazed up at Crosby Hall, seemingly unchanged since both the first and last time he’d set eyes on the place.

Alex’s eyes drifted from the gates to his driver, who was still struggling to unfurl the umbrella after nearly a solid minute of effort. He extended a hand to help and the man—a decade Alex’s senior, by the look of him—visibly flinched.

“I’m not my father,” Alex said exasperatedly. “Give it.”

His father, or step-father rather—though he’d played the part for most of Alex’s life—was not known for his forgiving nature, or his patience. The driver appeared well-acquainted with that fact, but Alex didn’t recognize the man which meant he must’ve been a new hire. Alex wondered how he’d had the misfortune to end up at the manor of all places.

Alex took care not to track mud into the hall when they entered. As a schoolboy, he’d thought it great fun to leave dirty shoeprints up and down the halls, seeing it as just another opportunity to get
his father minged off. He’d learnt early on that was the only way to get the man’s attention at all. It wasn’t until much later that his mother had sat him down and informed Alex that the only ones suffering for his bad behaviour were the maids.

Alex hadn’t expected his father to be tearfully awaiting his arrival at the door of course, but experienced a sudden jolt of confusion as he looked around the foyer and saw no one there at all, the entire ground floor as silent as the grave.

“My mother?” Alex prompted, glancing back at the driver, who seemed inordinately startled by the question.

“They haven’t—she’s probably resting,” he replied without meeting Alex’s eyes. “Your father’s in his study,” he added, probably thinking he was being helpful.

Alex scowled. “Have someone fetch me when dinner’s ready.” He marched up the stairs two at a time, to his bedroom on the second floor. It was unnaturally tidy, in a way he would have never allowed if he’d still been living at home. He supposed that didn’t matter much now, but he took the time to disorganize his books and discard the pieces of his uniform all over the floor before sacking out on the bed that felt far too soft after so many nights spent dozing against the nearest solid surface.

Alex was asleep in minutes regardless. When he woke, he wasn’t sure what he’d dreamed of, but whatever it was had left him feeling more relaxed than he’d remembered being in a long time. Alex stared sleepily out the window where the sun was just setting behind the trees, and didn’t register the knock at his door for another minute.

“What?” he asked, finally throwing open the door to find Beatrix standing on the other side, her hand outstretched to knock yet again. She was a scullery maid at the manor, one whose family had fulfilled various kitchen duties since before Alex and his mother had moved in. “Oh,” he said lamely. Alex suddenly realized he was standing in the doorway in just his shorts, and resisted the urge to cover himself up. “Sorry.”

“Dinner’s just about ready,” she said, staring pointedly at his bare chest. “Mrs. Wentworth’s waiting in the kitchens.”

“Right,” he replied. Beatrix didn’t move. “Well, I’ll be down in a minute,” Alex added. He waited until she nodded and turned around before closing the door to his bedroom once more.

She was what, seventeen, eighteen now? Alex felt like he was noticing her for the first time though they’d practically grown up together as children.

Alex dressed quickly and came to the realization that none of his belongings fit the way they’d used to. His pants hung loosely on his hips, and his collarbones protruded grotesquely through his thin button-up shirt. He threw on a jumper over it so the changes wouldn’t be as apparent. He wondered if that was why Beatrix had been staring, out of disgust rather than admiration.

The second-floor gallery was every bit as eerily quiet as the front hall had been when he’d first arrived. Alex delayed heading downstairs and instead traipsed down toward the eastern wing to his mother’s sewing room, where she spent the majority of her afternoons in leisure.

He opened the door and stared. For a moment, he thought he must have entered the wrong room, that he’d forgotten his way around the manor after so many months gone, but…no, this was the right room. It’s just that nothing about it was right.

Gone were the sewing machines, the embroidery supplies, the reams of patterned fabrics that she
collected like fine art. The table and chairs she and some of the other housemaids had once sat and
gossiped around while they worked were covered with white sheets, covered in a fine layer of dust,
like the belongings of someone whose sole owner had died.

For a moment, Alex found himself suddenly terrified that she had died. But quickly he realized how
foolish that was, for someone would have informed him prior to his homecoming if that had been the
case.

Alex closed the door on the disturbing scene, unable to come up with a reasonable explanation for
why his mother’s things had all been covered up or removed entirely. He stepped back, about to
head downstairs to the kitchens, when he promptly tripped over something just behind him and had
to catch himself against one of the light fixtures to keep from falling arse over tits right there in the
corridor.

His yelp of surprise was met with an answering yowl that echoed throughout the gallery, and Alex
turned to find a flash of ginger fur darting around the corner toward the main staircase.

“Shit,” he muttered, darting after the beast. He grabbed the little monster by the scruff just as he
reached the first-floor landing. “Where’d you think you’re off to, eh, Codders?”

Codswallop, the stray cat Alex had begged his mother to keep when he turned up in the garden
when Alex was twelve, hissed back at him. Alex shushed the cat and slung him over his shoulder
like a sack of spuds, petting Codders for a few seconds until he started to purr.

“That’s right you missed me, you little devil,” Alex said as he descended the rest of the stairs.

The ground floor still seemed almost as deserted as the first and second and Alex frowned as he
carried the cat with him to the kitchens.

Mrs. Wentworth was standing just inside the door, looking stern as ever with her arms folded over
her chest, lips pursed in apparent disapproval. She nodded meaningfully at the cat and Alex suddenly
found Beatrix’s younger brother Christopher at his side, reaching up for Codders. Alex handed the
cat to the boy and watched as he darted out of the kitchens to play with him somewhere where he
wouldn’t get tufts of fur in the food. Not that Alex cared about that, but his father would be furious.

>Welcome home,” Mrs. Wentworth said.

“It’s good to be home,” Alex replied automatically, not meaning a single word of it. “Beatrix said
you wanted to see me ‘fore dinner,” he continued, casting a brief glance in the girl’s direction just in
time to see her step to the side and hide herself amongst the pots and pans hanging from the ceiling
rack.

“Yes, well.” Mrs. Wentworth seemed flustered, or perhaps just stressed. Either were out of character
for the woman, who always conducted herself with impeccable propriety as the head of the female
staff at Crosby Hall. “Mr. Porter and I,” she continued, “thought you should be informed as to your
mother’s…situation, as it were, before you sit down to dinner.”

“Situation?” Alex questioned, immediately trying to quash the panic he could feel swelling in his
chest. His hands clenched around nothing, as if they expected to find a rifle instead of air.

“She’s been sick,” Mrs. Wentworth explained, “for a while now. She’s been better since hearing that
you were coming home, but your father doesn’t like anyone to mention it, so we thought it best to
warn you now.”

Alex nodded, feeling slightly numb, expecting to be dismissed. But Mrs. Wentworth just continued
to stare back at him, brows furrowed with some indecipherable emotion.

“There’s something else,” she said finally. “A man from London arrived this afternoon, on your father’s invitation. He’ll be joining you for dinner.”

“Someone from the House of Lords?” Alex asked, unable to come up with any other reasonable explanation for his father receiving a visitor on the same day as his homecoming.

Mrs. Wentworth shook her head minutely. “Military,” she said.

Alex’s heart dropped. Was he being discharged? It was a foolish thought, he realized almost immediately; Mrs. Wentworth had just told him that the man had come to see his father, not him. “Do you know his rank?” he wondered.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Right, well.” Alex glanced at the clock in the corner of the room, the minute hand pointing dangerously close to twelve. “I guess I better sit down then.”

Mrs. Wentworth nodded. “Beatrix,” she called out, “the wine please.”

Alex looked at the housekeeper questioningly as Beatrix brushed past the two of them to get to the newly refurbished buttery, which his father had re instituted in the name of traditionalism a year or so before Alex had joined the army. “Don’t tell me he sacked Chip.”

“I’m afraid nearly half the staff is gone at this point,” Mrs. Wentworth informed him gravely. “Your father’s temperament hasn’t been particularly…stable, lately.”

Beatrix darted back out of the buttery with a bottle in hand this time, and Alex followed her as she left the kitchen, frowning as he contemplated everything Mrs. Wentworth had just told him.

The two of them made it to the dining room with just seconds to spare. Alex was barely sitting down when the opposite door opened, the one that led to the library where his father often entertained, and Lord Crosby swept into the room with his mother and a much taller man in tow.

Alex had to suppress his surprise when he spotted the visitor, decked out in full military regalia, because he recognized him. From Dunkirk.

He bolted up out of his chair and saluted Colonel Winnant as he entered the dining room. The Colonel saluted back, told him, “At ease,” and Alex sat again, feeling acutely embarrassed to have had to resort to such displays in front of his father, who examined the whole exchange without betraying a hint on his face as to his own thoughts.

“Have you met my son before, Colonel?” Crosby asked as he pulled out a chair for Alex’s mother, who hadn’t once looked at her son since walking into the room.

“No, unfortunately,” Winnant replied as he took his own seat across from the boy. “Alex, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

The four sat in silence as Beatrix rounded the table with the bottle of wine, clumsily pouring it into each of their glasses. Alex could read the irritation in the set of his father’s eyes at her incompetence, and resisted the urge to pipe up and tell him that if he wanted the job done right he shouldn’t have sacked their butler.
Once she’d finished and left the room again, the conversation picked up where they’d left off.

“I hear you were at Dunkirk,” Colonel Winnant said, glancing across the table at Alex as he took a bite of his fish, chewing contemplatively as he awaited a response.

“Yes, sir,” Alex said again. “I was part of the civilian vessel evacuation.” He carefully avoided mentioning how he’d come to end up on that civilian vessel, and what had happened to those who hadn’t made it onto the Moonstone.

“Yes…a miracle, that. I suppose Alex has probably regaled the two of you with the whole story, so I won’t make him repeat it.” Winnant directed the last part of toward his parents, who looked up with twin expressions of unease.

“He actually just returned home this morning,” Crosby replied delicately. “We wanted to give him some time to himself to adjust before we bothered him for any war stories.” His father chuckled, but Alex guessed that it probably seemed half-hearted even to Winnant, who didn’t know the man like he did.

“Well, have at it then,” the Colonel said, motioning for Alex to go ahead.

“Most of it wasn’t very interesting,” Alex said slowly, hoping he could avoid telling the grislier parts of the experience. “We were just... waiting, really.”

“You weren’t on the perimeter with the Rear Guard?” his father asked sharply. The disapproval was clear in his voice.

“No,” Alex bit out, “I was on the beach, where they told me to be.”

“We had the French manning the barricades mainly,” Winnant informed Lord Crosby, who spared him just a brief glance before turning back to Alex.

“And where do you suppose they’ll put you now?”

“The Home Guard, I expect, sir,” Alex replied stiffly.

He couldn’t help but look to Colonel Winnant for confirmation. The Colonel noticed.

“You mentioned Alex returned home just today,” Winnant said to Lord Crosby. “I assume he hasn’t yet heard your proposal?”

Alex glanced between Winnant and his father, trying to find the reason for the Colonel’s visit in their faces, but gleaned nothing from their carefully moderated expressions. When he looked at his mother, it was to find her with her head down, slowly prodding her food with her fork and not taking a single bite.

“Proposal?” he asked, remembering to tack on a “Sir?” just before the pause could be considered impolite.

“Your father was telling me you wanted to join MI(R) when you first enlisted, is that correct?” Colonel Winnant looked to his father instead of Alex for confirmation despite addressing the latter, earning a curt nod in response.

Alex felt his face burning and said nothing.

“Alex didn’t meet the division’s requirements, which I believe to be, perhaps, unfair.”
Wouldn’t you agree?"

Winnant took a long moment to respond. “Well, there are reasons, of course, to limit entry based on more than just qualifications. Intelligence-work is a delicate process, you understand.”

“Of course,” Lord Crosby replied patiently. He pointedly avoided looking at Alex once throughout the entire conversation. “But I’m to understand that these…restrictions based on parentage wouldn’t be an issue for recruits in Churchill’s new division, is that right?”

The Colonel looked uncomfortable as he dabbed at his lips with his napkin before replying. “Yes, we’re more interested in what our agents can provide the organization rather than their origins. And I agree that Alex’s military record is nothing to be ashamed of, particularly for someone so young, but we aren’t looking for recruits from the Army so much as Navy and RAF in particular.”

“What for, sir?” Alex asked. His verbal contribution was finally met by a glance from his father, this one in warning. Alex wasn’t bothered. He’d spent most of his life being reprimanded for speaking out of turn.

“Paratroopers,” Winnant explained. “Churchill wants to explore using them in a greater capacity to carry out covert operations.” Seeing the confusion in Alex’s face, he clarified, saying, “They’re specially trained soldiers who jump from planes and parachute directly to the mission objective. He thinks the technique has great potential for sabotage in occupied Europe, provided we can properly implement it.”

“You don’t think I’d be capable, sir?” Alex questioned. He could see his father in his peripheral vision, growing redder with suppressed rage by the second.

“It’s not that,” Winnant replied, seeming slightly taken aback by the boldness of the question. “It’s just we’re sticking to established pilots mostly to accommodate limited resources. Soldiers in the SOE will be expected to do double duty, as it were.”

Alex remained quiet for a moment. “You spoke of operations in occupied Europe, sir. Surely you need soldiers who can communicate with the citizens in those countries.” The glare from his father this time was practically deadly.

“You speak…?”

“French,” Alex replied. “And I have personal connections,” he added, “to an RAF pilot who fought at Dunkirk.” It wasn’t a lie so much as an exaggeration, but Alex felt his heart rate rise regardless as the Colonel examined him carefully.

“Well, you certainly seem ambitious,” Winnant finally replied, “and I can’t fault you for that.” He turned back to Lord Crosby, who only had a second to collect himself again after staring daggers at Alex for most of the conversation. “I’ll speak with the Director about making arrangements,” Winnant said. “You’ll be held to your end of the bargain, of course.”

“Of course,” Lord Crosby managed. “I would not make such promises lightly, I assure you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Winnant replied. “And Alex, what was the name of that pilot you mentioned? I’d like to get in contact with him as well.”

“Collins,” Alex said. He scrambled to remember the man’s first name. “Asher, Asher Collins. Based out of Hawkinge, I believe.”

“Rank?”
“Acting Squadron Leader, sir.” Alex remembered that because Tommy had told him, a few hours before they’d parted ways. He wondered if he’d ever see Tommy again. If he ended up in this new organization, as a paratrooper or whatever, he probably wouldn’t.

Alex hated himself for wanting to reconsider based only on that.

Colonel Winnant nodded and turned his attention back to his food, apparently satisfied with the answer.

Alex could still feel his father’s eyes on him as he ate, and he knew that no matter the outcome of this conversation, he would still be thoroughly berated for his behaviour later.

He glanced up at his mother. She looked perfectly healthy, but she still hadn’t spoken or acknowledged him even. He was worried. Perhaps the illness was worse than Mrs. Wentworth had let on?

“Mother,” he said quietly, his voice breaking on the second syllable. She didn’t look up, but Alex could see both his father and Colonel Winnant turn their eyes toward her to catch her reaction. “Mother,” he tried again, a bit louder.

Lord Crosby’s eyes flickered briefly to meet his son’s before turning back to his wife. “Catherine,” he tried, and she lifted her head to look at him quizzically. “Alex is trying to speak with you.”

“Alice?” she said, sounding half-asleep. Her head swivelled around to take in each of the men in turn, her frown deepening as she gazed at each of their faces in confusion. “When is he coming back?” she asked suddenly.

“Who?” Alex replied, before his father had the chance to answer.

Catherine stared back at him like she didn’t understand the question. “Alex,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I’m right here,” he replied, brows furrowed as he tried to parse her statement.

“No,” Catherine said. She shook her head and squinted a little at him. “My son,” she continued. “When is my son Alex coming home?”

Alex shoved his chair back and stood upright, ignoring the flinch from his mother when it scraped loudly against the polished wood floor. “I’m right here,” he said slowly, deliberately, enunciating each syllable as his mother stared back him like he was a stranger. “I’m right here!” he shouted, and the sudden increase in volume made Catherine start.

Her hand jerked to the right and knocked into the back of the half-empty bottle of wine Beatrix had left on the table between Lord Crosby and his wife for them to refill their glasses if necessary. All four members of the dinner party watched as the bottle wobbled before tipping over the edge of the table. Alex couldn’t see the impact, but the sound of the glass shattering made him close his eyes for a brief moment, as he resisted the urge to drop to the floor and make himself as small as possible.

The silence following the crash was like the ringing in his ears after a bombing.

“I’ll get another,” Alex said curtly, not giving either his father or the Colonel an chance to argue before he walked out of the dining room, slamming the doors shut behind him with little care as to what impression it left on either man.

His footsteps echoed like gunshots as he stormed through the great hall to get to the buttery. Alex
hadn’t decided if he even wanted to go back to dinner after he’d retrieved the bottle of wine. Maybe he’d just go back to his room, lock himself in for the night. Maybe he’d just kill himself.

It wasn’t the first time he’d thought about it. It wouldn’t have been the first time he tried.

The kitchen was dark when Alex opened the door. He guessed the staff, Mrs. Wentworth included, were taking a much-deserved break in the steward’s room, before they were expected to come clean up after the Crosby’s and their guests had finished their meal. Interrupted now, he supposed, when his father rang them to clean the mess his mother had made.

A heaving sob had him pausing in the doorway to the buttery, a wave of unexpected emotion washing over him like its literal counterpart. He counted to ten, took a deep breath, willing it to pass.

When Alex turned on the light inside the buttery he realized he wasn’t alone.

Beatrix was seated at the table in the centre of the room, her back to Alex. Her head was slumped down over the top with her arms tucked underneath as a makeshift pillow. Her breathing was slow, even. She hadn’t woken when he’d come in.

Alex stared at the back of her head, a mess of dark brown curls. He wasn’t aware he’d even moved until his fingers were tangled in them.

“Master Alex,” Beatrix said with a gasp, bolting upright and whirling around to face him.

“Sorry,” he said, snatching his hand back automatically. “I didn’t mean—sorry.” Alex wasn’t sure what urge had driven him to touch her. He’d hardly spared a second glance at her before.

“Has dinner finished?” she asked, standing up slowly to face him. “I didn’t mean to nap on the job, I was just….”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. He stepped closer without thinking about it.

“Your parents?” Beatrix asked, apparently reading Alex’s intentions in his eyes. She was biting at her bottom lip, from anxiety or indecision, maybe.

“Busy,” he said, hoping that would quell her fears. He didn’t need this to be complicated; he just needed a distraction. Alex reached over suddenly to grab a bottle from the rack and opened it with ease. He downed as much as he could before taking a breath, and then handed the rest to Beatrix, who accepted hesitantly. “It’s a good year,” he told her. “My father will be livid I’ve wasted it.”

Alex watched as she slowly put her lips to the mouth of the bottle, closed her eyes, and drank. The colour went straight to her cheeks, as if the red of the wine was soaking into her skin, making her blush. Then he pulled her into his chest and kissed her.

The action felt almost alien, though he remembered doing it hundreds of times before. It wasn’t like the first time, not even close, but even though Alex knew in his mind what to do, it was like his body didn’t, like he wasn’t fully in control.

Beatrix seemed to have no such difficulties. She pressed him back against the shelves, rattling the bottles in their holders, ignoring the little grunt of pain that Alex managed to eke out against her lips. Her hands were under his jumper, ripping his shirt out from his trousers.

He shivered as her warm palms pressed against his stomach briefly before moving down again to undo his fly. Then she was on her knees and his pants were around his thighs, and her mouth and hands were on him: hot like firebrands burning his skin.
Alex closed his eyes—trying to focus, trying to relax, simultaneously.

But all he could think about was the blood rushing in his head, reminding him of the heat of battle, the adrenaline pumping an echo of the way he’d felt every time he’d broken the surface of the waves, his own gasps sounding like a death rattle to his ears. And his hands in Beatrix’s hair, her curls the same dark brown as the French soldier he’d left to die….

Suddenly he was doubled over, and all the wine he’d just drank was coming out of him, spewing onto the floor of the buttery. Beatrix jumped back, emitting a little shriek of disgust. Alex collected himself and looked back at her, intending to apologize, but he couldn’t when he caught sight of her expression, read the pity in the set of her mouth, the lines creasing her forehead.

“Fuck you,” he said venomously instead. She opened her mouth, either in shock or to reply, but Alex didn’t give her a chance. “Fuck all of you,” he practically shouted before storming blindly out of the kitchen.

Alex didn’t return to the dining room, didn’t bother to see Colonel Winnant off, didn’t care if it left a poor impression and sabotaged his chances of being selected for the SOE. He spent the night in the orchard, watching the clouds slowly drift across the sky until dawn, and when he returned, it was to the same eerily empty house he’d run away from.

Alex didn’t mention his indiscretion, and neither did his father. They didn’t speak at all.

Alex finally received word in three days’ time that his leave was being extended by an entire week; in the same letter, notification that Acting Squadron Leader Asher Collins of Her Majesty’s Royal Air Force would be calling on him the following Sunday afternoon.

Alex couldn’t decide which of the emotions battling inside his gut was stronger: the anticipation or the dread.

Collins arrived just after teatime on the appointed date. Alex met him at the door, exchanged a stiff but polite greeting, and then led him to the library so they could talk in private.

Lord Crosby had gone to London to take care of the other arrangements that would need to be settled before Alex could officially (or more accurately: unofficially) join Churchill’s secret army. Alex was glad his father wouldn’t be present for this conversation. He didn’t think he could handle the added scrutiny; he was nervous enough as it was.

“Have you heard from Tommy yet?” Collins asked as they entered the room.

Alex gestured for him to take a seat on one of the leather armchairs near the fireplace and sat down opposite him on the other. “I didn’t want him to know that I’m….” He trailed off and shook his head. “He knows to send letters to the barracks if we get separated. That’s good enough.”

Collins nodded slowly. “You seem quite close,” he said.

Alex narrowed his eyes, suspicious about the question. “I thought we were here to talk about the SOE,” he replied.

Collins shrugged. “Just trying to make conversation, but if you want to get right to it—” He stared at Alex as if expecting a response, but when he didn’t receive one, he turned to the fireplace and stared into it instead. “I’ve had a look at your records. You’re young, of course, but you’ve had a few fair chances to prove yourself, and the way your superiors tell it, you haven’t disappointed.” Collins paused, glanced back at Alex before continuing. “There’s just one problem.”
“What?” Alex asked, mystified by the sudden turn. He hadn’t acted with the utmost decorum during the evacuation, of course, but Collins didn’t know about that. No one did, except for Tommy and a few of the Highlanders who’d made it back, and they were all just as guilty as he was of acting only in the interest of survival.

“Do you remember that lad below deck that you covered up?” Collins asked.

Alex nodded, remembering the look on his friend’s face when Alex had told him the boy was dead. He wasn’t sure what some poor dead civilian had to do with him though, or the SOE.

“I want you to know what happened to him,” Collins continued. “I want you to know that he died for no reason, Alex, other than instinct.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked hesitantly. “I thought he fell or something. During the bombings.”

Collins inhaled sharply before replying. “I wasn’t there when it happened, but that other soldier on the boat with us…the one who wouldn’t speak, he knocked George down because he was scared. And George died because of that.” He paused for a moment. “You ever been hunting?”

“Yeah, a few times.”

“You ever hunt anything that could hunt you back?”

“My father took me on a lion hunt once, when I was a child.” Alex stopped, gave Collins a questioning look. “What does this have to do with that soldier, and the boy—George, you said?”

Collins nodded, but didn’t answer the question. “Tell me about the hunt,” he said instead.

Alex briefly contemplated refusal, but decided to play along for now. “I was ten,” he said, speaking slowly, trying to remember all the relevant details of a story he’d never had a desire to tell. “I remember the trip was important to my father, he wanted to impress someone, perhaps, but I was a child and none of that really seemed important. There were two of my father’s friends with us, and two African guides. One of them brought his daughter along. She was a little older than me, I think, maybe thirteen or so.”

Alex glanced over at Collins to see if the other man was still listening to find the pilot’s eyes locked on his face.

“My father’s friend, he wasn’t an experienced hunter, and not a very good listener either,” Alex said, taking a breath after before continuing. “He startled the lion before he could get off a clean shot and it got away, but it was wounded. We tracked it for at least half a day, but it found us before we found it.”

Alex paused then. It had been a long time since he’d thought about the hunt, about the girl, though he’d had nightmares for over a year after they’d returned to England.

“It attacked the girl, nearly killed her. I remember seeing her just…she was covered in blood, barely alive when they took her back to the village. I don’t know what happened to her after that. My mother was furious when she heard. She made my father promise to never take me on a big game hunt again, so we stuck to pheasants, deer, until I went to boarding school.”

Collins had a frown etched into his face when Alex looked up at him again.

“That story not good enough for you?” Alex quipped, unable to help himself. He didn’t have time for cryptic metaphors and he wasn’t a child who needed to be instructed in morality through fables.
“Let me guess, you’re going to feed me some philosophical bollocks about men being crueler than animals.”

“Men are animals,” Collins retorted without missing a beat. “And animals are only driven by survival. War is a wound, Alex. And it keeps ripping into us even when we’re out of the range of the bullets and the bombs, and the sinking ships—in your mind, it’s like you never even left, isn’t it?”

Alex stared at Collins wordlessly, feeling raw and exposed in a way that he never had even when the doctors had checked him over at the barracks after he’d come back from Dunkirk. For the first time, Alex noticed how different Collins looked now, as if the man he’d met on the Moonstone had been cored, like an apple.

“I can see the same thing inside you that I saw inside the soldier who killed George,” Collins told him, his face all hard edges and no give as he looked through Alex. “And I can’t have someone like that on my team, understand?”

Alex swallowed heavily, feeling the weight of the rejection crashing down on him like a collapsing building. He started when Collins reached up, put a hand on the back of his neck, pulling him in closer. It was the kind of thing he would have associated with his father, if his father had been the type to ever once touch Alex of his own accord.

“Drown it out, laddie,” Collins said in a low tone. “Whatever you have to do to smother that wounded lion inside of you, do it. Before it kills someone. Before it kills you. Drown it.”

So Alex did.

He was half-drunk when they made the jump, and it finally caught up to him when they landed in the sand at Dunkirk. He’d almost broken his ankles, remembering just in time to shift his weight and try to make a roll when he crashed in the sand right after Collins had completed his own, more graceful, descent.

And then he’d taken off his headgear, and questioned just how much he’d really had to drink, because standing in front of Alex was a ghost.

Even after Tommy had confirmed that Gibson was indeed very alive, and very real, Alex couldn’t believe it. He felt like he was living in a dream, or maybe a nightmare. Had his parachute failed on the way down? Was this hell?

Alex could almost believe that hell was an exact replica of Dunkirk Beach. Replete with the reminder of the very thing he regretted the most.

Gibson avoided looking at him as he introduced Alex and Tommy to his companions, an Englishman that Collins apparently knew—and very well, judging by the way they kept staring at each other—and a Frenchwoman who looked like she could have killed the lot of them with a single look, her size be damned.

Alex remained silent as they traipsed through the sand up the beach to the eastern edge, where the sparse grass gave way to greener meadows and a thick copse of trees. After about a mile or so, they finally emerged from the forest and Alex could see a lone farmhouse ahead in the distance.

“That’s your headquarters?” he asked, speaking up for the first time since he’d landed.

Tommy and Collins both gave him warning looks, but Alex just rolled his eyes.

“It’s nicer than it looks,” Gibson said quietly, surprising Alex with the response.
“Yes, it’s quite homely,” the Englishman, Farrier, added.

“I’m sure it’ll suit us fine,” Collins replied, sounding like something was caught in his throat as he did so.

Alex, who had hardly taken his eyes off the other man since he’d arrived, watched as Gibson looked over at Collins and then Farrier with a curious expression. Apparently Alex wasn’t the only one who’d noticed their strange familiarity.

He caught Gibson’s eyes as the Frenchman turned his head back, and the two of them exchanged a loaded glance. Alex wanted to throw up after he’d looked away again.

Sooner than he’d anticipated, they reached the house. There was a man standing at the door, tall and bearded. He reminded Alex far too much of his father, his real father, to ever feel comfortable in the man’s presence. Alex learned he was named Leclair and silently vowed to himself to stay out of the other man’s way at all costs.

Gibson and Farrier showed the newcomers to the attic, where they would sleep. It was small, dark, and Alex immediately felt more at ease amongst the nest of blankets and makeshift mattresses spread out across the floor, reminded of the times when his regiment had holed up in some abandoned French apartment to wait out the night.

“I suppose you’ll want to sleep,” Gibson told them, in the southern accent that Alex had a feeling would never seem natural to him coming out of the Frenchman’s mouth. “We can talk more tomorrow.”

“You got a bog around here?” Alex asked. He looked around at Tommy and Collins, who had already started preparing to bed down for the night. “I gotta piss.”

“Young man, you can always go in the woods too, if you like,” Gibson replied. He hesitated. “I’ll show you,” he said.

It was the first time the two of them had been alone—ever. The tension in the air was palpable as they descended the staircase together and walked out of the farmhouse.

Alex felt his eyes drawn to Gibson’s back, remembering when he’d hauled himself up onto the Mole after Tommy had saved him, how he’d put a hand on Gibson’s shoulder in solidarity, high off the relief that he’d survived.

Gibson had filled out since then, the muscles in his neck and shoulders more defined. They’d all grown some in the last year, of course, but the difference was more striking after a year in which all of Alex’s memories were of a scared little boy, barely more than skin and bones under his borrowed uniform.

“The outhouse,” Gibson said as they finally reached the tiny little shed. “You can always go in the woods too, if you like. It’s just that there’s a few women around the Château, so.” He didn’t finish the sentence, but Alex nodded anyway before cramming himself into the outhouse.

He pissed for so long that he started to worry he might rupture something. Next time, he probably shouldn’t drink half a dozen ales before getting on a plane.

Around him, Alex could hear nothing except for the quiet rhythm of Gibson’s breathing and the sound of crickets. He stood there for a moment even after he was done, just taking the atmosphere in. Dunkirk had never been this peaceful the last time he’d been there.

“I don’t know what you said to me,” Gibson said, finally breaking the serene silence. “I can’t
remember the words, no matter how much I try. But I know what I saw in you. Hate, fear. The tools of a scared child.” He stared intensely at Alex, who had no choice but to gaze helplessly back, stunned. “We should have never even been on that boat. And I don’t forgive you for that.”

Alex felt the words stinging like a physical wound, but he said nothing.

“Well,” Gibson said after a minute in which neither spoke, “I suppose we should go back in.” He didn’t wait for Alex before doing so.

Alex trotted after him, clumsily trying to do his belt back up as he followed.

When they returned to the attic, Collins was already asleep, snoring loudly on his back. Alex wasn’t surprised by that; the man could fall asleep inside a jet engine if he were tired enough. It was dark but Alex could see the shape of Farrier’s body turned toward Collins, though he couldn’t tell if the former was awake.

Tommy sat up just as soon as they came in. Gibson took the bit of mattress on one side of him, Alex the other.

There were a few minutes of shifting and settling, and then silence. Alex stared out the window, catching just a glimpse of the moon in the night sky over the trees.

“You all right?” Tommy asked some time later, turning over to face Alex in the darkness.

Alex was still lying flat on his back, not even trying to pretend to sleep. “Yeah,” he breathed out quietly. “It just…it feels safer at night, you know? I almost don’t want to sleep.”

“I know,” Tommy replied after a minute or so had passed.

But Alex fell asleep despite that, and when he woke again, the sun was high in the sky, an indicator that he’d slept well through the morning and into the afternoon. He yawned, stretched out his limbs like a starfish, and that’s when he realized that he was completely alone in the attic.

He found the others crowded into the tiny kitchen downstairs, mugs in everyone’s hands except for Simone and Leclair. They all turned to look at Alex when he entered the room.

“Thought you might never wake up,” Collins remarked with a smile.

“Well, it’s teatime, innit?” Alex joked half-heartedly.

“That it is. Er, Jack, if you would?” He gestured to Farrier, who handed Collins another mug. Alex watched as Collins’s hands trembled slightly while he poured a new cup. “Just like back in Weymouth, eh?”

He handed Alex the mug, and Alex tried not to spit the tea right back out as soon as it touched his tongue. “Yeah,” he said, coughing a bit at the taste. “Great.”

Tommy laughed and Alex’s eyes widened in surprise. Tommy rarely smiled. Alex didn’t think he’d ever heard him laugh, certainly not like that. Alex looked over at Gibson to find him staring at Tommy with a matching grin. He tried to ignore the knot slowly tightening in his stomach.

The others chatted around Alex for a while, but it was the sort of simpering small talk that he hated. No one was really saying anything worthwhile. Then finally, Tommy nudged him while the older members of the Resistance were distracted.
“I think we should talk,” Tommy said uncertainly. “You know, just the three of us, in private.”

Gibson barely flicked his eyes in Alex’s direction before nodding, but Alex noticed. He got up first, and Alex and Tommy followed suit. They almost made it to the back door before Leclair noticed and stopped them.

“What are you boys off to?”

“I’m just going to show them around outside,” Gibson fibbed. “We’ll be back in a minute.”

Leclair nodded his assent and the three continued out the door and into the afternoon sunshine.

Gibson led them around to the east side of the farmhouse, where there was an old wooden swing tied to the branch of an oak tree. Gibson leaned against the trunk while Tommy plopped down onto the board and swayed back and forth. Alex stood a few feet away, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, not feeling as if he belonged there at all.

“I’m not sure what to say,” Tommy admitted, after they’d all just sat there a moment without speaking.

“Well, you’re the one who wanted to come out here,” Alex retorted, unable to help the defensive reply.

“I know,” Tommy replied calmly. He looked between Alex and Gibson, both of whom stubbornly refused to look at each other. “Look,” he said, turning to face Gibson. “Alex isn’t the person isn’t the person he tried to make himself out to be, okay?”

“I don’t need you to put words in my mouth,” Alex interrupted. He felt out of control. He wanted a drink. His hands were trembling at his sides and he balled them into fists, willing his breathing to even out. “He knows what I’ve done. I sure as fuck know what I’ve done. There’s no point in trying to make a case on my behalf, Tom. Gibson’s already made his opinion of me perfectly clear.”

Alex didn’t realize he was waiting for Gibson to react to that statement until Gibson didn’t, just continued staring coldly back at Alex until it became too much and Alex was forced to glance down at his own shoes, unable to bear it.

“No,” Tommy protested, but it was a losing fight. “We’re the same, you see, can’t you both see that? All of us, we went through those things together. We know how it was back then.”

He kept saying ‘we’ and ‘us’, but for Alex, there was only ‘them’ now, and himself. Nothing then, had really changed, not even in a year.

Alex looked up to find Tommy’s eyes boring desperately into his own, but he couldn’t give him what he wanted.

“It was a mistake,” Tommy said, his voice pleading now.

“No,” Alex replied, and he stared past Tommy to meet Gibson’s eyes again. “It was a choice.”

Survival had always been about making hard choices, and learning to live with them. And if one couldn’t live with them, then Alex supposed they would end up just like him: regretting the choice to survive at all.
I. Collins

Chapter Notes

I assume if you're reading Dunkirk fic that you're probably prepared for this kind of thing, but just in case: this chapter contains a fair amount of explicit Nazi imagery/rhetoric/etc.

This is also the longest chapter so far and at this point the fic is just rounding out the first 1/3 of the story. (If you aren't following my Twitter you may not know but I have come to the realization that this fic defies my attempts to estimate its length & now may end up being 15-18 chapters total.) (EDIT: Boo Boo the Fool x3.)

This chapter is from Collins's POV & I know a lot of you out there are big Collins fans, so hopefully you enjoy it!

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @TerranAlleen (writing updates)

Collins dreams of water.

The ocean beneath him is endless, glistening under the full moon. There’s wind rushing into his face, filling his ears with the thunderous sound of it. He’s plummeting downwards with no chute, but he’s not afraid.

Until he hits the water.

He wakes with a start, flat on his back staring at darkened rafters, with the sound of quiet breathing all around him. It takes Collins a minute to remember that he’s in France, at the headquarters of the Resistance cell, and that Farrier is alive.

Collins sat up straight, trying to collect himself again. He glanced over at the shape of Farrier buried underneath his blankets less than a foot away from where Collins had been sleeping. The closeness wasn’t reassuring.

After a while he laid back down again and closed his eyes, but the racing thoughts didn’t slow any. Collins moved his hand toward Farrier, letting it rest on the edge of the mattress, with just the tips of his fingers brushing against the other man’s forearm. He focused on that point of connection and let it quiet his mind until finally he fell asleep once again.

He awoke early in the morning as he always did despite the late night they’d just had. It was a habit from his early days in the RAF that he’d never managed to break, even after he’d joined the SOE and routine had become a thing of the past.

Collins rolled onto his side to look at Farrier, who was still asleep. The covers had fallen off him in the night and lay puddled in the crevice between their adjacent mattresses, revealing his bare shoulders and back, tanned and heavily scarred. Most were familiar, but the thick jagged knot at the base of his neck, the flat white crescent along his bicep, those were new. Collins wondered how Farrier had gotten them.
Collins briefly contemplated reaching over to wake the other man, but just as he was thinking better of it, Farrier’s eyes lazily blinked open and settled on him. The older man’s face slowly stretched into a sleepy smile.

“You have a beard now,” he said.

Collins shook his head exasperatedly, trying to hide his embarrassment at the comment. “It’s been a year, you can’t have expected me to look exactly the same.”

“No, I like it.”

There was a lump in Collins’s throat that he couldn’t dislodge, no matter how much he swallowed. “There’s something I should probably tell you…” he said, sitting up as he did so. But before he could continue, there was a loud thump from the other side, where the three younger men were sleeping, and suddenly Tommy was popping up from his cocoon as well, his hair standing all on end as he looked around wildly.

Collins gave him a quizzical look, and Tommy shrugged apologetically. “Gibson kicked me,” he explained.

Collins rolled his eyes while Farrier laughed quietly. “You know Gibson, then,” he said, joining the other two in the upright position. “From before the evacuation?”

Collins pointedly avoided looking at the dark swaths of ink covering Farrier’s chest.

“During the evacuation really,” Tommy replied with a yawn. “We met on the beach. Gibson saved our arses a few times before we finally ended up on one of the civilian ships headed for Britain.”

“But he wasn’t with you,” Farrier said.

“No,” Tommy replied after a short pause. “We got separated.” The way he said it made it clear that the term was a euphemism, and that whatever happened to Gibson hadn’t been mere happenstance.

Farrier just nodded and stood up, stretching his arms over his head with a groan. “Right, well, he’ll probably tell you himself, but don’t mention that he’s not English around the others. He’s still hoping for a ticket across the Channel when you lot are done here.”

“When we’re done here,” Collins corrected, looking up at Farrier with a distinct frown.

“Right, yeah, of course.” Farrier didn’t meet his eyes. “Breakfast then?”

Collins nodded, but Tommy yawned again, and laid back down. “I’ll be down later,” he said drowsily.

Collins felt his heart rate skyrocket as he got dressed, his back turned to Farrier, and then followed the other man down the stairs into the kitchen. It was a surprising realization, but the last thing he wanted was to be alone with Farrier right now.

Whilst Farrier moved through the house with ease, Collins felt too big for the little farmhouse, like if he wasn’t careful he might bump his head on a low-hanging doorframe, or accidentally knock something off a table with an errant swing of his hands. He tread carefully, like he was walking on broken glass, and earned a questioning look from Farrier in response.

Collins ignored him and squeezed himself into a chair between the kitchen table and the wall, watching as Farrier rummaged through the cupboards to find them something to eat.
“You still take your oatmeal the same?” Farrier asked, still with his back turned.

“Aye.”

Collins leaned his head back against the wall and let his eyes slide shut, just listening to the sounds of pots banging against each other and the rhythmic noise of a knife against a cutting board as Farrier made breakfast for the two of them. It reminded him of things he’d rather not remember now, but there was no escaping that, not anymore.

Collins suddenly felt sick to his stomach at the realization that even if he’d rather have him alive, things had been easier when Farrier was dead.

“Peaches and honey, no milk,” Farrier announced, causing Collins to jump a little bit as he opened his eyes to find Farrier’s face just inches from his own as he set their bowls down on the table.

“Thanks,” Collins said, awkwardly picking up the spoon and pausing just before he put the first bite into his mouth to watch Farrier eat first.

“You’re lucky,” Farrier said through the mouthful of his own oatmeal, smothered in brown sugar and practically soup with the amount of cream he preferred. “There’s a few peach trees right outside around the farm, so we never go without in the summer.”

Collins nodded. “They’re quite good,” he said simply.

They endured the rest of the meal in relative silence, nothing but the sounds of birds chirping outside and the occasional scrape of metal against ceramic to disturb the placid atmosphere. Farrier finished first, leaning back in his chair until the front legs lifted off of the ground as he stared at Collins with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You haven’t asked what happened,” he said.

Collins swallowed hastily and almost choked. “I didn’t—I thought you’d tell me,” he said, “when you were ready.” It wasn’t the whole truth, not even close to it. If Farrier told him what had happened in the last year, Collins would have to do the same. And he knew that was a conversation neither would wish to have, when it came right down to it.

“Oh, right,” Farrier said, looking a bit abashed, and Collins felt guilty for letting him believe that he was the one at fault even for something as minor as this. “Well…I don’t even know where to start.”

“The COs did a fly-over before they abandoned the perimeter,” Collins prompted. “They saw the wreckage of your plane on the beach, assumed you’d crashed. Nell, she—well, we buried an empty coffin, Jack.”

At the mention of his wife’s name, a hollowness shone through in Farrier’s face, and he was silent for a long time before responding. “How is she?” he asked finally. “I mean, how’s she been holding up?”

“Fine, I suppose,” Collins replied. He didn’t want to talk about Nell. “We make do. But what about you? How’d you end up here?”

Farrier gave an abridged summary of the events that had led to him meeting Gibson and discovering the Resistance while Collins listened with a troubled expression. He’d never considered that Farrier could have been captured, and if he hadn’t escaped, Collins wouldn’t have ever known he was still out there, alive, waiting for rescue. It was only by some strange twist of fate, then, that the two had been brought together again. And all for the wrong reasons.
“Jack,” he said, at the end of the tale, “there’s something I need to tell you.” But again, just before he could get the words out, Tommy and the other boy, Gibson, came bounding down the stairs, all carefree smiles and laughs like Collins had never seen before on the former’s face.

“Morning,” he said chipperly, tossing a quick, “Later,” in Farrier’s direction before addressing the lads again. “Eager to eat, are we?”

“Starving,” Tommy confessed, throwing himself down carelessly in the chair next to Collins.

Gibson appeared more hesitant, but took the seat next to Farrier once he tapped the chair back in permission. They appeared awfully comfortable with each other, and Collins couldn’t help but feel… strange about that, even if he couldn’t yet define what the feeling was exactly.

“Toppings?” Collins asked before Farrier had a chance to. He slid out of his chair and walked over to the pot of oatmeal to dish out a couple more bowls for the two boys.

Tommy wanted the works; Gibson, just a few peach slices and a dash of sugar. They ate without looking at each other. Farrier watched both of them all the while. Collins watched him.

Farrier had teased Collins about his, but he had a beard now too. It suited him more, Collins thought, but out of the RAF there was no need to stick to regulations for appearance, and he’d let himself get lazy. He supposed Farrier had grown his out for much the same reason. It made him look older, a more defined reminder of their difference in years, in experience.

They didn’t have a chance to talk again that morning, the kitchen only filling up more and more as the day passed, some coming and then going, but most staying for a bit of conversation or a bite to eat.

Leclair was one of the last to show, and it was then that Collins realized the opportunity to speak to Farrier had passed, at least for the time being. Collins had anticipated the man being all business, so he was surprised when Leclair told them they would hold the briefing after supper.

The Frenchwoman who had met them on the beach, Simone, remained notably absent.

Collins noticed immediately how uncomfortable Alex seemed around Gibson and Tommy. Clearly there was something unresolved between the three of them, something that had happened to them out on the beach, or perhaps on the water, but it was none of his business. He had his own problems to worry about.

Collins felt as if he floated through the afternoon, not really present in any way even while the others around him joked and laughed and told stories. Supper, some kind of soup he couldn’t even attempt to pronounce, was served early, while the sun was still up, and it was immediately afterward that Leclair invited the three to his room to talk.

“I assume none of you are the Mr. Dawson I’ve been corresponding with,” was his opening statement as he shut the door behind the five of them.

“No,” Collins said, taking a spot against the wall nearest the door while Tommy, Alex, and Gibson crammed in against each other on the sofa at the foot of the bed. Farrier perched on the edge of the desk in the opposite corner of the room, next to Leclair, who stood near the fireplace, looking impassively at the others. “Peter Dawson owns the property we use as headquarters in England. He works with some of the other research divisions, trying to coordinate how our station can best be used by the SOE.”

“Mere coincidence then,” Leclair replied, “that you all happen to be familiar with Farrier and Gibson
“Less coincidence than odds,” Collins shot back. “They wanted soldiers who’d been at Dunkirk before.”

Leclair nodded, apparently satisfied with that answer. “Dawson said the three of you speak German,” he continued.

“Tommy can understand it well enough,” Collins clarified, ignoring the boy’s embarrassed flush at being put under the spotlight, “but his accent’s shite.” He lifted an eyebrow. “You planning on briefing us or interrogating us all night?”

Leclair just stared back at him impassively but both Farrier and Gibson looked noticeably discomfited by the interaction. The leader of the Resistance cell didn’t seem particularly intimidating at first glance, but clearly he held greater sway here than Collins was privy to.

“We’ve done our research,” Leclair said finally. He reached over to point at a map hanging on the wall over the fireplace. “We know they’re using damaged Panzers to build a new prototype, something we haven’t seen before. And we know where they’re doing it. But we can’t get inside to do anything about it until we have a better idea of what we’re getting into.”

“You want us to run recon for you?” Collin asked, letting his incredulity show plainly on his face. In the corner of his eye he could see Farrier frowning at him, the same frown their CO had given him for speaking out of turn, but Farrier wasn’t Fortis Leader. Things were different now.

Leclair glanced at him lazily, as if Collins was barely worth of note, before turning his attention to the map. “In a sense of the word,” he replied. “The Germans have the docks completely barred to civilians. There is a fence here,” he said, pointing to a dotted line in a near semi-circle, enclosing the entire area, “and the perimeter is guarded on the outside by the Wehrmacht. They’re heavily armed and we haven’t found a way yet of penetrating the line without detection.”

“What about from the water?” Collins wondered.

“Same level of security with even fewer entry points.”

“I assume you have some sort of plan,” Collins said, ignoring the pointed cough emanating from Farrier. “Else we wouldn’t have been brought here.”

“We need a group who can pose as SS,” Leclair told him.

“Fuck’s sake,” Alex muttered under his breath. No one acknowledged him.

“How are we supposed to do that?” Collins demanded.

“We have uniforms,” said Gibson, piping up for the first time.

Leclair nodded. “We’ve identified a time and place for you to pose as bodyguards of a woman we believe to be instrumental to the war effort they’re conducting here: Maxine Sevard. She’s French-born but apparently important enough to the SS that they’ve given her a rotating staff of bodyguards.”

Farrier continued as soon as Leclair had stopped speaking, not even giving Collins a chance to respond to this new information. “Simone, Gibson, and I will intercept the guards she’s meant to receive while you—”
“Not Gibson,” Leclair interrupted.

“What?”

Collins looked over to find the soldier in question staring at Leclair in confusion. Apparently Leclair wasn’t the type of man to ask someone’s permission before making a decision that involved them. Collins had always hated those officers the most, the ones who believed they had all the answers to questions you hadn’t even thought of yet.

“Gibson will go with Collins and Tommy will replace him in assisting Farrier and Simone,” Leclair replied calmly, making it clear with both his tone and expression that he would hear no argument on the matter. He scanned the room, meeting the eyes of each of them in turn, as if inviting them to dare to challenge him.

But even Alex wasn’t that stupid.

“The switch will take place shortly before dawn,” Leclair continued. “Sevard is staying at a hotel near the docks. There are SS guards that stand watch outside her room and are relieved shortly before dawn by another rotation, which then escorts her to the perimeter. From what we’ve seen, she mostly ignores the men, so it shouldn’t be too hard for you to keep a low profile.”

At the mention of dawn, less than twelve hours out, the reality of the situation suddenly struck Collins. He felt his chest going tight with panic and focused on not allowing himself to hyperventilate. They’d trained for this. He knew Alex would pull his weight. Gibson was an unknown but as long as he followed orders, they’d be fine.

Collins focused on his shoes for a moment, tuning out the rest of what Leclair was saying. When he looked up, Farrier’s eyes were on him, turned down at the corners in evident concern. Collins stared back, attempted a reassuring smile, just a quick quirk of the lips, but he could tell immediately that it hadn’t had the intended effect. Collins wasn’t surprised. Farrier had always been able to see right through him.

“From what we can tell,” Leclair was saying when Collins picked up the thread of it again, “the men they send from the SS are changed out frequently for security reasons. If they question you, tell them you’re a replacement unit sent to provide protection while the First Rotation is being questioned by SD-Leiter Köhn.”

“I assume this ‘SD-Leiter Köhn’ doesn’t exist,” Collins said dryly.

The corners of Leclair’s mouth twitched upwards into something that almost resembled a smile. “That’s the nice thing about these Germans; they don’t ask too many questions.”

Collins wasn’t sure if that was an answer to his own question, or a slight against it. Or maybe a bit of both. He decided to ignore it in the event it was the latter. “And uh, this…Simone? She didn’t need to be briefed?”

“She’s making certain preparations elsewhere,” Leclair replied tightly. “Now if you don’t mind, I’ll need to speak with Gibson alone for a moment. Farrier can answer any other questions you might have. I’d advise all of you to get a good night’s sleep if you can.”

Collins stared at Leclair impassively for a long moment, resisting the urge to look over to gauge Farrier’s reaction. “Right,” he said finally. “Off with you lads then.” He stood and made shooing motions toward Alex and Tommy, who begrudgingly got up and headed for the door. Collins was hyper-aware of Farrier’s frame, shorter than his but broad enough to make up for it, like a brick wall
behind him as he passed through the door.

Alex turned to face him as soon as he followed the two boys in the corridor, his mouth opening to say something, but Collins wasn’t in the mood to hear it. “Not now,” he pre-empted, voice sharp with some emotion he didn’t want to put a name to.

Alex looked as if Collins had slapped him, but he merely scowled and pushed Tommy ahead, the two of them heading upstairs to commiserate on their own.

Collins stood there for a second without moving. He flinched when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“You all right, mate?” Farrier asked in a low voice.

Collins sucked in a deep breath and shuddered. “I need to tell you something,” he said. “I need you to promise me…something.”

Farrier’s hand gave a little tug and Collins allowed himself to be pulled around to face the other man, who was staring up at him with undisguised concern shining in his eyes. “If it’s about Nell…you don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Farrier said. “You know I wanted that. For both of you.”

Collins shook his head violently, trying to suppress the tears threatening to burst out from just behind his eyes. “It’s—I’m—” he said, struggling to find the right words. There weren’t any. “She was pregnant when we left,” he said finally, letting the words hang in the air.

It took a moment before they sunk in. Farrier blinked a few times, his eyes drifting downwards as the weight on Collins’s shoulder suddenly increased, as if Farrier was now using him to keep himself upright. “She was…” he managed, the words just barely audible.

“His name’s Henry,” Collins told him, pushing past a lump at the back of his throat to get it out. “He’s almost six months now.”

“Do…do you have a picture?”

Collins shook his head. “No, I’m sorry.”

Farrier closed his eyes a moment. “He’s all right? Both of them, they’re okay?”

Collins hesitated before answering. “Nell, uh, she’s had some problems…adjusting, but Peter—our station correspondent—and his fiancée, they’ve been taking care of her and the baby, and they’re safe enough in Weymouth.”

“Right, okay.” Farrier squeezed Collins’s shoulder, but he couldn’t tell if the movement was conscious or not. “Fucking hell.”

“I know it’s a lot,” Collins said cautiously.

“Yeah…innit?” Farrier replied, but he sounded awestruck, not in any way troubled by the news. Somehow, that made Collins feel even worse. “Blimey.”

His hand finally slipped off of Collins shoulder, and the two stood there for a minute, just inches apart, but Collins had never felt further, not even when he’d thought Farrier was dead.

“I’m off to bed then,” Collins said, but he didn’t move.

Farrier nodded. ‘I’ll be up in a mo’,” he said, still sounding not-quite-present.
Collins nodded and turned. He went to the kitchen first, finding one of the other members of the Resistance, Aimee, he thought, sitting at the table, scribbling on a piece of paper she was shielding with her arm.

“Evening,” he said as he walked over to the cupboards and began opening them. He wasn’t sure if she’d even looked up, but there was no response from her. Glancing over his shoulder out of curiosity, Collins could see now that the girl was sketching something and hadn’t even seemed to notice his entrance. He walked over to her and sat down, causing her to start. “That’s a proper likeness,” he told her, even as she tried to cover the drawing of Gibson she’d been shading in, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

Aimee stared at him a moment and then hesitantly touched a finger to her ear. It took Collins a moment to understand.

“Sorry,” he said automatically before realizing that the apology was useless. He stared at her flummoxed for a moment before gesturing for her to pass him the pencil and paper she’d been using.

She did so hesitantly, and Collins turned over the page to the back, which was blank. He scrawled a hasty ‘très bon’ but immediately felt that it wouldn’t suffice.

The feel of the pencil scraping against the page was almost alien after so much time had passed since he’d last drawn anything, but Collins worked quickly, not allowing himself to second guess the curves of the Spitfire as it took shape underneath the words he’d written. He passed the paper back to Aimee when he was finished and watched as a smile slowly blossomed on her face.

“Merci,” she said haltingly.

Collins smiled back and stood up, intending to resume his search, but a tiny cough from Aimee stopped him. She pointed toward a large trunk crammed into the corner next to the cabinet containing most of the dishware. Collins stared at her questioningly, but she merely pointed again, more vigorously.

He wrestled with the latches for a moment and then flipped up the lid to find that the inside was stuffed full of liquor. Collins looked back at Aimee, but she was hunched over the table again, focused on her drawing. He chuckled to himself under his breath and pulled out a dusty bottle of brandy, tucking it under his arm before exiting the kitchen.

Farrier hadn’t made it upstairs before him, Collins discovered when he entered the attic to find Alex lying face down on top of his blankets, Tommy sat up next to him with a book propped up in his lap.

Collins wondered if that meant Farrier had re-joined Leclair and Gibson for another, more privileged meeting. He didn’t particularly care for the French cell’s proclivity for secrecy, but there wasn’t much he could do about it in his current position. Collins would just have to hope remaining on a need-to-know basis wouldn’t get any of them killed.

“Sleep,” Collins ordered, watching as Tommy grimaced slightly before closing the book and lying down, the covers pulled all the way up to his chin. The command had come out sharper than he’d intended, but luckily Tommy wasn’t the type to take things like that personally.

With his subordinates bedded down for the night, Collins took a swig of the brandy he’d pilfered, letting the heat of it wash into his chest, and began the arduous process of taking off his uniform, something he was determined to abandon once they’d had an opportunity to acquire a civilian kit instead.
He glanced over at the lamp in the window, the flame still gently flickering, and contemplated snuffing it out. After some deliberation, he decided to leave it, and yanked a sheet over his head as he laid down, trying to block out any trace of the light.

Collins wasn’t sure how long it took him to fall asleep, but when he awoke in the morning to Alex shaking him, he was drenched in cold sweat and the space next to him was still empty.

“What time’s it?” he asked groggily.

“Half four,” Alex replied. “They need us downstairs to get dressed.”

“Aye,” Collins replied, feeling his eyes drift closed again of their own accord. Alex gave him another violent shake. “For fuck’s sake, lad, I’m awake!” he said, shooting upright.

Alex shrugged and moved away from him. Collins heard the door to the attic open and then shut in short succession.

He sighed and yawned widely before getting up. He felt a bit odd walking into Leclair’s room downstairs dressed only in his scants, the tiny little chamber crammed full of bodies, some of them in a similar state of undress. Aimee was there as well, Collins was surprised to note, along with Simone and another woman Collins had been introduced to the day before as Dominique.

Collins did a double-take when Aimee moved over to him to reveal Gibson wearing a grey-green uniform he had seen only in grainy black and white photos. When he looked over at Alex, it was to find the boy being dressed similarly with an expression of distaste twisting his features.

“We only have two officer uniforms,” Leclair said casually as Aimee began to pull at Collins’s arms with a roll of cloth measuring tape in her hands. “So you’ll have to make do with whichever fits the best.”

That ended up being a jacket that exposed an extra inch of wrist and a pair of trousers that were so short it was lucky the cuffs were covered by the tops of his boots because there was no way that Collins could have pulled the uniform off otherwise.

Once fully-dressed, he glanced down at himself and then up at the other two with a grimace. “Does anyone else suddenly feel like they need a bath?”

Alex snorted lightly, but Gibson’s expression remained as hollow as ever.

“I don’t know about a bath,” said Dominique as she pushed him into a sitting position on the bed and then draped a towel around his shoulders, “but you’re beard’s not regulation.”

Collins looked to where Farrier was leaning against the wall in the corner with his eyes closed as Dominique scraped a straight razor across his cheeks, and then shifted his gaze to Simone, who stood within an arms’ breadth of Farrier, but held herself in a manner that made it seem as if there was a physical barrier separating them. Her mouth was twisted into a frown as she glanced over at Farrier, and suddenly things clicked into place for Collins.

“Oh,” he said aloud without realizing, drawing the attention of the others. Dominique paused in her work and gave him a scolding glance. “Sorry,” he said in response. “Just thinking out loud.” Farrier finally opened his eyes then, and Collins did his best to meet them without looking away.

When Dominique was finished, Collins was left with nothing but a neat moustache, and he frowned at his reflection in the mirror, giving Alex a warning glare when a giggle escaped the boy’s mouth.
“I assume you’re familiar with the Nazi style of greeting,” Leclair said, drawing Collins’s attention away after a moment. The three dressed in SS field uniforms all nodded in unison. “Good, then we’ll move on to names.” He gestured toward Collins first. “SS-Unterscharführer Vogel,” he said, waiting for a nod of acknowledgement from Collins before moving on to Alex. “SS-Mann Sommer.” And finally, Gibson. “Waffen-Schütze Bauwens.”

“Why Waffen-SS?” Collins inquired.

Leclair and Farrier exchanged a meaningful look that raised Collins’s hackles. “Gibson will be posing as a Belgian soldier in your unit,” Leclair said finally.

“You’re serious?” Collins replied. “If he can’t even speak German, then what’s the point of replacing Tommy?”

“Collins,” Farrier said quietly, but it was a clear warning.

Leclair gave Collins a frigid stare in response. “I’ll remind you once more that this is our operation and that the SOE has graciously offered their assistance and nothing more. I trust that you can accept my decision for what it is.”

Collins cast his eyes down and said nothing. This time, he refused to look at Farrier at all.

After being supplied with weapons, the three undercover soldiers followed Simone out of the farmhouse with Tommy and Farrier at the rear. Collins was surprised when she got into the driver’s side of the vehicle and gestured for Collins to take the seat opposite.

“We’ll let you out a block north of the hotel,” Simone told him as they others climbed into the back of the military truck. “Sevard is staying on the third floor, room twelve. When you enter the lobby, you will greet the receptionist and ask her to escort you to Madame Sevard’s room. You will greet the previous unit and inform them that they are being relieved of their duty and that they are to await further instruction in their suite. Normally they would report back to the temporary barracks at the docks, but we want to keep them out of the way for as long as possible. Understood?”

Collins nodded, and looked back to check on his two subordinates, both of whom met his eyes with steely gazes of their own. Both were putting on brave faces, it seemed, but Collins could see the slight twitch as Alex clenched and unclenched his jaw, a tell-tale sign of his nervousness. Tommy was harder to read, but at least Collins knew the lad would be in good hands.

The drive to the outskirts of the city was shorter than expected, but when they reached the main road, Simone unexpectedly stopped and stepped out of the vehicle. She opened the door to Collins’s side and motioned for him to take her place.

“Gibson,” she barked, and the other boy jumped out to let her into the back while he sat up front in the front passenger seat.

“Gibson,” she barked, and the other boy jumped out to let her into the back while he sat up front in the front passenger seat.

Once sat there, Gibson nodded for Collins to proceed, and he did so, albeit at a snail’s pace.

“There’s a checkpoint ahead,” Gibson explained. “Just give the standard greeting and tell the inspector that you’re bringing subjects to the Hauptmann for questioning.”

Collins nodded and accelerated slightly, allowing Gibson to direct him to the checkpoint. There were beads of sweat dripping down the back of his neck as they stopped short just before the barrier and waited for one of the soldiers to approach.

“Heil Hitler,” the young man said, saluting and then quickly stifling a yawn.
“Heil Hitler,” Collins replied in kind, nearly choking on the words.

“Heading down to the docks?” the soldier replied after giving Collins and Gibson, and their SS uniforms, a cursory glance.

“The barracks, actually,” Collins replied. Even after countless hours of practice with Peter, the German words still felt wrong coming out of his own mouth. But if the soldier noticed, he gave no indication of such. “We’re to bring in subjects for questioning to the Hauptmann.”

The soldier nodded and marked something down in his log without even bothering to glance up. “Carry on,” he said, gesturing toward the other soldiers at the checkpoint, who immediately lifted the barrier for the truck to pass through.

Collins carefully inched forward, holding his breath until they had made it into the city. “Where to?” he asked, reverting to English once more.

“Down this street,” Gibson directed, “then left up ahead.” After a few more minutes, Gibson finally called for him to stop.

After Collins had parked in an alley just down the street from the hotel, all six got out of the truck and stepped out into the road.

“Good luck,” Farrier said as he passed Collins to take Gibson’s place up front while Simone got behind the wheel once more. Collins just nodded, unable to come up with a response.

He glanced over to find Gibson with one hand on Tommy’s shoulder, saying something to him that Collins couldn’t hear. Alex was standing a foot or so away, looking at his boots and tapping his bicep in a way that other people might have mistaken for impatience.

“We have to go,” Simone said sharply, motioning for Gibson to move.

The three impersonators stood to the side and watched as the truck slowly pulled out of the alley before disappearing from view.

“I suppose uh, Gibson, here knows where we’re going?” Alex said snidely, finally breaking the silence.

Gibson’s nostrils flared slightly but he didn’t rise to the bait. “Yes, let’s go.”

It had been hard to make out before, but as the three walked down the streets of Dunkirk together in the dim light of the budding dawn, Collins could see the blood-red flags hanging down from buildings with swastikas emblazoned on them, like they had stepped into some surrealist painting of an imaginary world. He’d known it was bad; he hadn’t realized just how bad. And this was what was waiting in Britain’s future.

Suddenly it felt like the weight of the entire world rested squarely on Collins’s shoulders.

“You all right?” Alex asked as they continued walking. Gibson glanced back at them but didn’t say anything.

“I will be once this is over,” Collins muttered. “What are we looking for once we’re inside the fence?” he asked, speaking a little louder so Gibson could hear.

“Any access points we can use to bypass their security,” Gibson replied. “I’ve been inside one of the warehouses before but I didn’t have much opportunity to look around.”
“You’ve been inside?” Alex replied, stopping so unexpectedly that Collins had to shove him along to keep from tripping.

“It’s a long story,” Gibson replied after a short pause.

“Aye, well it would have been good to know last night,” Collins said as they approached the hotel. He could see only a short ways down a barbed wire fence blocking the road and two Wehrmacht men sitting on the kerb with their backs to a lamp post. “So you’re the reason we know about the tanks?”

“Yes,” said Gibson.

“You know,” Collins said as they walked up the front steps to the entrance of the hotel, “if you want people to actually believe you’re English, you might want to drop the formality a bit.” He didn’t give Gibson a chance to respond before opening the doors and walking into the lobby.

There was no one inside except for a girl of maybe fourteen or fifteen sitting at the desk who looked half-asleep until she saw their uniforms and suddenly bolted upright. “Heil Hitler!” she exclaimed, tripping over herself to perform the salute.

“Heil Hitler,” Collins replied, hearing it echoed with slightly more hesitation from behind him. The girl stared at him expectantly and Collins, at a loss for how to address her in French, turned to Gibson for help.

Gibson nodded and addressed the girl with a long string of French, the only bit of which Collins could understand being the name of their mark: Madame Sevard.

The girl replied in kind and gestured for the soldiers to follow her. Collins brought up the rear this time as they did so. He noted Alex giving Gibson a quizzical look as soon as the girl’s back was turned, but there was no opportunity to ask about it as they ascended to the third floor and were taken down the corridor to the backside of the hotel, where they could see three other men also dressed in SS uniforms matching their own standing guard outside one of the exterior rooms.

“Heil Hitler,” Collins said as they approached, taking the initiative to greet the men who were all standing at attention.

“Heil Hitler,” they all replied in unison.

After exchanging the expected salutations, the shortest of the soldiers, a man with beady eyes and a ruddy flush to his skin, addressed Collins in German. “We weren’t informed the rotations were changing,” he said.

“My unit is being established as a temporary replacement for the rotation,” Collins replied, trying to remain calm and casual as he spoke to the real SS officer, who he expected at any moment to suddenly realize they were merely playing dress-up.

“Another security breach, I suppose?”

“Evidently,” Collins said, relaxing now that the officer was providing the story for him. “SD-Leiter Köhn arrived this morning to evaluate the situation.”

“Should we report to the barracks?” one of the other soldiers asked uncertainly, before being shushed by his companion.

“No need for that,” Collins replied. “You’re to return to your suite and await further instruction.”
“Right,” said the officer, suddenly looking less convinced by Collins than he had a minute ago. “And just in case someone asks, you are…?”

“SS-Unterscharführer Vogel,” Collins informed him, hoping the clammy sweat he could feel clinging to the inside of his uniform wasn’t visible. “And my subordinates: SS-Mann Sommer and Waffen-Schütze Bauwens.”

The last man, the one who’d shushed the other soldier, let out a snort. “They saddled you with a foreigner?” he said incredulously. “Poor bastards. You sure he’s not a Jew? He’s got the look of one.”

Collins could feel the tension radiating off of Gibson in waves but he refused to give the German soldier the satisfaction of acknowledging the taunt. “I believe we’re done here,” he said simply, addressing only the officer in charge, who immediately turned to the lower-ranking soldier with a disapproving frown.

“Enough, Bergmann,” he said in chastisement. The smile quickly dropped off of the other man’s face. “Very well,” the officer said, speaking to Collins once more. “We’ll leave you to it. Heil Hitler.”

“Heil Hitler.” Collins watched with bated breath as the soldiers walked down the corridor to one of the rooms near the end and disappeared inside. “Cunty fucking bumshite,” he muttered as soon as they were gone, prompting even Alex to gape at him in surprise. “What, like you weren’t thinking the same?”

“I’m not Scottish, mate,” Alex pointed out.

Collins rolled his eyes. “What was with you and Gibson downstairs?” he asked, the look Alex had given Gibson still niggling at him.

“Oh, his accent s’all,” Alex replied quickly. “Didn’t expect him to sound Belgian all of a sudden. Are you from Belgium?” he asked, switching to Gibson without missing a beat.

Gibson stared at both Alex and Collins like he couldn’t fathom what was happening. “No…” he replied slowly. “I’m from Belfort. Should we be discussing this right now?”

“Probably not,” Collins admitted, taking up post next to the door. “What time’s she usually leave?”

Gibson consulted his stopwatch. “We’ve got a few minutes,” he concluded.

“Great,” Collins replied. “So these tanks they’re building. You know much about them?”

Gibson shook his head. “Only that they’re keeping whatever it is they’re doing as quiet as possible.”

“Must be pretty important if they don’t even want their private army knowing too much,” Collins mused.

Gibson didn’t respond.

Collins looked to Alex on his right instead, about to ask his opinion when the door suddenly opened between them. All three stood to attention as a woman emerged from within and extended a slim hand expectantly.

“Feuerzeug,” she said in a throaty voice.
It took a minute for Collins to register the request, and he fumbled clumsily through the unfamiliar pockets on his uniform before producing the desired object and handing it to her. He prayed she wouldn’t pay enough attention to the cigarette lighter to notice the St. Andrew’s crossed engraved into the metal.

Madame Sevard, a tall blonde woman nearly the same height as Gibson, who was only a few inches shorter than either Alex or Collins, produced a hand-rolled cigarillo from her coat pocket and ignited it without ceremony using the borrowed lighter. She handed it back to Collins without a word and took a long drag before immediately exhaling through her nose. The lingering scent was unfamiliar to Collins.

After the smoke dissipated throughout the corridor, Sevard seemed to notice the men surrounding her for the first time.

“Who are you?” she demanded bluntly.

“SS-Unterscharführer Vogel,” Collins replied, only remembering at the last second to add, “Heil Hitler!” and salute.

Sevard waved the hand holding her cigarillo dismissively. “Right, well, I think we can dispense with all that ‘Heil Hitler’ nonsense, don’t you agree?”

Collins couldn’t help but glance over at Gibson for assistance, but Gibson looked just as, if not even more, confused.

Sevard shook her head in apparent exasperation. “Germans.” She took another step forward, toward the stairs leading down into the hotel lobby, but then suddenly stopped before she could pass Gibson. She narrowed her eyes as she examined his face. “You…do I know you?” she asked.

“Nein, Frau Sevard,” Gibson replied haltingly before switching to French. This time Collins caught enough to realize he was making up some sort of excuse about being stationed on the perimeter fence around the docks, where she might have seen his face before.

Sevard hummed contemplatively but seemed satisfied with his answer. “Let’s go then. I’d rather not be late to my own meeting.”

Collins waited until she passed before giving Gibson a quizzical look. Gibson shook his head, apparently just as in the dark as Collins in this regard.

The actual job of escorting Sevard was simple enough. She wasn’t prone to small talk and had no time to deal with unnecessary details such as military protocol, instead just waving her hand and watching as a military barricade rapidly unraveled to let her through.

None of which seemed at all helpful to Collins, who was beginning to believe that they’d been sent on a fool’s errand.

Then they entered the complex.

Collins had to force himself to keep pace with Sevard, so strong was his instinct to pause and marvel at the level of sophistication occurring around him as complex machine parts were being assembled or disassembled throughout the warehouse at a prodigious rate. Alex seemed similarly awestruck and Collins had to gesture discreetly for the lad to close his mouth as they walked past the hulking wreckage of a decommissioned Panzer being harvested for spare parts.

They followed Sevard past this grand assembly line and into an enclosed walkway that led to another
warehouse built on an adjacent pier. Through a window near the back, Collins could just make out
the shape of another tank frame, one more massive than he could have possibly imagined.

Madame Sevard made no comments about any of this, merely walking with purpose to an
unobtrusive door located away from all the hustle and bustle. She pulled out a keyring and opened
the door quickly. Collins lingered at the doorway while Alex followed her inside. She paid him no
attention as she rifled through a number of folders and diagrams laid out on the desk, some of which
seemed to be blueprints by Collins’s reckoning. He looked up to catch Alex’s attention, and instead
catched the lad swiping the spare keyring from a hook off the wall inches from where Sevard was
hunched over the desk.

“Here,” she muttered, clearly speaking to herself as she snatched a file from out of the mess strewn
across the desk. She gave Alex a forbidding look as she straightened up. “No one’s going to
assassinate me in my own office,” she told him, and Collins moved out of the way so Alex could
scurry out ahead of the woman. She re-locked the door after exiting and continued on to the next
building without another word.

Inside the third converted warehouse were endless aisles of makeshift cubicles, over half of which
were filled with women, apparently hard at work. None of them so much as glanced up as Madame
Sevard passed with her entourage.

Collins was surprised when they reached the opposite end of the warehouse, and instead of leaving,
Sevard turned and began to ascend the metal staircase leading to the catwalk around the top level of
the building. She led them to another door that resembled the one guarding her office, but this time
she opened it without using a key, giving Collins a glimpse inside of various men standing around a
large table, some of whom were dressed eerily similar to himself.

“You’re not to let anyone into this room,” Sevard instructed him. “Understood?”

“Yes, Frau Sevard,” Collins started to reply, but before he could get further than the first syllable, the
door to the conference room had been slammed shut in his face. “Right then,” he said before turning
to face the others. “I think I saw blueprints back in her office,” Collins told them. “Alex, you got the
keys, aye?”

“I can get them myself,” Alex replied. “You should stay here, keep watch.”

Collins frowned, but considered it for a moment. He turned. “Gibson?”

He seemed surprised to be asked his opinion. “We should send Alex,” he agreed.

“Cheers,” Alex said dryly as he turned and headed back down the catwalk at a brisk pace.

They stood there just a few moments before Gibson finally broke the silence. “Your given name…
it’s Asher, right?”

“Aye,” Collins replied, staring straight ahead. “Farrier talk about me, then?”

Gibson seemed reluctant to answer. “Sometimes.” He didn’t elaborate, and Collins didn’t ask him to.

Less than thirty seconds later, Collins found his thoughts interrupted by a clattering coming from the
stairs. Thinking it was Alex coming back, he stepped out onto the catwalk to get a better look, only
to be nearly bowled over by a man who could best be described as a human circle.

“Out of the way,” he said irritably, trying to push past Collins and Gibson both to get to the
conference room door.
“Madame Sevard had instructed that no one be allowed to enter,” Collins told the man dutifully.

The short round man huffed and pushed his glasses back up against his face, staring down Collins with all the nerve of a much taller human being. “I demand that you let me through at once,” he said, before pausing, and adding, “Name?”

“SS-Unterscharführer Vogel,” Collins replied. He felt the life leave him a little more each time he had to repeat the mouthful of shite.

“Right, well, I’m expected,” the man continued. “And if you don’t let me through, I’ll have no choice but to have a word with your superior.”

“Frau Sevard is my superior,” Collins said in a hard tone. He was alone now in blocking the door as Gibson slowly moved to flank the other man, presumably so he could keep an eye out for Alex coming back up the stairs.

“Then let me through!” the man shouted. “I’ll have a word with her right now!” His face suddenly went slack after he’d uttered the last word, and he squinted up at Collins as if seeing him for the first time. “What did you say your name was again?” he asked.

Collins opened his mouth to respond and found it filled with blood instead. He stared in shock as Gibson allowed the man’s body to drop to the floor before leaning down and wiping the blade he’d used to cut the man’s throat on part of his jacket.

“What in the name of God was that?” Collins hissed.

“He knew Vogel,” Gibson replied easily, as if he hadn’t just killed a man seconds before. “Or would have recognized the real one, at least. We need to find Alex.”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that,” Collins muttered as he leaned down to grab the dead man under the arms. “Get his feet,” he ordered Gibson. They moved him as quickly as possible, not wanting to chance being discovered in the act, and stashed the body behind a row of crates.

There was nothing neat about it, and anyone walking by would easily see the corpse, but they just needed to buy enough time to find Alex and get out.

They descended the stairs at a measured pace, not wanting to attract any undue attention as they moved past the rows of cubicles on their way to the next building, where Sevard’s office was located. They hadn’t even made it to the door when a group of men suddenly burst through as loud alarms began to blare overhead.

“You!” barked a man dressed in grey-green, pointing aggressively at Collins, who froze, unsure if he should start running or not. “Any sign of the intruder?” he asked, sounding out of breath as he approached.

“No, we haven’t seen anyone suspicious,” Collins replied cautiously.

The man nodded and clapped him on the shoulder before continuing past them. “Keep a sharp eye,” he said by way of farewell.

Collins and Gibson weaved through the countless SS and Heer soldiers rushing through the complex searching for the intruder while they did likewise, albeit with a different intended outcome. They checked the office first, but upon discovering it was locked, Collins began to lose hope.

“There,” Gibson said quietly, tapping Collins’s shoulder to get his attention as they trailed a group of
guards heading toward the warehouse they’d first come in through. Collins looked in the direction Gibson had indicated and sure enough, there was a familiar head of brown hair across the way.

They broke off from the group of SS they’d been following in hopes of maintaining a low profile and made a beeline for the other side of the warehouse, where they could see once they were closer that Alex was struggling with a door that looked like it belonged on the deck of a ship, not inside a portside storage facility.

“You look like you could use a little help,” Collins said deadpan as he sidled up to Alex and placed his hands on the wheel.

Alex jerked around in surprise, face relaxing once he realized it was just Collins. “Ta,” he said, gritting his teeth as the two of them put all their force behind turning the heavy iron mechanism.

“Why the bloody hell’d they put in one of these?” Collins wondered as he held the door open for Alex and Gibson to go through.

“It leads to a sublevel below the pier,” Alex replied, his voice echoing strangely off of the walls as they sprinted down a seemingly infinite spiral staircase. “I grabbed a bunch of notes along with the blueprints, some letters and other rubbish too, but there was a bunch of bollocks about using the canal system to offload restricted materials using U-boats.”

The words floated into Collins’s ears without his really registering them, until they’d reached the bottom of the staircase and found themselves at a makeshift pier below the docks, nothing but dark ocean water beneath their feet.

“Fuck,” Alex hissed as he examined a ladder at the end of the walkway, leading down into the water. “The entrance is submerged,” he said. “Do either of you—?” Without finishing the question, he spun around wildly, looking for something, but Collins wasn’t sure what.

Suddenly Alex stopped and began to take off his boots. It wasn’t until he stripped off his jacket, revealing a sheaf of stolen documents that Collins realized the problem.

“We’re swimming through there?” Collins questioned tightly, feeling as if all the air around him had been sucked out by some unseen force.

“It opens up into a tributary parallel to the beach,” Alex replied as he stuffed the papers into his boot and then stripped off his undershirt to insulate them before topping the whole thing off by placing the top of the first boot inside the other as a jury-rigged waterproof canister.

“How far?” Collins asked faintly.

“Few hundred meters, maybe a little more.” Alex was oblivious to Collins’s internal distress. “I assume Gibson knows where the rendezvous point is?”

Gibson took a moment to respond, seeming startled once again by being consulted for a response. “The Mole,” he replied. “We always use The Mole.”

“Well, no point wasting time,” Alex said. He tucked the boot capsule under his arm and jumped off the edge, sliding feet-first into the water with hardly even a splash.

Gibson followed without hesitation, leaving Collins standing above two dark-haired heads bobbing in the water, their white faces staring up at him expectantly while he tried to remember how to breathe.
“Don’t tell me you can’t swim,” Alex said snidely, and that was enough for Collins to pull himself out of his headspace and force his body to move, until he was in freefall plummeting headfirst toward the water.

It was colder than he’d expected, the panic surging through his chest heightening every sensation until it felt like the slightest brush against his skin was equivalent to the sting of thousands of needles. There was a grip around his arm and Collins surfaced with a gasp to find Gibson inches away, practically holding him above the water as Collins struggled to level out his breathing.

Alex was saying something but all Collins caught was the last bit: “Stay close.”

“You can go without breathing for longer than you think,” Collins heard Gibson tell him, and then Alex was diving under the water and Collins had no choice but to follow.

The water was equally dark and murky inside the tunnel, the occasional grate in the ceiling casting just enough light from above that Collins could track the dark shape of Alex swimming ahead of him. After a few seconds, a couple hundred meters suddenly seemed like miles.

With his lungs starting to burn from the lack of oxygen, Collins felt his movements slow, but then Gibson was there again at his side with a hand steadily tugging at his wrist. The water around Alex was growing lighter now as they curved towards the left.

Collins emerged from the canal with a sputtering gasp and hauled himself up onto the causeway obscuring the tunnel they’d just come out of. Even after he’d caught his breath his chest still felt like there were knives embedded in it. Alex finally seemed to realise something was wrong.

“You all right?” he asked, crouching low to check on the older man. Collins shoved him away, coughing. Alex didn’t try to touch him again.

Collins was barely cognizant of the journey as they walked eastward along the edge of the waterway, the horizon at his left the only constant he could process as he blindly followed Alex and Gibson down the beach.

He wasn’t sure how long it took them to reach The Mole, didn’t realize Simone was already waiting there with the others until he was being bundled up in someone else’s coat and pushed into the back of the truck, with Farrier at his feet, pulling off his sodding boots as the engine rumbled.

Farrier climbed back across to sit next to him as Simone began driving. Collins was aware of the hand on his thigh, invisible under the coat, and did nothing. It wasn’t fair, he thought, the words echoing like footsteps in the empty corridors of his mind. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

He must’ve fallen asleep on the way back, because the next thing Collins remembered was Farrier helping him out of the truck, his socked feet sinking comfortingly into the wild grass surrounding the farmhouse.

Leclair was a few yards away, arguing with Simone by the looks of it, and Collins had to focus himself for a moment to parse what they were saying.

“We need to discuss this now,” Leclair growled. He looked agitated, and if Collins had to guess, the lack of composure was probably unusual for him.

“They need time—” Simone argued, but Leclair cut her off before she could finish.

“We don’t have time!” Leclair yelled.
There was a heavy silence in his wake. And then Alex, speaking up: “Gibson and I can handle the briefing. Let Collins sit this one out.”

Leclair looked over at where Farrier and Collins were still standing and gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

Farrier sighed and gave Collins a little push toward the back of the house. “Come on, let’s sit, get you dried out.” Farrier herded him away from the farmhouse and into a little cluster of trees a short distance away, some with peaches still hanging ripe on the branches.

Collins allowed himself to be pulled down alongside Farrier as the older man sat against one of the trunks, staring vacantly up at the fruit as he tucked himself up alongside Farrier’s body.

“You need a fag?” Farrier asked, already reaching for his pocket to pull out his lighter.

“Aye,” Collins said. It’d do him better than a cuppa.

Collins watched as Farrier placed the fag-end between his own lips before lighting it. He took a quick drag and then passed it to Collins, who placed it in his mouth with a trembling hand. He blew smoke rings and watched them disappear in the morning breeze, only too-aware of Farrier’s eyes on him as the fag burned to nothing between his fingers.

Finally, he ground the remains into the dirt and turned to find Farrier watching him with a wry smile.

“You know, I think I quite like your moustache actually,” Farrier said.

“It’s mingin’,” Collins grumbled.

Farrier laughed. “You’ll get your ginger scruff back soon enough, don’t worry. I remember back at Hawkinge. You had to shave twice a day to keep regulations.”

It was an exaggeration, but one that made Collins smile nonetheless.

“Yeah, I s’pose you’re right about that.” Silence fell between them again, and Collins couldn’t help but voice something that had been drilling a hole at the back of his brain ever since he’d arrived. “Why does it feel like you’re not coming back?”

“Of course I’m coming back,” Farrier replied, but it sounded flat, rehearsed.

“You have a son,” Collins continued. “You have a wife.”

“I know,” Farrier replied. “I’m going back to them.”

“Good,” Collins said, his voice breaking as he tried to get the rest out. “Because I was never—I wasn’t a good replacement—”

“I wish you hadn’t had to be,” Farrier told him.

A gust of wind rushed through the little grove, and Farrier’s hair, a few inches longer now, tickled Collins’s cheek. “You know you’re still the only person I’ve ever loved,” Collins said matter-of-factly, thinking of the months spent playing house with Nell on Farrier’s behalf, all of it just a hollow echo of the real thing.

“I know,” Farrier replied, and Collins could hear the melancholy note in his voice. “Do you sometimes wish...?”
Collins stood up suddenly, unable to bear hearing the rest. “There’s something important I have to do,” he said dazedly, looking anywhere but at Farrier.

He walked back across the field alone. Farrier didn’t try to stop him.

He entered through the back door, listening to the sound of familiar voices in the kitchen and giving it a wide berth as he headed down the corridor adjacent to the parlour. It hadn’t felt like he’d been outside very long at all, but whatever meeting they’d had seemed to be over.

Collins knocked on the door to Leclair’s room, opening it once he heard the muffled, “Come in,” from the other side. Leclair was hunched over his desk, wearing a pair of spectacles perched low on his nose. He glanced up from the text he was examining—one of the items Alex had stolen from Madame Sevard by the looks of it—and leaned back in his chair, inhaling deeply through his nose as Collins entered and shut the door behind him. “Monsieur Collins,” he said, with a touch of dry humour, “how can I be of service?”

Collins wetted his bottom lip and swallowed against the sudden dryness at the back of his throat. He wouldn’t allow himself to second-guess this decision. “I need to send a letter.”
I. Maggie

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is a bit shorter and I assume probably a little unexpected as well. But hopefully you guys trust me and will enjoy it regardless! I do have the rest of the fic loosely planned out and there will be a couple more of these interstitial chapters (with different POVs) before the end.

Addt'l note: As of posting this chapter, Aneurin has just tweeted his headcanon about Gibson's real name. I haven't decided yet if I am going to retcon the fic to account for that or not. If you have any strong feelings about it one way or another, feel free to leave your input.

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Maggie walked in the door at nearly half seven on the dot and stopped in the entryway, trying to keep herself from bursting into tears.

She’d been a little worried at first when there’d first been talk of drafting women into the workforce. She’d never had a real job before, had never intended to have one either. She’d grown up learning to cook, to clean, to care for children, as her own mother had been taught, and she was just fine with that fate.

She’d thought Peter was happy with it too, but then he and his father had run off to Dunkirk one day and he’d come back different—not worse, but different than the boy she’d known in school.

And then everything was different. The war was at their doorstep now.

Peter, ever the gentleman of course, had offered to talk to people, see if he could register her for a position with the SOE if the draft indeed passed, but Maggie had wanted to show him what she was truly capable of. After all, this wasn’t just a man’s war anymore.

The first argument had taken place the day after Peter returned from the airfield. The house was practically empty now, and there wasn’t much for Maggie to do except read or knit, and she wasn’t terribly fond of either.

So two days hence, while Peter was locked in his study doing God knows what, Maggie marched into the village and began asking around for a job. But there wasn’t much left in Weymouth now that their regular influx of tourists had been gutted by the threat of invasion, and even less for a young woman with nary a day’s work under her belt.

But by late afternoon a woman at the bakery had at least pointed her in the right direction: a sewing group at a factory up north, about an hour by train. Maggie had gone first thing the next morning and signed up on the spot.

After only a few days however, Maggie was at her limit.

She sobbed quietly in the entryway: one aching hand braced against the wall, the other covering her
mouth to stifle the sound of her crying. But she wasn’t crying so much from the pain as from the sheer exhaustion, the emotional toll of spending an hour in the morning and another in the evening alone on a train with countless strangers, all wearing the same lifeless expressions. Maggie was afraid it wouldn’t be long before she became one of them.

“Maggie?”

She looked up to find Nell standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Henry propped up on her hip with a soft toy lodged in his mouth.

Maggie swiped at her eyes and tried to feign a smile. “Sorry, is everything all right?”

“Is everything all right with you?” Nell asked, looking concerned.

Maggie was a bit surprised by that. Ever since she’d come to the Cottage with Henry in tow, her only focuses had been herself, Collins, and occasionally, her son. Maggie hadn’t blamed her for that, certainly not as much as Collins had seemed to (though she didn’t blame him for his feelings either), but it was surprising to see her showing genuine interest in anyone’s problems but her own.

“I’m fine,” Maggie replied, sniffling a bit. “Just tired, you know.”

Nell stared at her, brows furrowing slightly as she shifted Henry to her other hip. “I’ll draw a bath for you,” she said before turning and heading back into the kitchen to start the boiler.

Maggie took a step forward, intending to help her, or at least take Henry, but after the first step she folded in on herself, ending up in a heap on the floor with her knees tucked under her chin, another round of sobs suddenly wracking her frame.

Nell came back to her a few minutes later. The sound of Henry hiccupping made Maggie raise her head.

“Sorry,” she said again, wincing when she put her hand down on the floor to leverage herself back into a standing position.

Nell didn’t say anything but her frown deepened. “Well, come on then.”

Maggie followed her upstairs to the bath, surprised when Nell came inside with her and started to run the water.

“You don’t have to—” Maggie started to say.

“Just let me do this,” Nell interrupted. She leaned precariously over the tub with Henry in hand as she plugged the drain, but Maggie kept quiet and let her work. “It’s just us looking after each other now, after all.” She turned to Maggie when she was finished and smiled slightly. “Do you mind helping me wash him while you soak? It’s been a while since he’s had a proper bath.”

“Course,” Maggie replied. She struggled to undo the buttons on her dress with trembling fingers as Nell laid Henry down on the top of the linens cabinet to undress him. She’d still only managed to get halfway through all of them by the time Henry was fully naked and squirming in his mother’s arms.

“Take him?” Nell said a bit breathless.

Maggie carefully held Henry away from herself as Nell made short work of the remaining buttons. She hated how her newly blistered and raw hands felt against the baby’s soft skin.
“There,” Nell said, taking Henry back while Maggie finished changing out of her clothes.

She stuck a tentative toe in the bathwater, only a few inches deep, and winced.

“How cold?” Nell asked.

“Too hot,” Maggie said even as she climbed in anyway.

Nell quickly adjusted the taps and stuck her own hand under the faucet. “Better?” she asked as the water quickly rose.

“Mmm.” Maggie forced herself to submerge both her hands as well and managed to avoid letting out a hiss of pain as the water stung every inch of exposed skin. It wasn’t the temperature that was the problem, but the fact that her hands and feet felt as if they’d been flayed. She hadn’t had time to grow accustomed to the physical demands of her new work yet, and the sudden change had been traumatic to say the least.

“Ready for him?” Nell asked.

Maggie raised her arms and accepted the baby, who seemed none too eager to get wet, but calmed down once she had him propped up against her knees, making cooing noises as she kissed his cheeks and belly.

“Right,” Nell proclaimed, hands on her hips. She looked suddenly at a loss for how to proceed. “I’ll just pop down and make us a cup of tea, then?”

“Thank—” The door slammed shut. “—you.”

Maggie sighed and looked at Henry, who stared back at her with wide hazel eyes. Nell’s were a light brown, she noted. Maggie wondered if that was why Nell had such a hard time looking at the boy on occasion, because he looked more like his father.

“Let’s get you washed up,” she said to Henry, reaching for the cloth hanging on the edge of the tub. It wasn’t the first time she’d been relegated to bathing Henry, not by far, and she had no delusions that it would be the last. He fuss ed when she wiped at his face and head but never resorted to a full-on cry like he was prone to when subjected to a quick rinse in the sink basin.

Maggie worked quickly, trying to make sure they were both clean before the lukewarm water turned chill. By the time she’d finished and had gotten out of the tub to dry herself and the baby, Nell was just coming back in with a mug in each hand.

Maggie dried herself shamelessly, but noticed that Nell pointedly averted her eyes when she walked in. “Thanks,” she said, accepting the cup of tea once she had her robe on. She let Nell finish drying and dressing Henry, not wanting to intervene on one of the few days Nell actually seemed capable of mothering her child.

Maggie followed Nell back out of the bathroom and down the stairs into the parlour, where she laid Henry down on his blanket to play while she sat on the sofa. Maggie joined her at the other end, tucking her feet under herself and then hissing when the coarse fabric rubbed against the blisters on her soles.

Nell gave her a pitying look. “You don’t have to do this job, you know.”

Maggie sighed. She knew she didn’t have to do it, but what else was there? “But don’t you just feel useless?” she pointed out. “All our men off to war, and we’re just…what, meant to sit at home and
wring our hands and hope for the best?”

“Would you rather fight instead?” Nell asked with a frown. She raised a hand to her lips, chewing absently at her thumbnail. She seemed to have no shame about it, though Maggie felt it was a disgusting habit, something her own mother had curtailed in her when she was in primary school.

“I don’t know,” Maggie replied honestly. “If I could, then, maybe. I don’t know.”

She couldn’t just do nothing, as so many of her friends from school seemed content with. Nell, at least, had Henry to look after. And for a while, Maggie had had Collins, Alex, and Tommy. And that had been enough. While it lasted.

“Maybe…when they come back, I’ll….” Maggie wouldn’t allow herself to even consider the possibility of an ‘if’.

Nell didn’t respond. She stared at Henry, who had rolled over onto his stomach and was bashing two of his toys together and gurgling happily.

“I know we didn’t talk much when the boys were still around,” Maggie continued tentatively, “but if you ever need to…just talk about things, I’m always willing to lend an ear.”

Nell was quiet for a moment before responding with a stiff, “Thank you.”

It was a clear indication that the conversation had run its course, but Maggie—having finally seen another side to Nell after months of fruitless attempts at getting the other woman to open up—was determined to see something come of this opportunity.

“I know it must be hard with Asher gone and all,” she began, only to have Nell cut her off as soon as she paused for breath.

“You don’t know,” Nell said simply.

“Pardon?”

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Nell told her. “My husband died out there, and Asher was a sorry replacement for him. And now I don’t even know if he’ll ever come back.”

“They will,” Maggie said, trying to sound reassuring. “Of course they will.” But she could tell Nell didn’t believe her.

Maggie didn’t see Peter that night until well after Nell and Henry had gone to bed, just as she was contemplating going to bed without him herself. He looked exhausted, perhaps even more so than she had upon returning home, and that only made her begrudge her own frailty that much more.

“Sorry I missed supper,” Peter said, placing a quick kiss against her temple as he passed by her. His lips felt dry and rough against her skin. Maggie wished he’d take better care of himself, or let her take care of him instead.

She watched as he rifled through the cupboards looking for something to eat, not having the heart to tell him that she hadn’t made supper, that she and Nell had eaten corned beef sandwiches because it was quick and it was what they had.

“I can run to the shops this weekend,” Maggie told him. “I know the cupboards are a bit bare but…."

Peter’s hands stilled. He glanced over his shoulder to look back at her and there was something
strange in his eyes, something she couldn’t make sense of.

“What is it?” Maggie asked. She was afraid of the answer.

“I got a letter this morning,” he said, stepping away from the cupboard and turning to face her as he spoke. “It was a message from our contact with the Free French, Leclair, confirming that Collins and the boys made the jump safely and that the operation is moving according to schedule.”

“Well, that’s good right?” Maggie asked, not seeing the problem. She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling like she still needed to brace herself for bad news based solely on Peter’s conflicted expression.

“Of course,” he answered, too quickly, “but—”

“Out with it, then.”

Peter gave her a sharp look in response to her reprimand. Maggie stared back at him unapologetically.

“The evac is planned for Sunday night,” he said. “I asked to go with them.”

Maggie was dumbfounded. And then, insistent. “Bring me with you.”

“What?”

“I want to come with you.”

“To France?” Peter asked, looking flabbergasted. “It’s not a holiday, Maggie.”

She glared at him. “Don’t patronize me, Peter.”

Throwing up his hands in surrender, he said, “Fine, fine. I’ll talk to them. No guarantees.”

Come Sunday night, Maggie was standing at the RAF Newmarket air field with Peter at her side, a Westland Lysander just a few yards away. The pilot looked proper miffed to be saddled with two extra passengers, in addition to the army Colonel overseeing Operation Souris whose name Maggie couldn’t remember.

She’d fought for the right to come along by arguing that she had medical experience, her father being a doctor, and that if something had happened to one of the soldiers they were supposed to retrieve, her skills might come in handy. Neither the Colonel nor the Lysander pilot had seemed particularly convinced Maggie would be of use, however, despite their reluctant agreeance after some long minutes of deliberation.

“All right,” said the pilot once everything was ready. “Up you go then.” He hastened Maggie over to the ladder on the port side and helped her climb up into the rear cockpit.

Peter was right behind, followed by the Colonel, who examined the seating in the rear of the plane with undisguised apprehension.

“You know, Mr. Dawson,” the Colonel said, before taking his seat opposite them, “when I asked if you would accompany me, I wasn’t extending the invitation to your plus-one.”

Peter stared icily back at him. “She’ll be useful,” he said coolly, “sir.”

The engine sounds grew louder for a moment and then levelled out again. “Sixty seconds to take-
off,” she heard over the radio, the words garbled by angry buzzing static.

“Peter?” Maggie said quietly, trying to make her request for help with the belts and buckles attached to her seat as discreet as possible.

“Right,” Peter said, reaching over to help her strap in. It was the first time Maggie had worn trousers and the flight suit was ill-fitting and baggy on her small frame. In sharp contrast, the seatbelt felt far too tight across her bust and hips but she didn’t dare complain about that in the presence of the Colonel. “All good?”

Maggie nodded, and tried not to squirm in her seat.

“Do you think Nell and Henry will be all right?” Peter asked as the pilot began the countdown to take-off.

“It’s one night,” Maggie reminded him, trying to pretend as if she hadn’t had the same exact worry running through her head during the long drive from Weymouth to Newmarket. But she knew they’d made the right decision. Nell wasn’t a child. And Henry wasn’t Maggie’s son.

They could all make it just the one night on their own. And then things would be back to normal again in the morning.

When Peter had told Maggie the flight from Newmarket to Dunkirk would be short, she hadn’t anticipated just how quick the trip would actually be. They had only been in the air maybe twenty minutes or so when the pilot announced that he was preparing to land.

The descent was rather quick, and Maggie gripped the straps on her seatbelt tightly as she heard the pilot call for them to brace for landing.

When they touched down on the beach, Maggie felt like she might still be thrown out of her seat, safety harnesses be damned. The plane shuddered and skipped along the sound with a horrible grinding sound and Maggie shut her eyes tightly to wait it out. She felt a hand worm its way underneath hers and she instinctively gripped it, squeezing hard enough that it made even her own joints ache.

Finally, the plane stopped moving and the sound of the engines quieted. Maggie opened her eyes and looked around the cockpit, hoping for some indication from either Peter or the Colonel for how to proceed next.

There was a lengthy silence and then the pilot’s voice sounded from their radios once more. “LZ is clear. Colonel, sir, you may want to step out of the cockpit for a moment.”

The Colonel exchanged a worried look with Peter as he unbuckled his seatbelt. Maggie’s throat closed up with a sense of overwhelming unease as she watched him climb out of the rear cockpit.

“What’s going on?” she asked, feeling compelled to whisper though there was no apparent reason to do so.

Peter shook his head with a frown. “I don’t know.”

They sat there for nearly a minute before the anxiety became too much too bear. “Should we go out there?” Maggie asked. “See what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said, and the crease between his brows deepened. “Dawson to Courier One-Three-Eight, do you read?”
There was nothing but crackling static in reply.

“Right,” Peter said with a sigh. He made short work of his buckle before getting up and moving over to help Maggie extricate herself from hers. “Stay behind me, all right?” he said, gesturing for her to follow him out of the plane.

Maggie could see immediately upon poking her head up out of the rear cockpit that pilot’s own cockpit was hanging wide open and visibly unoccupied, and that neither the pilot nor the Colonel were anywhere within sight on the beach.

Peter quickly helped her down off the ladder and then took a few steps away so he could get a better vantage point, spinning around in a wide circle as he scanned their surroundings. Finally, he glanced back at her and shook his head.

He’d taken barely a step toward her when Maggie saw the figure emerging from the line of trees encroaching on the beach just a few meters out from the sand.

“Peter!” she cried out in warning, though they had no weapons, no way to defend themselves whatsoever. She froze, watching helplessly as Peter spun around to face the approaching threat.

“Keep your voices down!” the figure hissed, and then Maggie could see as it drew closer that the shape was that of the Colonel. “Why aren’t you in the Lysander?” he demanded.

“With all due respect, sir,” Peter replied, “we were. Lockheed wasn’t responding when we radioed.”

“He’s probably out of range,” the Colonel told him, craning his neck to look past the plane, further down the beach. “I sent him east to look for any sign of the others.”

“Is that safe?” Maggie asked.

The Colonel gave her an exasperated glance. “Waiting here on the beach for an evac that should have taken five minutes tops is what’s not safe. We can’t stay here much longer. The plane’s too noticeable.”

“But what about—?”

The Colonel cut Maggie off without even acknowledging that she’d spoken. “You’re sure there was nothing in the letter about delaying the evacuation date? No deviations from the original plan at all?”

“Only the notice regarding the British prisoners,” Peter replied.

Maggie wrinkled her brow in confusion but didn’t dare ask what he meant by it now.

The Colonel worried at his bottom lip, eyes flitting from one end of the beach to the other. “Get back in the plane,” he said finally. “I’ll wait for Lockheed out here.”

Maggie stared at Peter as he buckled her back into her seat like she was a child. “What?” he asked, finally looking up and meeting her eyes.

“What did you mean?” she asked him. “About the prisoners.”

“Not now,” he told her firmly, and that was the end of it.

A few minutes later the Colonel returned and took his own seat. Maggie could hear the sound of the plane starting up again.
“No sign?” Peter asked.

“Nothing,” said the Colonel.

So that was it, then. They were just giving up. Going home empty-handed. What were they going to tell Nell?

Unfortunately, Maggie didn’t have much of an opportunity to muddle over what she might say on the flight home as the return soon made the initial landing look like a walk in the park. The turbulence was so bad that when they finally landed in Newmarket, she could stretch her fingers out of the claw-like position they’d been curled in for nearly thirty minutes.

It was raining heavily on the runway when they got out. The pilot saluted both herself and Peter as well as the Colonel when they passed.

“Sorry about your friends,” he said, the sound of his voice nearly lost as thunder rumbled overhead.

Peter rushed Maggie back to the car. She sat inside and watched as he stood nearby and talked with the Colonel for a moment, the two of them holding their jackets above their heads to try and shield from the torrential downpour.

When Peter finally got into the driver’s seat, he just sat there for a few minutes without moving. Maggie watched the streaks of rain washing over the windscreen and broke the silence.

“Peter, what was supposed to happen back there?”

He didn’t answer for nearly a minute, and when he finally responded, it was as if he hadn’t even heard her question. “There’s something I didn’t tell you.”

“What?”

“It’s not because I thought you couldn’t keep a secret,” he continued. He hadn’t looked at her once since getting into the car. “I just didn’t want to burden you with something you’d have to keep from Nell when things were so close to being…. Well, now it’s different, I suppose.”

“Peter, what are you talking about?” Maggie demanded.

He gave a short sigh and turned to face her as he started the engine. “Collins sent a letter along with Leclair’s. I don’t know how it happened but—Nell’s husband, Farrier, he’s alive.”

Maggie blinked rapidly, trying to process the information. She didn’t know what to say.

“He and another British soldier escaped from the Germans after the evacuation and joined Leclair to help the Free French. Collins sent the letter because—” Peter stopped. He took a deep breath before continuing. “Well, I suppose because he was afraid something like this might happen.”

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked.

“I was to give the letter to Nell if they didn’t make it back,” Peter told her. Maggie’s heart dropped before he even said the next few words. “Am to give the letter to Nell,” he amended, “because they didn’t make it back.”
II. Tommy

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY for taking so long with this chapter but hopefully the length makes up for it a little bit.

This is now officially the longest single project I have ever written so *wipes sweat away* wow. And we've still got quite a ways to go! Part of the reason for the delay is that I spent a little bit of time working out a lot of the future plot stuff so that I don't mess it up and have to retool something in one of the next few chapters. The other part of the delay is unfortunately health related :c but hopefully things will return to normal soon.

This chapter is back to Tommy's POV. Hopefully you enjoy! Please leave a comment with your thoughts on how the story is progressing if you are so inclined, as I super enjoy reading them.

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Gibson was alive. That had been the one thought running through Tommy’s mind since he’d landed on the beach at Dunkirk and seen a pair of familiar hazel eyes staring back at him, making him forget for a moment how to breathe.

Except he wasn’t Gibson now, he was Philippe. Though he’d always been Philippe; it was just that Tommy had never known that person, had only ever seen the façade—had chosen against better sense to believe it.

But somehow, knowing Gibson was alive hadn’t fixed anything.

Tommy had barely any time to adjust to being back in Dunkirk before realizing that his role as an SOE agent wasn’t going to be any different than being just another foot-soldier in the BEF. Well, aside from less posturing, less gunfire, and hopefully, more hot meals.

At the core of it, though, it was all the same. Leclair, another results-oriented commander who only viewed his troops as chess-pieces; Collins, a fresh-faced superior officer too concerned with his own problems to pay attention to his subordinates; and Alex, the stranger he'd been when they'd first met one year back on Dunkirk Beach.

Tommy felt as if every word he said to Gibson was being scrutinized by Alex, and then discovered that the converse was true as well. Even his attempt at peace-making had only the opposite effect—both refused to so much as look at each other after that.

So like he was wont to do when confronted with a problem that refused to allow itself to be resolved, Tommy simply shut down.

If he’d expected any concern to come as a result of his having a sulk, Tommy was wrong. Maybe it was the fact that he always looked like he’d just bit into a lemon even when he didn’t mean to, something his mother had often criticized him for as a child.
More likely was the fact that the others were all pre-occupied with plans he was apparently all but useless in helping to carry out, though he couldn’t deny he was a little grateful after seeing the others in their SS uniforms that he wasn’t expected to have to perform that charade.

Accent aside, he’d never been a good liar.

Tommy locked eyes with Gibson while the three were dressed and prepped for the reconnaissance mission, not averting his eyes until Dominique stepped directly in front of Gibson to fix his collar. Tommy glanced over at Alex who was standing just beside already looking impeccably put-together, but the other boy had his eyes downcast and didn’t so much as look up once as Leclair explained the essentials.

Tommy sat back and wordlessly observed the disagreement between Leclair and Collins—the first of many, he expected. And then they were off, Tommy squeezed into the back of a lorry alongside Alex, with Farrier and Gibson sitting across.

It was tense, uncomfortable, and Tommy was almost glad when Gibson got out to switch places with Simone just before the checkpoint at the town limits.

Tommy hesitated as Gibson squeezed past him, and then surged upward at just the last second to grab onto the sleeve of his uniform. “Good luck,” he said, a bit hoarsely, before sitting back down. He didn’t look to see Alex’s reaction, afraid of what he might find.

Gibson smiled slightly and then climbed out, to be replaced instead by Simone, who didn’t so much as acknowledge Tommy as she sat down next to Farrier.

The lorry started to creep forward after a few seconds and then stopped again a minute or so later. Tommy could hear the murmur of voices, Collins and another’s, speaking in German. Tommy held his breath as they remained stopped, only letting it out once they started to move forward again.

Simone stared out as the passing buildings as they trundled through the darkened streets of Dunkirk, a place Tommy had thought he would only see again in his nightmares only a week back. Tommy’s heart skipped a beat as they drove by the remainders of one of the barricades, and then again as they continued further down past a line of apartments that had been reduced to merely rubble.

Then they stopped and Simone and Alex were both climbing out of the back of the lorry. Tommy didn’t try to touch Alex like he had with Gibson, afraid of the consequences, but also worried about what effect his inaction might have once the opportunity had passed.

Alex was sensitive; Tommy knew that. He wanted reassurance, attention, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

“How are you holding up?” Farrier asked him quietly as Simone backed out of the alley.

“What?” Tommy replied, startled by the unexpected question.

Farrier’s look of concern deepened. “I meant, are you nervous, frightened,” he explained. “I can’t imagine you have much combat experience.”

Tommy stared back at Farrier with a frown. “I think I can handle it,” he replied frostily.

“Right, of course.” A shadow passed over Farrier’s face as they turned the corner, and when it was illuminated again, he wasn’t looking at Tommy any longer.

Simone parked the lorry in between two apartments. Tommy had to squeeze between the side of the
lorry and a fire escape to get to where Farrier and Simone were crouched behind a bin.

“They should walk right past us,” Simone explained in a low voice. “If they aren’t here within the next five minutes, follow my lead.”

Tommy wasn’t sure exactly what he was expected to do even if the officers in question did walk past them, but there wasn’t time to dwell. Less than thirty seconds after Simone had finished speaking, the sound of voices drifted down the alley toward them, shortly followed by their owners: the three SS officers the others would be replacing as Madame Sevard’s entourage.

Simone and Farrier attacked simultaneously, leaving Tommy behind as they both assaulted the two men chatting to each other at the rear of their formation.

Simone aimed low, striking her man with a forceful jab to the side that sent him reeling with a loud grunt. Farrier went straight for the head, his fist clocking the other man in the temple and sending him to the ground without a single word.

The officer turned at the noise only to come face to face with Simone’s pistol. Her finger almost seemed to caress the trigger as she stared the SS officer down. He didn’t move, didn’t speak.

With her other hand, Simone gestured for Tommy to come forward. “Take care of those two,” she instructed, pulling out two lengths of cord from the pouch on her belt and handing it off to Tommy.

He approached the still-conscious man that Simone had taken down and cautiously reached for one of his wrists, placing a knee against his lower back to keep him pinned just in case. Tommy looked up after he’d secured the first man to find Farrier standing behind the officer, apparently about to do the same.

It was just as Simone lowered her gun and began to turn that Tommy noticed it, barely more than a twitch of the wrist, but there nonetheless.

“Watch out!” he shouted, just before the officer spun around and kicked Farrier solidly in the shin, sending the pilot stumbling back as the officer reached for his own gun.

His fingers brushed against the Luger and fell limply to his side as a fountain of blood erupted from the back of his skull. There had been barely a sound from Simone’s silenced pistol, but the thud of the officer’s body hitting the ground suddenly felt deafening as Tommy stared at the corpse in shock.

“Let’s go,” Simone said, as if nothing of note had occurred.

Farrier was silent, his expression tight as he helped load the body into the boot before joining Tommy and their dazed prisoners in the back. He knocked on the interior roof, signalling for Simone to leave.

Tommy wondered how they were expected to get past the German control points with a dead SS officer and two prisoners as cargo, but apparently Simone was one step ahead, somehow effortlessly falling in line with a military caravan exiting the city that was an endless queue of lorries identical to the one they’d taken.

Even still, Tommy was surprised when they were waved through without question. He glanced down at their bound and gagged prisoners to find them staring up at him with silent rage, apparently aware of the fact that their comrades, ignorant to their plight, were just meters away.

Tommy couldn’t help but allow a little sigh of relief escape his lips as soon as they were outside the town.
Farrier smiled. “Looks like I was right about those nerves, eh?”

“Yeah,” Tommy replied in good humour, feeling almost giddy at their success, “s’pose you were.”

“Well,” Farrier said, giving a little stretch and kicking one of the prisoners for good measure. “It’s over now. We’ll offload these bastards on the scouts and then head back to The Mole to regroup.”

“The Mole?” Tommy replied sharply, feeling almost a sting of pain in his gut at the name.

“It’s barely more than driftwood now,” Farrier clarified, “but it still makes for a decent landmark, so we like to use it for rendezvous.” He squinted at Tommy and finally seemed to notice his discomfort. “Bad memories for you lot, I suppose,” he added.

Tommy nodded stiffly. He said nothing.

Tommy had been expecting to go back to the farmhouse but instead found himself in an unfamiliar piece of French countryside at the foot of a rickety windmill.

There were two men who climbed down a ladder to meet them almost as soon as they arrived. They were both tall and lanky, though one had dark hair and the other light. They didn’t seem like much in the way of guards from Tommy’s perspective, but he helped Farrier unload their captives and pawned them off to the scouts without protest, noticing as he did so that Simone was watching the two beanpoles struggle to herd the tied-up prisoners back to the windmill with a frown marring her face.

“We should go,” Farrier said urgently.

Simone wrinkled her nose but turned away from the scouts and got back into the lorry without saying a word. Tommy was surprised when Farrier didn’t join her in the front, which probably would have been more comfortable, but instead got into the back once more before they set off.

The horizon was beginning to lighten as they approached the remains of The Mole. Simone stopped just short of the sand and turned the engine off before stepping out. Tommy waited until Farrier did the same before following suit.

Tommy, not wanting to look at the crumbling mess of old wood still standing partially intact out in the water, watched Farrier and Simone instead. They were standing on either end of the lorry, Farrier leaning casually against the bonnet, while Simone stood stiffly with her arms crossed next to the rear left wheel, which almost came up to her waist.

The air felt charged as Tommy took a step between them, the tension he could read in the set of their shoulders and the lines around their eyes now almost palpable as they waited.

“I know it’s really none of my business, but is everything all right?” Tommy asked hesitantly, not sure whether he should be looking to Farrier or Simone for the answer. “You two seem….” He trailed off, cowed by Simone’s withering glare as he glanced over at her.

“Perhaps you should be more concerned that your friends can’t even bear to look each other,” she shot back.

Farrier straightened and whirled around to face her, fire in his eyes. “Lay off, Simone. It was just a question.”

“Oh?” Simone raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you’d like to answer it, then?”
Farrier looked at her open-mouthed and then glanced at Tommy. “That’s not to say that I—”

But Tommy wasn’t listening, distracted by something along the very edge of the shore, a few hundred meters of so down the beach to the west. An amorphous blob, suddenly coalescing into three distinct forms as it grew closer.

“Is that them?” Tommy asked, embarrassed at the naked hopefulness in his voice as he pointed at the dark shapes in the distance.

Simone and Farrier turned to look. Farrier spent only a second analysing the silhouettes out in the distance before breaking into a run, Simone jolting forward as if to follow him before she suddenly stopped, her jaw clenched as if she’d been physically restrained.

Tommy spared her a brief glance before following Farrier at half-pace, slowing down more once the men staggering toward them were close enough that he could recognize them despite their sopping uniforms.

Alex was at the head of the pack, head held high, apparently oblivious to his overall dishevelled appearance as he marched forward. Gibson was following just behind, and with his hair slicked back and a tinge of blue around his lips, he reminded Tommy even more of a ghost, like the images he used to conjure back in Weymouth when he’d believed that Gibson had drowned in the hull of that Dutch trawler.

But Tommy was most surprised to see Collins at the very back, staring vacantly at Alex’s feet as he stumbled forward through the sand. He’d seen the hollow expression on Collins’s face before, on nights when the older man’s screams had woken Tommy, and the two had run into each other in the kitchen; Tommy just looking for a midnight snack whilst Collins wandered aimlessly through the Cottage like a restless spirit.

Tommy hadn’t tried to speak to Collins after the first time that had happened. It was like Collins was still asleep, unaware of anyone’s presence, perhaps even his own.

So Tommy wasn’t surprised when, after cutting between Alex and Gibson to wrap a coat around Collins’s shivering shoulders, Farrier received no acknowledgement whatsoever from the other man.

“You two all right?” Farrier asked Alex and Gibson, both of whom merely nodded in response. “What happened down there?” he continued.

“Got what we came for,” Alex replied, holding up an object that Tommy scrutinized for a moment before realizing that it was made up of Alex’s boots, and that he was walking along the beach in just his wet socks.

“Any trouble?” Farrier asked as he marched with the trio and caught up to where Tommy was standing, still some yards away from where Simone was waiting with the lorry.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Gibson replied. Tommy noticed the minute glance he cast towards Collins as he said it, and wondered what exactly had happened to them.

“What about you lot?” Alex asked.

Tommy shrugged and fell in line with them as they continued toward the lorry. “Nothing we couldn’t handle,” he replied, unable to keep the slight tinge of annoyance out of his voice.

Gibson flicked his eyes over to Tommy, a sharp edge to his gaze that Tommy had never seen before, but he didn’t provide any further details about the expedition.
“He’s not injured, is he?” Simone asked with a frown as they got closer. She gestured for Alex and Tommy to get into the back of the lorry. Tommy did so with a bit of hesitation, watching as Gibson exchanged a loaded glance with Simone before getting into the passenger side of the cab.

Not for the first time, Tommy felt like he was missing something big. He didn’t like it one bit.

“No,” Farrier replied pleasantly as he practically lifted Collins, who was a few inches taller—albeit slimmer, into the back and pushed him down onto the bench across from Tommy. “Just needs warming up is all.”

The look on Simone’s face made it clear that she, along with anyone else who had spared more than a second evaluating Collins’s condition, didn’t buy that one bit. But she got back into the driver’s seat without argument and Tommy, feeling a bit bolder now, slid a little closer to Alex as the engine turned over and began rumbling underneath them.

Alex didn’t move away, but nor did he so much as look at Tommy, instead sitting with his elbows propped up on each knee, his head in his hands.

Tommy looked up to find that Farrier had managed to get Collins’s boots off and was sitting with the other man practically in his lap, rubbing his shoulders over the coat draped around him, like warming him up would yank him out of whatever hell he’d been transported to inside his own head. Tommy knew from experience that it wouldn’t be that easy.

Still, he was surprised by the apparent closeness between the two. Collins hadn’t ever spoken about Farrier, not even to Alex—who was an incorrigible gossip and certainly would have said something to Tommy if Collins had—but it was easy enough to put the pieces together considering Nell’s surname, and what little Tommy had heard about her husband dying in the war.

They’d found two ghosts, then, in Dunkirk. But even knowing that, Tommy still wasn’t sure if it was all worth it, being back.

He felt guilty thinking that. Gibson was a friend. He’d saved both Tommy and Alex, and he’d been stuck here for a year while they enjoyed what had been practically a holiday at the Dawson’s cottage. But the fact that he was alive…well, it hadn’t helped much. If anything, things had only gotten worse for all of them since their arrival.

The only sounds as they drove back to the farmhouse was that of Collins’s laboured breathing, punctuated by the occasional sniffle from Alex. Tommy, feeling almost physically weighed down by the depressing atmosphere, didn’t dare say a word.

Tommy glanced up at Farrier a few times during the drive, always to find him staring down at Collins, who looked like he had fallen asleep at some point.

There was something in Farrier’s eyes as he gazed down at Collins that made it suddenly hard for Tommy to swallow. He’d never been looked at like that by anyone. Ever.

Tommy wasn’t the only one to notice how Farrier looked at Collins. He watched Simone, who stared at the two of them as they got out of the lorry with a carefully schooled expression, but Tommy could read the jealousy in the muscle tic just below her jaw, the way she blinked slightly too often.

Tommy didn’t notice Leclair standing outside until he started speaking to the group of them gathered outside. Tommy was confused by that at first, wondering if the man had been waiting in a show of concern that seemed uncharacteristic for him, before quickly realizing that this was not the case at all.
—Leclair just wanted his information as soon as humanly possible.

The second surprise came during the course of the argument between Leclair and Farrier about delaying the briefing, when Alex volunteered to relay any necessary information on Collins’s behalf. Leclair reluctantly agreed, and they all went inside.

Tommy was the last to walk in the door and he cast a brief glance over his shoulder as he did so at Farrier and Collins, who were walking together looking almost like a pair of young springtime lovers, out for an afternoon stroll. The thought almost brought a smile to his face.

He turned back and came face to face with Simone, who was still standing in the doorway looking at him expectantly, almost suspiciously. Tommy wasn’t sure what he’d done to warrant her suspicion, but maybe the French were just naturally that way. Leclair certainly seemed to fit that profile, even if Gibson didn’t.

Leclair led them through the back door, past the kitchen, where Dominique and her husband were sat having a cup of coffee, by the smell of it. They only briefly looked up as the others passed by.

The rag-tag group—Alex and Gibson still dressed in their damp SS uniforms—proceeded down the corridor to Leclair’s bedroom. He held the door open for all of them, and Tommy noticed as he went through how Leclair kept curling and extending the fingers on the hand hanging to his side, but when Tommy looked at the man’s face, there was no trace of anxiety present.

Everything about this operation seemed strange, wrong. Tommy wondered what exactly Collins had gotten them into.

Having entered the room first, ahead of Simone, Gibson and Alex both headed for opposite sides of the cramped bedchamber—leaving Tommy with a dilemma. He quickly evaluated their positions, Alex by the writing desk, standing; Gibson sat on the edge of the bed. Tommy settled for compromise, feeling as though it was a mistake even so, and took up a position against the wall, close to the door.

Simone ended up next to Alex in the accompanying chair, which surprised Tommy. She didn’t seem like the type to ever let her guard down, or even to give the appearance of doing so. It was strange seeing her look so relaxed after Tommy had just grown accustomed to the permanent frown etched into her face.

Leclair nodded at the both of them as he walked in. “You were successful, I wager?”

Alex shrugged and offered the sheaf of crumpled papers he’d hidden in his boots. “Can’t tell you to what degree, but it seems promising,” he replied.

Leclair shuffled through the papers quickly. “French, German….” He quirked his head to the side. “Damn.”

“What is it?” Gibson asked.

“Looks like some kind of code,” Leclair replied. “Well, we can address this at a later time. Anything else I should know?” he continued, looking back up at Alex. His expression seemed almost strained now, like whatever he’d seen in the notes Alex had brought back was more concerning than he was willing to let on.

“Caught a glimpse of one of the tanks they’re working on,” Alex replied. His face was grim as he spoke. “It’s a monster. Never seen anything like it. Even the Russians—”
Leclair nodded. “Number?”

“What?”

“The tanks, how many are they working on?”

“I—I don’t know, I mean, there could be dozens for all I can tell.”

Leclair exchanged a look with Simone. “You swam out, correct?” he asked Alex.

Alex nodded. “They have a sub-level under the warehouses. We went through the canal entrance.”

Leclair’s eyebrows shot up. “Then we can plant explosives underneath, collapse the whole facility.”

“Yeah, I suppose…” Alex said.

Simone cut in. “Taking out the warehouses won’t cripple the Wehrmacht,” she pointed out. No one said anything in the silence following her statement, so she continued, saying, “We already know the reprisals for sabotage, but something this big…they’ll tear the city apart if we don’t strike first.”

“You want to make a two-pronged attack?” Leclair said sceptically.

“It’ll buy us time,” Simone argued.

Leclair didn’t have an answer for that. “We’ll discuss it later,” he finally concluded.

Tommy thought that Simone made sense, but didn’t think his opinion would count for much, so he said nothing. Alex and Gibson both were starting to look like they might fall asleep where they were. Tommy hoped for their sakes that Leclair would wrap things up soon. He could do with a nap himself.

“And your endeavours?” Leclair asked of Simone.

“Routine,” Simone replied curtly. “One dead, two disposed of—no alarm raised.”

“Francois and Hugues are taking care of our guests, I assume?”

Simone merely nodded.

“And Tommy?” Leclair inquired, glancing briefly at the boy before redirecting his attention to Simone. “How’d he fare?”

Tommy was startled by the inquiry. He wasn’t sure how to react. He hadn’t anticipated Leclair acknowledging his presence at all, let alone asking after him specifically. Simone glanced at Tommy, her lips pressed tightly together as she quickly assessed him before answering.

“He’s quick,” she began, and Tommy’s eyes widened as he glanced over at her in surprise. “He’s resilient, but most importantly: he’s observant. We might not have stopped the soldier who tried to escape if Tommy hadn’t called it out first.”

Which suddenly made the man’s death Tommy’s responsibility, and all that unexpected praise became instantly burdened by a wave of guilt, despite the fact that Tommy knew Simone had only done what was necessary.
“Good,” Leclair said. And that seemed to be the end of it. No further questions asked. “Alex, Tommy, why don’t the two of you rest up for a bit? I’d like the two of you to help sort through Sevard’s notes after lunch.”

Tommy exchanged a bemused glance with Alex before looking over at Gibson to gauge his reaction. He was staring down at the floor, his expression unreadable. Tommy sensed that Gibson had known that Leclair had wanted him to remain while Alex and Tommy were dismissed like little children off to bed. But truth be told, Tommy was too tired to really care.

“Cheers,” Alex said dryly as he straightened up and headed toward the door. He opened it and motioned for Tommy to go ahead of him. Tommy flushed at the gesture, feeling infantilized in front of Leclair and Gibson and Simone, whose eyes he could feel watching them as they exited the room.

“Well, that was reet weird, wannit?” Alex muttered once the door had been shut behind them. He started stripping off his jacket right there in the corridor, and Tommy wasn’t sure where to look.

“Which part?” Tommy asked.

Alex rolled his eyes. “That shit at the end, sending us away like that.” He slung the dampened jacket over his shoulder and continued down the corridor to the stairs around the corner, Tommy following just behind. “I mean it’s obvious he replaced you with Gibson to keep an eye on us,” he continued as they traipsed up the steps to the attic.

“You don’t know that,” Tommy argued, but it was half-hearted at best.

Alex opened the door to their roost in the attic, but didn’t wait for Tommy this time before walking through and practically throwing himself down on the mess of blankets he’d left as such upon waking. Tommy’s spot, in comparison, looked practically pristine.

“He’s the only reason you’re alive,” Tommy pointed out as he started to undress.

Alex laid flat on his stomach, still dressed in the grey-green trousers of his SS uniform. He turned his head to look over at Tommy with one eye. “You’re the only reason I’m alive,” Alex countered. “You pulled me onto The Mole, not him.”

“I was only down there because of him,” Tommy insisted.

Alex huffed out an indignant sound into his pillow and then reached down to undo his trousers. He shimmied out of them without getting up and threw them carelessly. Tommy watched as they landed almost poetically on Gibson’s pillow and crossed the small space to retrieve them.

“I don’t know why you care so much,” he heard Alex mutter.

Tommy didn’t reply. He didn’t know either.

Alex had fallen asleep before Tommy even laid down next to him, so Tommy took the opportunity to draw closer, resting his head against Alex’s elbow, protruding sharply from under his pillow. He fell asleep listening to the ebb and flow of Alex’s breathing in his ears.

“Tommy?”

He opened his eyes to find Gibson’s face hovering uncomfortably close to his own. Tommy glanced over at Alex to find him still in the same position he’d been in when they laid down, dead asleep.

Tommy sat up and rubbed his eyes. Gibson moved back to give him room, but stayed kneeling
between him and Alex. The expression on his face reminded Tommy of when he’d been a child and
an adult was trying to hide some sort of bad news from him, pretending everything was fine because
they thought he wouldn’t be able to understand or cope.

Some part of him wanted to confront Gibson and demand his honesty. The other bit didn’t want to
jeopardize whatever uneasy peace they’d managed to forge since Tommy’s return to Dunkirk.

The latter won out.

Tommy yawned. “What time’s it?” he asked.

“Lunch time,” Gibson replied. “I thought I’d come wake you both so you could eat.”

Tommy glanced over at Alex once more. “Let him sleep,” he decided. “He won’t mind.”

Gibson’s eyes widened slightly, but he looked more relax. “All right,” he said, standing up and
offering a hand to Tommy, who took it without hesitation.

“So how’d you learn English so well?” Tommy asked as they headed down the stairs together.

“Farrier,” Gibson replied, before adding, “And books. When I was in school my teacher used to tell
me I had an ear for languages, so I guess it was just easier for me.”

“Languages?” Tommy repeated.

Gibson’s hand stuttered on the railing as he stopped mid-step. He glanced back at Tommy, who was
standing right behind him, one hand braced against the opposite wall. “My sister and I went to a
Hebrew school,” he said carefully, “as children.”

“Oh,” Tommy replied. And that was the end of it.

Gibson continued down the stairs after that, speaking again to Tommy as if the previous conversation
hadn’t taken place. “Have you ever had an onion tart?” he asked, glancing back to catch Tommy
shaking his head. “Dominique’s husband is amazing. You’ll love them, I promise.”

Tommy smiled slightly, feeling almost warmed by Gibson’s enthusiasm. It was a side of him Tommy
hadn’t had the chance to see before when they were all struggling to survive out on the beach and in
the water. He could almost imagine what the last year might have been like if Gibson had made it to
the Moonstone with them. Maybe next year would be different.

He stopped himself before that train of thought could go any further. It wouldn’t do to dwell on a
future none of them knew if they’d even have.

The smell of onions and baked bread wafted into Tommy’s mouth before they even reached the
kitchen, leaving his mouth watering when they entered into the midst of a small crowd crammed into
the tiny space, all clamouring to get their hands on the fresh food.

There was a flurry of French all around him and Tommy was relieved when Gibson put a hand on
his arm to keep him in place while he forged ahead to retrieve some food for the two of them.

“Thought we’d eat outside,” Gibson said after coming back with two plates in his hands.

Tommy reached for his and nodded. “Sure,” he agreed, only too happy to let Gibson take the lead.

They slipped out through the back door and into the garden. Tommy watched Gibson’s stride,
noticing how it seemed to be steadier than he remembered, more purposeful. When he looked up
again he saw that they were making a beeline for a little grouping of trees, among which Farrier and Collins were already sat, and Tommy balked somewhat at the prospect of joining them.

Gibson glanced back as if sensing his hesitation. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Tommy lied.

It wasn’t until they got closer that Collins turned to look at them, and Tommy noted that he seemed back to his old self again. He was out of the SS uniform too, dressed simply in a lightweight shirt and workman’s trousers.

The smile on Farrier’s face flickered only momentarily as they approached. “Afternoon,” he said amicably.

Gibson plopped down beside him and looked up expectantly at Tommy, who followed suit after a second’s hesitation. “Afternoon,” Tommy replied tentatively before stuffing half of his tart into his mouth to avoid having to say anything else.

“You get any shut-eye, Gibson?” Farrier asked as he nibbled at his own food.

Collins sat by, picking at his meal with a stone-faced expression.

“I’ll be fine,” Gibson replied dismissively. “You?”

“Nah, we’ve been having too much fun reminiscing, haven’t we, Collins?”

Collins smiled tightly; it didn’t reach his eyes, a pale blue that reminded Tommy of the water in The Channel. “Aye,” he replied.

“You know each other from the RAF?” Tommy queried. The question was innocent enough, but Tommy could plainly see the way all three stiffened slightly in response.

“Yeah, we were part of the same squadron before the evacuation,” Farrier told him. A leaf drifted down as he spoke, landing in Collins’s hair, and Farrier reached to brush it away almost reflexively. “Fortis Team,” he added, jerking his hand back as if just realizing what he’d done. “I took him under my wing so to speak when he joined the RAF.” Farrier grinned at Collins. “Figured he could use all the help he could get.”

“Fuck off,” Collins replied with an eye roll. “Fortis Leader always liked me more than you.”

“Collins was the belle of the ball actually,” Farrier clarified for Tommy and Gibson, “even when he was a new recruit. Could charm the trousers off of any officer, no matter how stodgy.”

“Pity it doesn’t seem to work on Simone,” Tommy said without thinking. The fond smile that had blossomed on Collins’s face while Farrier spoke vanished instantly, and the others just stared blankly. Tommy felt his face growing warm but thought that adding an apology would only make things worse so he said nothing.

“Simone doesn’t like anyone,” Farrier finally replied after a moment, but the tense atmosphere remained. “How do the two of you know each other, if you don’t mind my asking?” He nodded toward Gibson, perhaps hoping he would answer instead of Tommy.

“Oh, well, that is….,” Gibson looked to Tommy instead, floundering. Tommy could understand how he’d have trouble explaining that the first time they’d met, Gibson had been wearing clothes that belonged to the corpse he was burying in the sand.
“We met during the evacuation,” Tommy chimed in. “Us and Alex, we decided to stick together, for survival. Gibson, he—” Tommy looked at him with an encouraging smile. “Well, you helped us out of a jam once or twice, isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” Gibson replied with a weak smile. “I suppose so.”

Collins looked from Gibson to Tommy and then back again. “How heart-warming,” he said flatly.

Farrier made a little noise under his breath and stood quickly before reaching down to help Collins up as well. “We’ll see you inside, eh?” he said, sounding more than a bit flustered. One might have thought that Collins was a demented relative who had made an uncouth comment and had to be ushered out of the public ear. “Hopefully there’s enough for second helpings.”

“Right,” Tommy said at the same time as Gibson replied, “See you round.”

Farrier gave a little wave before marching Collins back to the farmhouse at a pace just slightly too fast to pass for a casual walk. Tommy stared after them with a frown, Collins’s parting comment playing over and over in his head.

Tommy munched his way through the remainder of his tart with a frown, obsessing over the way every interaction he had with Gibson seemed to be fraught with tension, even when Alex was nowhere to be found. It hadn’t ever been like that out on the beach, when the two of them had never exchanged so much as a word, and the only thing either cared about was surviving.

Maybe it was civility that was the problem. Maybe words and emotions and expectations clouded whatever primal connection they’d shared during the evacuation. Tommy almost wished he could go back to that, even knowing the cost.

“You look older than I would have expected,” Gibson said after a minute had passed, finally breaking the silence.

Tommy looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Gibson shrugged. “Alex looks about the same. You seem different. Not as skinny, for one.”

That got a laugh out of Tommy despite himself. “Yeah, I suppose I bulked up a bit while training with Collins.”

Gibson didn’t respond to that but continued to gaze at Tommy almost pensively.

“I apologise,” Gibson said haltingly, “if this seems strange, but—may I hug you again?”

Tommy was surprised by the request. “Sure,” he acquiesced easily, but then froze, unsure if he should stand first or remain sitting.

Gibson scooted over to him before he could make a decision and wrapped his arms around Tommy’s shoulders. Tommy reached up to return the gesture, hyper-conscious of Gibson’s nose pressed against the side of his neck, and the splay of muscles underneath Gibson’s shirt.

It was the first time the two of them had really touched for more than a moment since their reunion on the beach—and now even that felt like a lifetime ago.

Tommy closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, trying to clear out all of the messy thoughts and unnecessary feelings from his mind. But when he opened them again, there was another complication standing right in front of him.
Alex leaned against a nearby tree with a sour look plastered onto his face. “Leclair wants to have another meeting,” he said, even as Tommy was pulling away from Gibson, who turned around to look at Alex in surprise.

Tommy and Gibson both scrambled to their feet, the latter practically jogging past Alex back to the farmhouse. Tommy stared at his retreating form with a mixture of shame and betrayal, but managed to reign in it as he dusted off his trousers before looking back at Alex.

“You get anything to eat?” he asked as they walked back together.

“Don’t bother,” Alex replied coldly. Clearly, Tommy’s concern was no longer welcome.

The others were already waiting in Leclair’s room when Alex and Tommy showed up—Simone included—and Leclair wasted no time, jumping straight into it as soon as the door closed behind them.

“Busy afternoon ahead of us,” Leclair said, “so I hope you all got enough rest and had something to eat.” He looked over at Collins and gave him a scrutinizing look. “You feeling up to running another errand?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” Collins replied. Farrier frowned as if he disagreed, but didn’t say anything to contradict Collins.

“Excellent,” Leclair said. “Then yourself, Farrier, and I will go out and raid the supply caravan for explosives.”

“Wait—” Simone protested. She closed her mouth and then opened it again, as if to continue, before shutting it once more with a scowl.

Leclair gave her a warning stare. “I’ll need you to check on our guests while I’m gone, Simone.” It took Tommy a minute before he realized that Leclair was referring to the prisoners they’d left at the windmill that morning.

“Pourquoi pas?” she replied, letting the irritation in her voice bleed through and prompting Leclair to turn his attention away from her as if she were nothing more than an unruly child throwing a tantrum for attention.

“And us?” Alex cut in, providing the necessary distraction.

“Busywork, I’m afraid,” Leclair said, casting a fraction of a glance in Gibson’s direction as he did so. “I need translations for Seward’s notes, and Mr. Dawson assured me that you had the best grasp of German and French both.”

He was speaking to Alex still, leaving Tommy as the odd man out once again, but this time Tommy was more pre-occupied with staring at Gibson, who was sitting with his arms folded on the edge of Leclair’s bed, staring intently at the older man.

Tommy narrowed his eyes as he examined Gibson, wondering if Alex was really onto something this time, and not just being overly paranoid. There was no doubt Leclair was hiding something, but surely Gibson wouldn’t be keeping the man’s secret if it was something that might get them all killed. Tommy needed to have faith in that much, at least.

“Collins?” Alex asked sharply, looking to their own commanding officer for guidance.
Collins just shrugged. “Leclair’s right,” he said. “It’s important we have whatever information is in those notes before we make our move.”

Alex didn’t look happy about the answer, but it seemed he was willing to accept it coming from Collins at least. He settled back into the chair at Leclair’s desk with his arms folded and had a sulk while the rest of them bustled about, getting ready to leave.

Tommy watched as Collins crossed the room to tousle Alex’s hair with a smile, like they were brothers, before following Farrier out. No such gesture was made toward Tommy.

He looked up and caught Gibson staring at him, and wondered if he’d noticed Collins’s preferential treatment.

“So,” Tommy said when Alex didn’t so much as move after the others had left, “you gonna sit there and sulk all night or are we gonna get on with it?” He’d briefly considered a more delicate approach, but decided that Alex had tried his patience enough already and didn’t deserve it.

“Fine,” Alex snapped, his eyes shooting up to meet Tommy’s as he stood. He turned to the stack of papers sitting on Leclair’s desk and shuffled through the documents quickly, tossing them into various piles. “Here’s what’s in German, French, and whatever bollocks this is,” he said, pointing to the last pile with a frown. The bollocks in question was a bunch of writing that might as well have been Egyptian hieroglyphics for all Tommy knew.

Gibson squinted at the cryptic letters. “I’ve seen that before,” he said slowly.

“Great,” Alex said. “Have at it, mate.”

Gibson frowned but accepted the stack of papers and retreated to his seat on the bed. He laid out the notes on the mattress to his left and then reached over to grab a book from the nightstand beside the bed.

Tommy walked over to Leclair’s desk and retrieved some blank sheets of paper and two pencils from the supplies that had been left out. He distributed half to Gibson, who accepted it with a smile and a polite “Thank you” and then went over to the trunk at the foot of the bed to sit and work. Tommy didn’t bother to even look at Alex for fear that if he said or did anything, it would just be an excuse for them to have a row, and Tommy wasn’t keen on conflict.

They worked quietly with only the sound of the clock on the wall slowly ticking to remind them of the passage of time. Tommy chewed pensively on the end of his pen as he tried to puzzle out some of the more complex sentence structures in the letter he was translating from German to English, which so far had just been an account of the sorry state of accommodations Madame Sevard had been treated to since she’d arrived in Dunkirk.

Tommy could tell by the more frequent scratching of Alex and Gibson’s pens that they were making quite a bit more progress than he was.

Some incalculable amount of time later, Alex sighed. “I can’t draw worth a damn,” he muttered. Gibson made an inquisitive noise.

“Well, we should send copies of these tank diagrams back to Peter,” Alex clarified. “I expect your Supreme Leader Leclair will want to keep the originals.” Alex glanced over at Tommy and frowned. “Collins can take over when he gets back I suppose.”

“Collins draws?” Tommy asked, surprised to learn that now, when he’d known the other man for a
year and it had never come up.

“Well,” Alex amended, “he used to.”

Gibson coughed lightly, drawing Tommy’s attention back to him. “Aimee can do it,” he offered. “She’s upstairs in the girls’ room. She’d be happy to help.”

Alex hummed under his breath and then shrugged, standing up and gathering the necessary documents into his arms. “Which room?” he asked, already headed for the door.

“Second on the left,” Gibson told him.

The door shut without another reply. Tommy sighed, feeling like a gust of fresh air had just filled the room without Alex’s omnipresent bad mood hanging over all of them, but when he looked over at Gibson again, he found that the French man was already back to translating.

Tommy sighed again and squinted at the clock. It’d been an hour or so, and he was only a third of the way through the first letter.

But before he could go back to staring at Madame Sevard’s penmanship until his eyes bled, the door opened again.

Tommy glanced up, expecting to see Alex standing in the doorway. It was Simone, looking more frantic and frazzled than he’d ever seen her.

“One of you needs to come with me now,” she said, sounding out of breath.

“I can go,” Gibson said, already starting to get up.

“No, I’ll do it,” Tommy countered hastily, causing both Gibson and Simone’s heads to spin round to look at him with twin expressions of disbelief. “I wasn’t much use at this anyway,” he added, gesturing vaguely to the half-arsed scribbles in front of him.

“Hurry,” Simone urged as she turned away.

Tommy jogged out of the room and then had to almost sprint to keep up with her as Simone slipped out the backdoor of the farmhouse and started to cut across the field.

“Where are we going?” he called out to her.

“The Tower,” she replied without turning her head. “The prisoners we picked up this morning escape,” she told him. “We need to find them.”

Tommy felt the blood drain from his face, wondering what he’d gotten himself into. Surely if it was that dire, they should have had Alex and Gibson come along too? But no, he supposed, thinking it over more. If the escaped prisoners somehow made their way to the farmhouse, they’d need somebody there to protect it.

“What happens when we find them?” Tommy said between gasping breaths, trying desperately to keep up with Simone. He could out sprint Collins and Alex easily, but endurance had never been his strong suit.

“You ever killed a man before?” Simone asked.

Tommy paused for a moment before answering honestly. “No.”
“Think you can manage it?” She glanced briefly back at him as they slipped into the trees and continued forward.

Tommy put up a hand to shield his face from the stray leaves and branches whipping past them as they ran. “If it comes to that,” he replied, hoping she’d believe him.

Simone just laughed.

It was a few more minutes before they reached the windmill, which Simone had referred to as ‘The Tower’, and by the time they arrived, Tommy had a stitch in his side that rivalled the pain of a knife wound. Not that he’d had much experience with that, of course.

The Tower was the same as it had been earlier, the area surrounding it undisturbed, quiet. Tommy wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. A pile of soot, perhaps. When Tommy followed Simone up the ladder however, he was greeted with a very different sight inside.

One of the men from earlier was crouched in a corner with one knee up, the other extended flat along the ground in such a way that Tommy could plainly tell that his kneecap was in the wrong place. Tommy had to quell a sudden pang of nausea and focused on the man’s face instead of his leg. He looked pale, his mouth tight like he was trying to keep from screaming, and there was a trickle of blood at his hairline.

Simone rushed over to him immediately and began speaking in rapid French. His answers, in comparison, sounded slow and hazy, like he was drunk—though Tommy figured that was probably a result of his head injury.

“What happened to him?” Tommy asked as he carefully navigated his way through the mess of broken glass and scattered supplies littering the cramped space.

“Francois went out to take a piss,” Simone answered without looking at him. She leaned the other man forward to get a better look at the wound on the back of his head and frowned slightly upon examining it. “The Germans ambushed Hugues, dislocated his knee so he couldn’t follow, and escaped. We need to find them.”

Hugues grabbed for Simone as she started to stand up and said something to her again. All Tommy caught was the name ‘Francois’ and the flash of annoyance that crossed Simone’s face in response.

She gave Hugues a hasty response and turned to Tommy, gesturing for him to go ahead of her. He quickly scrambled down the ladder and waited at the bottom, scanning the area around them for any sign of the soldiers, more than half-hoping he wouldn’t find any.

“Which way?” he asked Simone after she’d leapt down from the third rung of the latter, apparently too impatient to climb the last few feet.

She pointed out into the trees. “Hugues saw Francois go that way, east, so we’ll follow his trail and keep an eye out.”

“What exactly are we hoping to find?” Tommy inquired as they set off in the direction Simone had demonstrated.

“Ideally?” she replied. “Francois alive with two dead SS.” She shook her head. “He wasn’t meant to go after them alone.”

The trail Francois had left was so obvious that even Tommy, who had little experience tracking anything at all, could have followed it without Simone’s help. There were snapped branches,
trampled weeds—Tommy felt as if they were following a rampaging elephant into the heart of the jungle.

And then they reached the river, and the trail stopped there, as if Francois had just vanished. Simone examined the shoreline with a frown, kicking over a stray rock with her foot in frustration.

“Maybe we should split up?” Tommy suggested. It wasn’t something he particularly wanted to do but he couldn’t see any other recourse for finding their quarry when all they knew is that they were heading east, while the river they’d used to cover their tracks ran north to south.

“And what then?” Simone retorted. “Whichever of us finds them gets killed or captured? We have no way to signal each other,” she pointed out.

Tommy didn’t have a good response for that. But before he could agree with her, there was a loud gunshot in the distance. Both Tommy and Simone’s heads whipped around in its direction: north.

They exchanged barely a second’s glance before heading downriver in the direction the sound had come from. Less than five minutes later, Tommy spotted something up ahead along the bank of the river and let out a quite yelp of alarm.

Simone rushed past him and ran over to the huddled figure, crouching down next to it with no apparent fear or hesitation.

Tommy followed more tentatively, keeping his head on a swivel as he approached just in case the escaped prisoners they were looking for had laid some kind of ambush for them. There seemed to be nothing. Just the sounds of frogs croaking and the water trickling along the shallow riverbed, punctuated by the ragged breathing of the man lying in the mud under Simone.

As Tommy drew closer he could see that the man—Francois, he assumed—was clutching his shoulder, under which streams of blood were soaking into the jacket he wore. Tommy watched as Simone tugged Francois’s hand away from the wound, despite his laboured protests, and moved aside his clothing to get a better look at the injury.

It was a clean shot, Tommy noted. There wasn’t any sign of arterial bleeding at least, but that didn’t mean Francois wasn’t still in danger of succumbing to blood loss or shock if they left him there.

“I’ll go ahead,” Tommy volunteered.

Simone glanced up at him, looking surprised. But she didn’t argue. “I’ll catch up with you once I get him stabilised,” she said with a nod. She reached into the back of her trousers, procuring a pistol and holding it out to Tommy. “If it’s necessary,” she said.

Tommy set off like a shot, feeling like his head had been filled with a swarm of bees from the adrenaline suddenly coursing through his body. He stayed within the trees as he followed the river, not wanting to be spotted first. The only way he’d get through this ordeal alive is if he remained hidden. By all accounts, surprise would be his only advantage.

There was another gunshot.

Tommy dropped to the forest floor reflexively, the shot so close and so loud that his body had confused it for the sound of an explosion and responded in kind. Tentatively, he raised his head and looked around, finally spotting a small speck of red through the leaves ahead.

He stayed prone, crawling forward until he could make out the sound of voices. He took cover behind the nearest tree and then leaned around it to try and assess the scene ahead.
It looked like there was a road a few dozen meters ahead, cutting through the trees. Tommy could just make out the shape of a vehicle, and then its lights suddenly turned on, illuminating a large swath of forest in front of it.

In the bright headlights, Tommy could now see a man dressed in SS grey-green on his knees, his hands held above his head in surrender. Close to him was another man in matching colours, but this one was lying sprawled out in the dirt with a hole in his head.

Unsure whether he should be more revolted or relieved, Tommy scooted closer, trying to figure out if the vehicle ahead belonged to the Free French. Maybe it was Leclair, he thought hopefully—only to have that thought cut short as another man hopped out of the front and stepped into view, his Nazi armband on full display as he approached the SS man still kneeling in surrender.

The man in the Wehrmacht uniform turned and yelled something back to his comrades still in the vehicle. The lorry rumbled and inched forward in response, until the Wehrmacht man had all but disappeared from view.

“Did you shoot him?”

The whisper in his ear nearly caused Tommy to let out a shriek in surprise that would have alerted every single German soldier to their position, but it died in his throat as he spun around and saw Simone crouched next to him. He hadn’t even heard her come up.

Tommy shook his head and pointed to the Wehrmacht patrol, who were now getting out of the lorry to retrieve the SS man they’d mistakenly shot.

Simone frowned and stared intently at the men, who were speaking loud enough that Tommy could make out some of the words.

“They’re looking for someone?” Tommy whispered as the lorry, loaded up now with their added cargo in the form of the two SS soldiers, began to drive down the road away from them.

“Probably Leclair and the others,” Simone confirmed. She looked worried. “We need to get back,” she said, standing up again once the German patrol had disappeared into the trees.

They made their way through the woods back to Francois, who looked significantly worse despite the tourniquet Simone had applied to slow the bleeding. She spared only a moment to help Francois up off the ground and then passed him off to Tommy, who teetered slightly under the weight of the larger man leaning into him.

“Get him back to the Château,” Simone instructed Tommy. “If Leclair’s back by the time you get there, have Farrier head to the Tower to help me with Hugues.”

“What about Gibson?” Tommy asked before she had a chance to leave. “He knows where the Tower is too, right?”

“Gibson’s not to go out on his own,” Simone replied with a pinched expression. “Now go,” she urged.

Tommy and Francois staggered forward as Simone cut right into the trees. Tommy wasn’t familiar with the area and everything looked more or less the same, but he’d always had a knack for finding his way and it wasn’t long before they emerged into the large clearing surrounding the farmhouse that the Free French referred to as the Château.

The two stumbled inside to find Dominique and her husband in the middle of preparing dinner. She
shrieked at the sight of Francois’s bloodless face, and Jean-Marie’s knife dropped to the floor with a clatter.

“Where’s Simone?” Dominique demanded as she hurried to Tommy’s side to help Francois onto the table.

“Hugues is still at the Tower,” Tommy explained breathlessly, watching as Dominique accepted a pair of scissors supplied by Jean-Marie and began cutting away Francois’s jacket with calm efficiency. “They were watching two Germans we captured this morning, and they escaped.”

“Merde!” Francois hissed as Dominique probed at the entry-wound in his shoulder with her fingers.

“Eau chaude, Jean-Marie,” Dominique said without turning her head, “s’il vous plait.”

Jean-Marie grabbed a pot and darted out the back door.

“How can I help?” Tommy questioned, wondering if he should go out and look for Simone and Hugues.

Dominique looked back at Tommy, her face almost as pale as Francois’s. “Aimee’s room is the second on the left,” she said. “I need you to fetch her quickly.”

Tommy nodded and headed for the stairs, only remembering that Alex and Gibson were still hard at work on translating when he caught the faint sound of music emanating from Leclair’s room. He wondered if he should go get them as well, but just as soon realized that they probably wouldn’t be much help.

Out of habit, Tommy knocked on Aimee’s door when he reached her room, even though time was of the essence. Then he felt doubly foolish once he remembered that when Gibson had told him about the Château’s household, he’d specifically mentioned that Aimee was deaf.

“Fuck,” Tommy muttered as he wrenched open the door, which was slightly off-kilter and barely fit in the frame.

Aimee was sitting at the desk between the two beds, one of which Tommy assumed belonged to Simone. She had her back turned and had a pencil in her hand, scribbling away at something Tommy couldn’t make out until he was right behind her.

His heart skipped a beat when he realized it was a sketch of Gibson, every angle of his face rendered immaculately in graphite. But this was an image of him that Tommy had never truly seen, his eyes wrinkled in laughter, his torso bare. She’d taken the time to detail a scar on his hip, and Tommy found himself wondering if Gibson had possessed it when they’d first met.

Tommy’s hand was an inch from Aimee’s shoulder when she whirled around to face him, her face beet-red. She hastily shoved her drawing into a folio lying on the desk and blinked at Tommy questioningly.

“Um, ah, Dominique needs you downstairs,” Tommy said slowly, unsure of how to explain the situation, or even communicate it to her. He didn’t even know if she could read lips.

Aimee frowned at him, and Tommy motioned for her to follow him as he walked toward the door. She followed, albeit hesitantly, and Tommy breathed a sigh of relief, picking up the pace once they reached the stairs.

Once they reached the kitchen and she spotted Francois, Aimee pushed past Tommy to help
Dominique, who was still barking orders at her husband. She nodded at Tommy as he entered and pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear with a blood-stained hand.

“Help me hold him down,” she directed.

Tommy approached Francois tentatively, unsure of where to put his hands. He settled for the right elbow and hip, hoping it would suffice.

Dominique inhaled deeply and then inserted a pair of metal forceps into the wound.

Francois thrashed like a hooked fish, and even the combined efforts of Tommy, Jean-Marie, and Aimee weren’t enough to keep him still.

Dominique let out a muffled yell and yanked the forceps back, wiping her eyes as Francois’s body relaxed under Tommy’s hands. “I need Simone,” she said desperately. “I can’t cut him open myself, I don’t know enough to avoid the arteries. She’s the only one with any triage experience.”

“Okay,” Tommy said. He let go of Francois and headed for the door, suddenly aware of Simone’s pistol again, still tucked into his coat. He took a deep gulp of the evening air and hoped to God that she hadn’t needed it.

And as if God was listening, Tommy had barely taken three steps out the door before spotting two silhouettes at the other end of the field, hobbling through the grass at a snail’s pace. He sprinted over to them, finding Simone looking even more drained than the man she was carrying, nearly twice her size.

Tommy ducked under Hugues’s other shoulder to relieve the weight and gestured for her to go ahead of them. “Dominique needs you,” he gasped, still winded from the run and with no time to catch his breath.

Simone nodded and ran ahead, quickly disappearing into the dark with the setting sun at their backs.

Hugues grunted at the shift in weight but said nothing as they made their way across the field as a three-legged entity, sweat pouring off both of them like rain by the time they reached the Château.

They were greeted with a bloodcurdling scream as Tommy kicked open the door from his foot. He froze in the doorway, paralyzed by the sight of Simone with a bloodied scalpel in one hand, the other holding the pair of forceps clamped around the mangled remains of a bullet.

Francois’s scream trailed off into a yelp as Aimee applied pressure to the fresh incision, and then there was a brief moment in which the entire house was utterly silent, with the exception of a soft melody still emanating from Leclair’s bedroom.

The door suddenly flew open with a bang and Alex and Gibson tumbled out practically tripping over each other as they skidded to the end of the corridor to find themselves face to face with Tommy, still barely managing to hold Hugues upright.

“Some help?” Tommy managed, noting as the two moved to either side of Hugues that both looked to be in similar states of disarray, both their clothes and hair looking distinctly disheveled.

Wankers, Tommy thought as he stifled a scowl. He’d been running around the French countryside with Simone trying not to get himself killed and all the while Alex and Gibson had been, what—napping?

Tommy shook his head and sighed as the two of them helped Hugues over onto the couch. He
would have guessed it of Alex, of course, but he’d had a little more faith in Gibson.

Well, on the bright side—at least they hadn’t killed each other yet.
II. Alex

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait between updates again! I promise I'm not giving up on this fic & I have it more or less planned out to the very end, so please bear with me!

This chapter is Alex's POV & I think it's one many of you will like very much. *wink*

Hope you enjoy!

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Alex woke to the sun shining in his eyes and a pounding rhythm against the inside of his skull. He hissed and pulled the covers over his head, realizing a few seconds later that the attic was dead quiet, lacking the slightly raspy sound of Tommy’s breathing that had used to annoy him before months of sharing a bedroom had acclimatized him to the noise.

He peeked out from under the quilt. Sure enough, the space next to him was vacant, only the imprint in the bedding to mark that Tommy had ever been there.

Alex suddenly felt a burning behind his eyes. He shut them tightly, attributing the unexpected sting of tears to the pounding headache that only seemed to be worsening as he laid there.

He hadn’t had a single drink since before they’d arrived in Dunkirk, Alex suddenly realized. No wonder he felt like shit.

Alex rolled over to look at Collins’s pack, remembering how the other man’s breath had smelt faintly of brandy when Alex had woken him that morning. A bit to take the edge off couldn’t hurt, he rationalized.

Alex crawled through the mess of blankets and pillows over to where Collins’s things were sitting neatly at the foot of his threadbare mattress. His hands were trembling as he fumbled with the buckle. He finally got the damn thing open after a brief struggle and looked inside to find nothing but a spare kit, a pack of fags, and a worn leather journal.

Alex reached for the journal resting on top of the folded-up clothing despite it not being what he’d been looking for in the slightest. He hesitated before opening it, wondering if it was Collins’s diary or something, though he didn’t really seem like the sort to keep something like that lying around.

Flipping it open to the first page, Alex was surprised to find not words but pictures inside. Sketches, of planes mostly, at least for the first dozen or so pages, and then it turned to portraits instead. Alex skimmed through the faces, some more detailed than others, and then stopped short about halfway through the journal.

He finally recognized the face staring back at him. Alex looked down in surprise at the drawing of Farrier’s face in profile and examined it for a few seconds before turning to the next page. There was another sketch of Farrier, this one taking up practically the entire page and looking straight-on. The lips were smudged, like someone had carelessly rubbed their fingers over the charcoal before setting
On the next page was another, and on the next, another. Alex flipped rapidly through the journal, finding only countless sketches of Farrier in different poses, expressions, with sometimes just a hand or nose rendered in meticulous detail between. And then suddenly they stopped.

The final pages of the journal were blank.

Alex flipped back to the last sketch, about two-thirds of the way in. It was messier than most of the others he’d seen, sharp lines and rough curves just barely coalescing into the shape of a man with his eyes closed, recognizable as Farrier only by the strongest of his features. Alex looked at the date scribbled in cramped handwriting in the righthand corner.

4th of June 1940. The day of the evacuation.

Alex felt an unexpected coldness fill his gut. He stared at the picture a moment longer and then hastily stuffed it back into the pack, hoping Collins wouldn’t notice later if it seemed out of place. He closed his eyes and flopped down onto Collins’s mattress then, with every intention of going back to sleep until his headache resolved itself, only to have the back of his skull collide with something solid underneath Collins’s pillow.

Alex jerked upright, clutching his head—which was now radiating red hot bolts of pain all the way down to his spine—and wrenched the pillow away to find a glass bottle underneath. For a second, he almost forgot the headache.

Alex opened the bottle without thinking and gulped down a few swallows of the brandy, which was the best he’d had since the first time he’d raided his father’s liquor cabinet. He didn’t register what he’d done until the warmth hit his stomach. Alex pulled the bottle away from his mouth, coughing.

Just enough to take the edge off, he reminded himself as he closed the bottle and tucked it back underneath Collins’s pillow where he’d found it. Alex licked his lips, trying to rid himself of the aftertaste.

It wasn’t long before he felt the heat in his gut travel to his head. Alex breathed out a quiet sigh of relief and finally stood up, walking back over to his own pack to change into something presentable before he headed downstairs.

Even after the brandy had taken effect, the smell wafting up the stairs from the kitchen made Alex slightly queasy. He held his breath and then let it out all at once when he walked into the kitchen to find it packed full of people, but with Tommy nowhere in sight.

“Christ alive,” Alex muttered under his breath, already starting to back out of the room with every intention of returning to the attic and going back to his nap.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump in surprise. Alex spun around to find Collins reaching out to him from the darkened corridor that led to Leclair’s bedroom, looking more like a spectre hiding in the shadows than a man.

Collins gestured for Alex to come closer, which he did, after a moment’s hesitation.

“We need to talk,” Collins said quietly, once they were far enough into the cramped passageway that they were comfortably obscured from the others’ view.

“Okay,” Alex said slowly, wondering if Collins was finally going to address the elephant in the room: namely, whatever the hell was going on between Gibson and Leclair.
“Are you drinking again?”

“What?” Alex blinked rapidly and took an automatic step back, wondering if the stench of brandy was really that obvious.

The hand on his forehead was unexpected, and for a second, Alex forgot where he was. “I just don’t want you keeling over on me cause you’ve gone cold turkey,” Collins said.

“I’ll manage,” Alex replied, rolling his eyes. Even knowing that Collins wouldn’t judge him for it—and was a thief himself, more or less—Alex didn’t want to admit to having dipped into the bottle of brandy hidden under Collins’s pillow. “Occupation or not, they’re still French. I’ll have a glass of wine with dinner if that’s what it takes to stop you fretting over me.”

“Well, just try to moderate,” Collins said, his hand still pressed to the side of Alex’s face where it had come to rest after sliding down from his forehead.

The touch stirred up something uncomfortable in Alex’s stomach and he quickly pulled away.

Collins frowned, his hand slowly drifting back down to his side. “What’s the matter with you, then?”

Alex contemplated giving an excuse, telling him it was nothing, but the genuine concern in Collins’s voice stopped him. “Just…feel out of sorts, I guess.”

“What d’you mean?”

Alex scoffed. “It’s nothing,” he grumbled. He regretted not saying so earlier, because now he just felt foolish for calling attention to feelings he’d rather not give a name to.

Alex turned to leave but Collins grabbed his arm, stopping him. “No secrets, aye?” he said.

It was a hollow invitation, particularly now that Collins’s secrets had all but risen from the grave, but Alex felt something in him give. The words came spilling out, without restraint. “I can’t stand it here,” he confessed. “I can’t stand being alone. You have Farrier, Tommy has fucking Gibson now, and I have no one.”

Being in the city earlier had only reminded him of how his entire regiment had been slaughtered in the streets a year ago while Alex hid. The water in the canal as they swam to freedom prompting memories of sinking ships and bodies on fire. And Collins’s hand around his wrist, the carefully sympathetic lilt to his voice, like an echo of Alex’s past, when he’d received a letter from Crosby Hall written in Mrs. Wentworth’s spidery script to inform him that his mother had passed in her sleep.

And still the loneliness he felt now surpassed all of that.

Collins stared at him for so long that Alex couldn’t help but look away. He wasn’t expecting the delicate touch of Collins’s warm hands on his face again, this time one on either cheek, pulling his gaze back to meet the other man’s clear blue eyes. “You’ll always have me. I promise.”

The door to Leclair’s bedroom suddenly opened, startling the two of them apart. Alex leaned up against the wall and focused on regulating his breathing as Leclair emerged and glanced between Alex and Collins with narrowed eyes.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Leclair said dryly.

“No bother,” Collins replied. “We were just having a chat.”
“Then I hope you won’t mind if we move that chat to my chambers,” Leclair said, utterly expressionless.

Alex couldn’t tell if the way he’d phrased the request was meant to be a joke.

“If you wouldn’t mind getting the others?” Leclair continued. “Simone’s already waiting inside.”

Alex wasn’t expecting it when Collins turned to him, saying, “Alex can go fetch them. I’d like a word with you in the meantime.”

Alex frowned. “I don’t even know where they are,” he protested, fully aware as he did so that it had come out like the whining of a petulant child who didn’t want to do his chores.

“Tommy and Gibson are just outside,” Collins said in a slightly strained voice.

Alex lingered a second longer, wishing that he had any confidence Collins would share the details of his discussion with Leclair later. No secrets, eh? The journal in Collins’s pack had erased all faith in that statement, beyond even the damage that had been done by Farrier.

And speak of the devil.

Farrier was standing inside the kitchen nearest to the corridor talking with Jean-Marie when Alex emerged. Alex grimaced and coughed lightly to get his attention.

“Leclair wants another meeting,” he said in a low voice.

Farrier nodded and excused himself, quickly shoving the rest of the pastry he’d been holding into his mouth.

Alex stepped to the side to stop him from entering the corridor. “You might want to give them a minute,” he warned. “Collins wanted a private conversation, I suppose.”

“With Simone there?” Farrier said incredulously.

Alex shrugged. He wasn’t going to pretend he understood Collins’s motivations.

Farrier shook his head in exasperation. “Right, well, I’ll keep an ear out in case someone decides to throw a punch.”

Alex nodded and moved aside so Farrier could get by him, intending to head out the back door without another word said about the matter.

But Farrier put a hand on Alex’s shoulder to stop him as he passed. Alex glanced up at him with a scowl, not bothering to hide his irritation at the unsolicited contact.

“Just wanted to thank you for looking out for Collins earlier,” Farrier said earnestly before letting go.

“I certainly didn’t do it for you,” Alex said nastily, feeling an unexpected rush of satisfaction when Farrier’s face darkened in response. Alex didn’t give him a chance to properly respond before shoving past him and slipping out the back door, ignoring the crowd of strangers happily chatting over their afternoon meal.

If he’d expected any relief from the stifling cheerfulness when he walked outside, he was wrong.

Tommy and Gibson were out underneath the nearby fruit trees, looking like something out of a classical painting—one Alex couldn’t fit himself into.
Alex marched toward the picturesque scene with every intention of remaining calm and composed as he delivered his message. He stopped short when Tommy and Gibson suddenly embraced and put a hand up to brace himself against one of the tree trunks as he tried to squash down the blinding hot rage surging up inside his chest.

Alex wasn’t entirely ignorant. He’d realized early on after seeing some of the weaker boys at school get pushed around amidst taunts of ‘fairy’ and ‘poof’ that he should keep certain things to himself. But that didn’t mean he was unaware of them. And jealousy was no stranger to him, not in the slightest.

But Tommy just didn’t make sense.

Peter? Alex could easily wrap his head around it—Peter was practically pretty enough to be a girl anyway. Collins? Alex had already looked up to him; it was only natural if those feelings of admiration turned into something else.

But Tommy? A too-skinny London runaway with funny teeth and a nose he hadn’t quite grown into yet? It didn’t make a damn lick of sense.

And still, none of Alex’s rationalizing seemed to make an ounce of difference to the thing rattling around inside his ribcage as he stared at Tommy with his chin resting on Gibson’s shoulder, looking more at ease than Alex had ever seen him, even on their laziest of days back in Weymouth.

Then Tommy’s eyes flew open and Alex met his gaze head-on, wishing his own discomfort wasn’t so plain to read in his expression. “Leclair wants to have another meeting,” he said flatly as Tommy and Gibson separated.

They both hastily climbed to their feet, Tommy red-faced while Gibson’s expression remained stoic and unchanged as he walked quickly toward the farmhouse, leaving Tommy behind.

Alex waited for Tommy to wipe the grass and dirt off his trousers before heading back, matching his stride to Tommy’s as they walked side-by-side.

“You get anything to eat?” Tommy asked.

“Don’t bother,” Alex replied automatically, not wanting to deal with Tommy’s invariable need to play nursemaid on top of everything else.

Alex was hyperaware of the way that everyone in the kitchen glanced at the two of them as they walked back into the farmhouse before going back to their conversations. Alex ignored them and continued on to Leclair’s room at the end of the corridor, not bothering to knock before opening the door to find everyone else stood or sat in various positions throughout the room.

Alex looked over at Collins as he entered, noting that the man looked tense—but that didn’t mean he hadn’t gotten what he’d wanted out of his conversation with Leclair, whatever that might have been.

“Busy afternoon ahead of us,” Leclair said without even giving Alex and Tommy time to sit down, “so I hope you all got enough rest and had something to eat.”

Alex caught the look Leclair gave Collins as he settled in at the desk against the far wall, far enough from the rest that he could watch any of them without it being blatantly obvious that he was doing so.

“You feeling up to running another errand?” Leclair asked.

“Yes, of course,” Collins replied.
Alex continued staring at Collins even as Leclair continued, but the pilot’s expression remained unchanged.

“Excellent,” Leclair said. “Then yourself, Farrier, and I will go out and raid the supply caravan for explosives.”

Alex glanced back at Leclair in surprise even as a sharp “Wait” left Simone’s mouth. Leclair stared at her for a moment but she didn’t say anything else.

“I’ll need you to check on our guests while I’m gone, Simone.”

Alex realized that Leclair must have been referring to the SS soldiers who had been intended to guard Madame Sevard before Alex, Collins, and Gibson had taken their places. Simone and the others must have stashed them away somewhere before meeting them back at the Mole, then. Which meant that the Resistance had a possible second base of operations.

Alex wondered if Collins knew that, or had just realized it as well. He wondered if Tommy had seen it that morning, if he remembered where it was.

“Pourquoi pas?” Simone said, but Leclair looked away from her without responding.

“And us?” Alex finally chimed in, wondering what his intended role was in this ‘busy afternoon’ as Leclair had put it.

“Busywork, I’m afraid,” Leclair replied. His eyes drifted to Gibson for half a second, but it was long enough that Alex noticed the look. “I need translations for Sevard’s notes, and Mr. Dawson assured me that you had the best grasp of German and French both.”

Alex resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He wasn’t sure if Leclair expected him to be flattered by the comment, but frankly there wasn’t a damn thing the other man could have said that would have made him feel better about spending the next few hours cooped up with Tommy and Gibson reading, like they were all schoolmates studying for an exam together.

He glanced over at Collins again, who was studying the floor with a strained look on his face. “Collins?” Alex prompted, hoping for some means of escaping his fate.

Collins glanced up at him momentarily and then shrugged. “Leclair’s right,” he said, dashing any hopes that Alex might have had of rescue. “It’s important we have whatever information is in those notes before we make our move.”

Alex was now convinced that whatever conversation had occurred between Collins and Leclair preceding the meeting was actually just a means of brainwashing Collins, whose reply couldn’t have sounded more rehearsed if he’d been reading it off a piece of paper in front of him.

But Alex wasn’t going to argue if Collins wasn’t willing to join him in the fight. He slumped down into the chair at Leclair’s desk with his arms folded, watching as the others (Gibson and Tommy excluded) prepared to leave the farmhouse.

Alex was surprised when Collins wandered over to him before following the others out of the room, stopping long enough to tousle Alex’s hair with a reassuring smile, the barest reminder of the conversation they’d had earlier out in the corridor.

Alex couldn’t muster up the energy to return the smile. He stared stone-faced as Collins walked out of the room and then continued staring at the door even after Collins had closed it behind him.
“So,” Tommy said, interrupting Alex’s almost trancelike reverie, “you gonna sit there and sulk all night or are we gonna get on with it?”

Alex was surprised at the steely edge in Tommy’s voice. “Fine,” Alex snapped.

He stood, meeting Tommy’s gaze head on with a scowl before turning to go through the notes and diagrams he’d lifted from Madame Sevard’s office.

Alex began to sort through them, trying to make sense of the chaos and create a system the three of them could work with. Diagrams were the first to go; they’d figure out what to do about those later. The first dozen or so letters were easily partitioned into two separate stacks for French and German.

And then Alex found himself confronted with a page full of writing in a language he didn’t remotely recognize, though some of the scribbles looked like they might have been bastardized Roman characters. Maybe. If Sevard had encoded anything important, they were fucked.

“Here’s what’s in German, French, and whatever bollocks this is,” Alex announced once he’d whittled everything down into four orderly stacks, only two of which they actually had the means to do anything about.

Gibson stood suddenly, craning his head to get a better look at the piece of paper resting on top of the last pile, which was also—thankfully—the smallest of the lot. “I’ve seen that before,” he said.

“Great,” Alex replied, trying not to let his surprise show through. He didn’t want Gibson to have the satisfaction. Alex wasn’t convinced Gibson would actually have any luck decoding them anyway, but that wasn’t his problem. “Have at it, mate.”

Alex got to work on translating the French correspondence right away, ignoring the other two as they retrieved the necessary supplies before settling down to work on their own portions of the task laid out for them.

Frankly, Alex hadn’t expected Madame Sevard’s personal effects to be such a bore.

She was more verbose than necessary in the first letter, dated several months earlier, and addressed simply to ‘J’, no given or surname, with an address in Vichy. But for some reason, she hadn’t actually sent the letter.

Apart from that, the only peculiar thing about the letter was the fact that it read more like a schoolgirl’s diary than a piece of correspondence, as if she had written it with no intention of it ever being delivered to the addressee.

The second letter started off the same, and then Alex read the first few lines on the back of the page, and felt his heart jump up into his throat.

“Do you remember when Maman used to sing us ‘Au claire de la lune’?” it read. “Sometimes when I can’t sleep, I still sing it to myself.”

It was as if the words had conjured a door in Alex’s mind, like an unwitting spell. He could hear his own mother’s voice, clear as day, singing to him before it was joined by another—this one lower, deeper, belonging to a man whose face was nothing more than shadow and fog in the deepest recesses of Alex’s memories. Memories that had already been shifted and disturbed simply by Leclair’s lingering presence, like a revenant.

He shoved the letter away with a sharp inhalation and then glanced around himself to see if either Tommy or Gibson had noticed his brief retreat into reminiscence. Both remained hunched over their
own translation work, seemingly oblivious to everything else.

Alex licked his lips, which suddenly felt uncomfortably dry, and reached for the letter once more. His fingers inches away, he suddenly froze, and reached instead for one of the diagrams he’d set aside earlier.

It was a complex sketch of various mechanical parts that Alex couldn’t make heads or tails of, but the prospect of trying to copy it now seemed more palatable than reading through Seward’s unsent letters to J, whoever they were. Besides, he reasoned, surely it couldn’t be that difficult.

Several crumpled pieces of paper with failed attempts at even tracing the linework in the diagram proved Alex sorely wrong. He huffed out a sigh of frustration and pushed away the original sketch, forced to admit defeat.

“I can’t draw worth a damn,” he said under his breath, surprised when Gibson hummed questioningly in response.

Alex glanced over his shoulder to find Gibson staring back at him, wide-eyed and expectant.

“Well, we should send copies of these tank diagrams back to Peter,” Alex continued. “I expect your Supreme Leader Leclair will want to keep the originals.” Alex looked over at Tommy, mainly to avoid meeting Gibson’s eyes for longer than he had to, and contemplated their options for a moment. Then remembered the journal he’d found in Collins’s things earlier that afternoon. “Collins can take over when he gets back I suppose.”

Tommy looked surprised. “Collins draws?”

Apparently Collins hadn’t revealed his hobby to Tommy either. Alex felt somewhat vindicated by that.

“Well,” Alex replied, thinking of the dates in the journal, “he used to.”

Gibson emitted a quiet cough, and Alex turned his head automatically. “Aimee can do it,” Gibson said, looking between Alex and Tommy as he spoke. “She’s upstairs in the girls’ room. She’d be happy to help.”

Alex hummed quietly to himself in response and then shrugged. He grabbed the diagrams as he stood, figuring running the errand would at least give him a chance to clear his head before he went back to translating whatever useless fodder was still waiting to be uncovered in Seward’s letters.

“Which room?” he asked, remembering just before he reached the door.

“Second on the left,” Gibson replied.

When Alex looked back at him, Gibson’s nose was already back a book, the coded pages laid out all around him like some sort of pagan summoning circle. Judging from the pile of crumpled paper lying at his feet, Gibson wasn’t having much luck either.

Alex shook his head in wordless wonder at the spectacle and quietly closed the door.

The farmhouse had quieted in their absence. Alex could hear the loud chirping of crickets from outside as he walked down the corridor to the stairs on the opposite side of the wall and wondered if someone had left the back door open.

He didn’t waste time looking, instead heading up to the second floor without delay, only to find that
the second door on the left was hanging wide open with no one inside. Alex glanced around at the other doors, all closed, before stepping into the bedroom and sitting down on the bed closest to the door.

He folded his hands together in his lap over the stack of diagrams and waited, feeling extraordinarily foolish for doing so. There were no other options he could see, however, other than tracking someone else down for help, and Alex would rather face the entire German army by himself than ask anyone for a goddamn thing.

A minute passed. Alex leaned back against the wall with a sigh and closed his eyes.

A soft brush against his knee made him jump up off the bed, fists clenched and hovering in front of his face. The stack of papers in his lap fluttered to the ground in a whirlwind of parchment and ink. Aimee stared at Alex with wide eyes, her hand still outstretched toward him.

“Désolé,” Alex said as he sunk back down onto the bed. He bent down and quickly retrieved the scattered pages with Aimee’s assistance. “I didn’t hear you come in—” he started to say after organizing the diagrams into a somewhat orderly pile once again, but stopped when Aimee placed a small notepad and pencil into his lap. Alex looked back at her questioningly. Aimee’s only response was a delicate tap against her ear.

Alex went red. He stared down at the notepad, ragged and missing almost the entirety of its pages, wondering how he could have been so absorbed in his own issues that he hadn’t noticed at any point in the last two days that Aimee was deaf. He hadn’t even tried to speak to her when she’d helped dress him that morning. Christ.

He wrote his request quickly, wanting to get out of there as soon as possible. Alex handed the notepad back to her and waited with one finger tapping a steady rhythm against the top page sitting in his lap.

Aimee’s eyes narrowed and then she looked up at him and nodded. She held out a hand and Alex handed her the pages. Her eyes bugged out when she shuffled through them and saw just how much work he was asking her to do. Alex didn’t blame her for feeling overwhelmed.

“Merci,” Alex said as he stood and patted her shoulder awkwardly, hoping the gesture would adequately convey his gratitude.

Aimee nodded with a tight smile. Alex could feel her eyes following him as he left the room and he didn’t fully relax until he reached the stairs, where he stopped for a moment to compose himself.

Alex didn’t know why he was so concerned with Aimee’s opinion of him anyway. She was just some girl, one he wouldn’t ever see again a week from now. So what if he’d made an arse of himself?

When Alex walked back downstairs, he noticed that it was even quieter than it had been before. He poked his head into the kitchen to find that the back door was closed, once again blocking out all the sounds of the countryside. He supposed that Aimee must have been outside earlier, when she hadn’t been in her room, and had shut the door on her way back in.

Upon returning to Leclair’s room, it was nearly a full minute before Alex realised something was different.

“Wait, where’s Tommy?” he asked, looking wildly around the room as Gibson slowly raised his head to reply.
“He went out with Simone.”

“What, why?”

Gibson shrugged and glanced back down at his notes. He jotted something down, biting absently at his lower lip.

“Well, why didn’t you go with them?” Alex demanded.

“Simone said she needed one of us,” Gibson replied, this time without looking up. “And Leclair wants these translations done before the operation.”

“Christ,” Alex muttered. “You really have your priorities sorted, don’t you?” Gibson didn’t respond, which only fuelled Alex’s irritation. “And that’s another thing, he added. “I don’t understand why we need any of this nonsense to help us plant a couple bombs in a facility we’ve already reconed. We have an exit strategy: the canals.”

Gibson continued writing as if Alex hadn’t even spoken.

Alex stared at him, trembling in anger, half-considering taking one of the books from Leclair’s desk and chucking it at Gibson’s head.

Instead Alex turned back to the task at hand and pulled the letter he’d been working on previously off of the pile he still needed to go through. His hands were still shaking slightly as he picked up his pencil and began where he’d left off, just after the part where Sevard had mentioned ‘Au claire de la lune’.

He’d been hoping the work would take his mind off of Tommy, at least for the moment, but the worries remained at the back of his mind, inescapable. Alex just couldn’t fathom why Gibson—who sometimes looked at Tommy like…like Tommy was Jesus or something—seemed to suddenly not give a damn where Simone had taken him and why.

Finally, Alex couldn’t take it anymore.

“Is there a damn radio in here? I can’t fucking concentrate.”

Gibson glanced up at him, and then pointed to the corner of the room, next to the bureau. “Leclair’s gramophone,” he said. Alex was already up out of the chair and heading over to the record-player to investigate. “Be careful with it,” Gibson warned.

Alex tossed a scowl over his shoulder and examined the empty jacket for the disc already on the turntable. He wondered if he could convince Gibson to trade off with him every few minutes to switch sides.

“Dunno why he couldn’t just own a bloody radio,” Alex muttered to himself.

“Beethoven’s Fifth runs for fifteen minutes,” Gibson said unexpectedly.

“What?”

“Beethoven’s Fifth runs for—”

“No, I heard you,” Alex interrupted, “I just—never mind.” He turned back to Leclair’s portfolio and thumbed through it till he found the Beethoven record. He was surprised at the richness of the sound that emanated when it started to play, and he drifted back to the desk almost as if in a trance. “Where
did he get that?” Alex wondered.

“Hmm?”

“The record—the Beethoven; where did Leclair get it?”

There was a brief pause in the sound of pencil scratching paper before Gibson answered. “America,” he replied curtly.

Alex glanced over at him, eyes narrowed. “So you and Leclair are like…mates, then?”

Gibson’s hand froze, pencil hovering a centimetre above the page. He looked up at Alex from under long, dark eyelashes. “We have a working relationship. I expect, no different than with your own commanding officer, Collins.”

Alex snorted. “Yeah. Of course.” He hoped for Gibson’s sake that wasn’t strictly true. Alex shuddered to think of the two French blokes being that close.

The conversation ceased after that, and the two continued translating with only the sound of the orchestra to accompany their work.

When the music faded away into near silence, Alex was surprised to hear the creak of bedsprings behind him. He turned to see Gibson extricating himself from the disorganized nest of notes he’d created around himself on Leclair’s quilt.

“Find anything interesting?” Gibson asked conversationally as he switched sides.

Alex waited until the symphony resumed before replying, bewildered by Gibson’s casual tone. “Not really,” he confessed. “It’s just a load of letters she wrote and never sent. Reads more like a diary than anything.”

“And the diary of a Nazi isn’t interesting?” Gibson questioned, lifting an eyebrow as he returned to his den of chaos.

“No,” Alex replied curtly, “it’s not. Shockingly enough, she isn’t writing about her outings with Hitler at the bloody zoo.” Alex wasn’t expecting Gibson to flinch at the name, but he continued as if he hadn’t noticed. “The only time she even mentions the Reich at all is in connection to some Austrian bloke named ‘Ferry’ that she visited in Stuttgart last month. Apparently his father is some bigwig and she wanted to impress him.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it,” Alex replied. “Sorry if that’s not good enough for you.”

Gibson flicked his eyes up just briefly to meet Alex’s and resumed writing without rising to the bait. Alex turned away and tried to focus on the music, instead of the way Gibson’s silence had incensed him, like he was a child again, begging for scraps of attention from his new father.

The symphony came to a close sooner than Alex expected. He got up out of his chair and stretched languidly, sighing to himself. “My turn, I s’pose,” he muttered to himself as he made his way over to the gramophone to flip the disc back to the first side. “You get anything?” Alex called out to Gibson as he replaced the needle.

“What?”
When Alex turned back around, Gibson was looking up at him with a dazed expression, as if he’d just woken.

“I asked if you’ve got anything,” Alex said, gesturing toward the mess strewn about the bed. “You’ve been working for nearly two hours straight, surely you must’ve turned up something worth talking about.”

Gibson scrunched his brows together, like what Alex had said had confused him. “I haven’t translated it yet,” he replied.

“What? What do you mean you haven’t translated it yet? What the hell have you been doing?”

“Transcribing,” Gibson explained, looking almost pained as he did so. “It’s not a code, it’s an ancient Hebrew alphabet. There’s no point in trying to make sense of it until it’s something I can read.”

Alex gaped at him. “You can read Hebrew.”

“Yes,” Gibson replied with an impatient sigh.

“I didn’t know that,” Alex remarked dumbly.

Gibson gave him a sharp glance as if to say ‘no fucking shit’. Feeling adequately chastised even without a verbal reprimand, Alex returned to the desk with his own notes and picked up the next letter, hoping Gibson wouldn’t notice the flush in his cheeks as he did so.

At first, the letter read more or less the same as the rest. But then Alex noticed midway down the page that something had been scratched out, leaving a black square next to the letter ‘J’, the mysterious addressee. Alex hunched over the page and squinted at the mark, trying to decipher what Sevard had been trying to erase. After a few seconds, he gave up and lifted the page up to the desk lamp instead, hoping the light would make the scratched out letters easier to make out.

“What are you doing?”

Alex knocked his elbow into the edge of the desk, wrenched out of his all-consuming focus by Gibson’s interruption.

“What? Oh, er, there’s something crossed out in this one,” he explained, waving the page about as he turned to face Gibson. He rubbed his throbbing elbow and grimaced.

Gibson carefully set down his book and got up to take a look. He grabbed the letter from Alex, lifting it to eye-level. He narrowed his eyes in concentration and scrutinized the block of ink for several seconds before setting the letter back down on the desk and moving over to the bookshelf by the bed.

Alex didn’t ask what he was doing, just waited.

Gibson came back with a Bible in hand. He opened the cover and ripped the first page free of the binding with little care. Alex was taken aback by the bizarre behaviour, but still said nothing as Gibson flipped the letter over so that the its back-side, blank except for a few sentences at the very top, was lying face-up on the desk.

“She presses too hard when she writes,” Gibson explained as he placed the tissue-thin Bible page over the portion of the letter that had been redacted. “That’s why she used half a bottle of ink going over it.”
“Surely that’s not going to work—” Alex said as Gibson lightly scraped the slanted side of Alex’s pencil over the torn-out page, but he stopped short when he saw the barest hint of pen-strokes starting to emerge within the shaded area. “What does it say?” he asked once Gibson’s hand had stilled.

The letters were mirrored and Alex couldn’t decipher the reversed text without leaning into Gibson’s space to get a better look.

Gibson snatched up the shaded page and the letter without giving an answer. “I’m taking a break,” he said curtly before standing and exiting the room, both documents still clutched in his left hand.

“Oi!” Alex called out, waiting barely a second before going after him. He caught Gibson before the door had even swung shut, grabbing a fistful of his shirt near the shoulder and pulling the sleeve down far enough that he could see Gibson’s collarbones shining with sweat under the dim light coming in from the kitchen. “You can’t just walk out of here like that without an explanation!”

“Says who?”

“Me!” Alex spluttered, flabbergasted by Gibson’s response.

“It’s none of your concern,” Gibson told him.

“Then why won’t you at least tell me what it says?” Alex demanded. “Or where you’re taking the damn thing?”

“To Simone,” Gibson replied, tucking his hand behind his back when Alex made a grab for the pages.

“You don’t know where she is,” Alex pointed out.

“Then I’ll find her.”

“Great plan,” Alex said exasperatedly, making another failed grab for the letter. “I still don’t see why you can’t just tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Leclair asked me not to,” Gibson replied long-sufferingly, as if the answer should have been obvious to Alex. And well, it had been—sort of.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you’d been promoted to Grand Duke of Secrets in Leclair’s little monarchy. And what would that make me, hmm? Oh, I’ve got it, I can be Tommy’s squire.”


Alex stared at him, trying to parse the intent behind the almost monotone retort. “Did Tommy tell you what I said, then? About you being a frog?”

“No need,” Gibson said. “That part stuck out just fine.” He met Alex’s gaze head-on with a cool stare of his own.

Alex shoved Gibson into the wall without warning, using the momentary distraction to pluck both pages from Gibson’s hand before darting back into Leclair’s room. He launched himself face-down onto the bed, desperately holding the shaded portion of the page up to the dim lamp on the nightstand, trying to decipher the backwards writing before Gibson had a chance to stop him.

J-A-C— Alex had just made out the faint outline of the lowercase Q—which he’d at first mistaken
for a P instead—when a heavy weight suddenly landed on top of him, forcing him to drop the page with an involuntary wheeze.

“Get... off me.... you wanker,” Alex grunted, furiously wriggling until he managed to flip himself onto his back, even with Gibson still lying on top of him.

“Did you read it?” Gibson demanded, ignoring Alex’s frantic struggles to free himself.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Did you read it?” he repeated, sounding half-crazed.

“Yes!” Alex admitted, finally giving up after realizing his slight height advantage was no match for Gibson’s stockier build. He lay there completely still except for the rise and fall of his chest as he tried to catch his breath. “It’s just a name,” he added, almost a knee-jerk reaction to the suddenly despairing look on Gibson’s face. “I don’t even know what it means.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” Gibson replied with a renewed intensity in his expression.

“Who would I tell?” Alex said. “I don’t know what it means,” he re-iterated.

“You have to promise.”

“Fine, fine! I promise.” Alex realized that Gibson was still lying almost fully on top of him, staring down at him with a worried crease between his brows, the tips of their noses almost touching.

Belatedly, Alex realized he had moved first, chasing Gibson’s mouth with his own when the other man instinctively reared back. Alex dug his fingers into the thick curls at the back of Gibson’s head despite thinking better of it, and kissed him harder.

The sound of the orchestra emanating from the far corner of the room was drowned out by the sound of Gibson panting hotly against Alex’s neck when he finally allowed Gibson to pull away.

“Take off your trousers,” Alex told him.

“What?”

Alex didn’t see fit to repeat himself, instead shoving his hand between them to unbutton Gibson’s trousers himself.

“Wait,” Gibson protested as Alex shoved his trousers around his thighs. “You should know that I’m not—I don’t—”

He couldn’t seem to find the right words but Alex figured out what he was trying to say as soon as he reached into Gibson’s shorts and found with a little jolt of surprise that he was cut. Of course, Alex realized once the momentary shock had worn off. The Hebrew and all, it made sense.

“Doesn’t matter,” Alex reassured him. “You’d fit right in with all those poncy English aristocrats,” he added, even though Gibson wouldn’t understand the comment—didn’t know about the decade of mockery Alex had endured in changing rooms and toilets for being the only boy there who wasn’t cut, just more evidence that he hadn’t belonged.

Alex shivered as Gibson’s fingers, unexpectedly rough and callused in sharp contrast to his deceptively cherubic features, brushed against his lower belly. Before Alex could say anything to stop him, Gibson’s hand slipped lower and Alex steeled himself for the inevitable embarrassment
once Gibson realised he couldn’t reciprocate.

But that moment never came.

Instead Alex heard himself gasping at the unexpected bolt of white hot electricity that laced through the base of his spine at the first touch of Gibson’s hand, a sensation that felt almost brand new after countless months of his body not feeling like his own.

That’s when the screaming started.

Gibson and Alex rolled off the bed in a tangle of limbs, both of them hastily trying to readjust their clothes as they scrambled for the door.

Alex wasn’t sure what to expect when they emerged from the corridor, but it certainly wasn’t the sight that awaited them in the kitchen: Simone, Dominique, and Aimee holding down an unfamiliar man while blood poured out of his shoulder, and Tommy in the doorway supporting another stranger with a strained expression on his face.

“Some help?” he gasped when he caught sight of Alex and Gibson in the entryway.

Gibson’s reaction time was slightly faster. Alex trailed behind him as they rushed over to relieve Tommy, Alex taking his right side, Gibson the left. Together the three of them slowly hobbled through the kitchen, past the stairs, and into the front parlour where they laid the man out on the sofa with no small amount of effort.

“What the hell happened?” Alex asked between panting breaths as he turned back to look at Tommy, who was staring at them from the bottom of the stairs. Alex went scarlet, realising how the two of them must look, and self-consciously ran a hand through his mussed hair.

“The SS—” Tommy started to say only to be interrupted by more screams from the kitchen. He winced and then continued. “The men from the SS we captured this morning escaped and we were trying—” He stopped again as the screaming resumed, but this time Tommy didn’t say a word after it stopped.

Alex glanced back at Gibson. He was looking down at the man they’d helped into the parlour, who was lying on the sofa stiff as a board, one of his legs clearly misshapen under his trousers. His eyes were closed, but Alex could tell from his ragged breaths that he wasn’t unconscious, at least not fully.

“Should we do something?” Alex asked, looking from Gibson to Tommy, who had slid down to the floor and was sitting with his back against the wall, staring vacantly at the staircase.

Tommy didn’t acknowledge that Alex had even spoken. Gibson just shook his head minutely. After a long moment, he looked up at Alex and there was something in his expression, something he could read just under the surface of Gibson’s skin. Growing, festering.

Regret.

“Don’t—” Alex tried to say, but Gibson was already turning away, heading for the door.

“What’s wrong with him?” Alex heard Tommy ask, but he didn’t even know where to begin.

“It’s fine,” Alex replied, “just stay here a minute.”

The door with its rusty hinges hadn’t quite closed all the way when Alex slipped out into the evening
air with a sigh, still not altogether sure of what he was planning to say to make some kind of amends. He wasn’t even sure why he was bothering; Gibson wasn’t exactly queuing up to make friends either, despite what Tommy probably wanted from both of them.

But it might do something about the pit in his stomach, a deep emptiness that had been steadily growing since he’d locked eyes with Gibson that first night on the beach.

Whatever misplaced sense of guilt Alex had felt—well, it should’ve been gone, right? So why did he feel so much worse?

Alex found Gibson sitting in the rickety tree swing with his back to the farmhouse, staring out across the field into the endless dark beginning at the treeline. He was pushing himself slowly back and forth. Alex approached quietly and grabbed at the ropes hanging from the branch without warning, causing Gibson to whirl around with a start.

“What—?”

“Don’t say anything,” Alex cut in. “Just let me—just let me say what I need to, all right?”

Gibson’s frown deepened but he nodded, and said nothing.

Alex sighed, shut his eyes for a moment as he began. “I wasn’t thinking earlier,” he said, before realising how that sounded and starting over again. “I wasn’t planning on—you know,” he tried instead. “I’ve seen the way you act around Tommy and…I won’t tell him what happened if you won’t.”

Alex swallowed tightly and forced himself to keep his eyes locked on Gibson as he kept going.

“I thought about you, you know. And it wasn’t—I knew it wasn’t my fault, what happened. But I still thought about you.” He tore his eyes away finally, unable to bear it anymore. He stared down at his shoes instead, at the wildflowers poking through the grass between his feet. “And I don’t expect you to forgive me for how I treated you. But I just thought you should know.”

“What do we tell him?”

“What?” Alex glanced back up in surprise to find Gibson still staring at him, expressionless.

“If Tommy asks about us, what should we tell him?”

Alex shook his head, ran his fingers through his hair again. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Tommy already knew without asking, that everyone did, that what they’d done wasn’t something they could hide. “I dunno,” he confessed. “I guess we just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Gibson was silent for a moment. Then he stood abruptly, and Alex let go of the swing as he took a reflexive step back.

“We should go back inside,” Gibson said. “They might need our help.”

Alex nodded, already starting to turn back toward the farmhouse when he felt Gibson’s hand on his shoulder.

“You shouldn’t worry so much,” Gibson said quietly. Alex was hyper-aware of how close they were again, with Gibson practically leaning in to speak the words in his ear. “He’ll choose you, in the end.”
Gibson let go of his shoulder, leaving Alex standing there alone in the grass. Alex watched him walk away without saying a word despite the screaming in his head.

You’re wrong, he should have said. Would have, if he were a better man. *You’re so wrong.*
II. Collins

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait between updates! I'm really going to try to get the next one out a lot quicker. I appreciate your patience & I promise I am going to try to get this fic finished by the end of the year!

Another Collins chapter with quite a bit of action. And..."action". *wink* Collins & Farrier's interactions were really fun to write in this one as they've both changed quite a lot in their time apart as well as having unresolved issues to start with. So lots of tension, for sure. Hope you enjoy!

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The look in Leclair’s eyes once Collins had him cornered reminded him less of a trapped animal than a fully-realised hunter himself, and Collins knew before he even opened his mouth that he wasn’t going to get the answers he wanted. Simone, standing silently in the corner, wasn’t helping his cause.

“I expect you want to know why I had Gibson go with you, instead of Tommy,” Leclair pre-empted.

Collins crossed his arms over his chest, trying to make himself at least look a bit more intimidating, even if he didn’t feel it. “That’d be a start.”

Leclair shrugged slightly and mirrored Collins’s stance. “I don’t trust you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t look so surprised,” Leclair replied coolly. “I don’t trust many people. Gibson’s a rare exception.”

“Gibson isn’t even his name,” Collins pointed out.

“And you think Leclair’s mine?” The man in question finally glanced away, toward Simone, who was still studiously examining her fingernails as if pretending the two men weren’t even present. “Gibson’s a good soldier. I trust you had no complaints about his accompaniment?”

Much as Collins wished he could air his grievances with the boy, just to feel vindicated in his suspicion, Gibson hadn’t done anything to deserve it. The opposite actually, he realised, thinking back on the incident outside the meeting room that had nearly ended with Collins’s identity being compromised. “No,” he replied begrudgingly. “But I don’t appreciate feeling like I’m being spied on by someone who’s supposed to be an ally.”

“In that case, Mr. Collins,” said Leclair, with just the hint of a smile pulling at the corners of his lips, “I believe you’ve taken up the wrong profession.”

The door opened then, and Farrier slipped through, looking appropriately apologetic. “Not interrupting, I hope?” he said as he quietly closed the door behind himself. It used to infuriate Collins how fucking posh Farrier was, and then at some point it had grown on him and he’d started to find it
rather endearing.

“Just making conversation while we wait,” Leclair said, his tone perfectly casual.

Collins could tell by Farrier’s expression that he knew the truth. He assumed Alex must have said something to him. Collins wondered if he’d heard any of their ‘conversation’, as Leclair had put it, through the door.

After the three younger boys finally arrived a few minutes later, the meeting that commenced was brief, but Collins still had trouble maintaining his concentration throughout. He perked up when his attention was called for, but for the most part, his thoughts remained elsewhere as he stubbornly mulled over his earlier confrontation with Leclair, trying to parse some hidden meaning in what little the other man had said.

It was a frustrating endeavour, and ultimately a fruitless one; and then one that slipped his mind as soon as Leclair asked if he was up to running yet another errand.

“Yes, of course,” Collins replied without even pausing to consider if it was true. He hadn’t let himself think about his experience in the canals since it had occurred. He wasn’t going to start now.

Collins was surprised when instead of sending Simone along with them to retrieve the explosives they’d need for the sabotage mission (as she’d clearly expected) Leclair announced that he would be joining them instead. Collins wondered if that was in response to the fact that he had all but outright accused Leclair of using Gibson to spy on the British soldiers or if there was something else at play here, yet another determining factor that Leclair didn’t see fit to make the rest of them privy to.

He diverted these thoughts just long enough to quietly warn Alex against starting an argument with Leclair in his stead and then took his own advice and followed Leclair’s lead without question.

Collins spared just a moment to quickly tousle Alex’s hair before he exited the room behind Farrier. He’d already been aware of how much more attention Alex required; their discussion earlier had only confirmed that fact.

“Where are we headed?” Collins asked as followed Leclair and Farrier out to the anterior of the farmhouse, where Simone had parked the military truck that morning.

“Supply station a few kilometres away from the town limits,” Leclair replied as he climbed into the driver’s seat. “We’ve raided it before, for food and other supplies.”

“But not weapons.”

Leclair turned in his seat to lock eyes with Collins as he climbed into the back alongside Farrier, who merely sighed in response to the statement, like he was expecting a fight.

“We have plenty of guns,” Leclair explained, “and only so many hands to carry them.”

The engine rumbled under Collins’s feet as he nodded his acknowledgment. He was capable enough of putting his own personal feelings about Leclair aside when offered a reasonable answer.

Farrier leaned past him to tap Leclair’s seat as they started moving. “Same as usual?” he asked.

Leclair nodded. He drove with both hands tightly clenched around the steering wheel, like he wasn’t used to driving, or nervous about it.

“What’s the usual?” Collins asked as Farrier settled back into his seat.
“Someone runs point—me, in this case—someone else watches their back, and a third stays behind with the lorry to provide a quick getaway.”

Collins raised his eyebrows at Farrier. “I should hope you don’t expect me to hang back with the truck, then.”

Farrier shook his head, laughing. “No, Leclair will stay behind and wait for us to come back with the explosives. As if I wouldn’t want you as my back-up.”

Leclair didn’t say anything to contradict Farrier’s statement, so Collins assumed that was it settled. He leaned back against the worn canvas seat-back, too hard and too angular to ever really be comfortable, and closed his eyes.

Collins had learned early on in his days with the RAF that worse than the actual fighting was the waiting—the prickly feeling of anticipation that swallowed up the time in between returning from a successful mission and leaving for the next, not knowing this time if you’d make it back home.

He’d let the anxiety consume him at first, leaving him a nervous wreck even when he was on leave. Then he’d been assigned to Fortis Team and things had been different. For a while at least.

Collins was so wholly focused on keeping his breathing even, his heartbeat steady, that he nearly leapt out of his seat when Leclair’s voice suddenly cut through the reverie.

“Do you have any family back home?”

Collins’s eyes flew open. He glanced at Farrier and then back over his shoulder to look at Leclair. “You’re talking to me?” he asked.

“Seeing as I’ve had an entire year to learn everything there is to know about Mr. Jack Farrier—”

Not likely, Collins thought, catching a glimpse of the slight redness tingeing the tips of Farrier’s ears as they continued onward.

“Yes,” Leclair finished, “I was asking about you.”

“No,” Collins replied shortly. “No family back home.”

Leclair didn’t ask him to elaborate. Collins avoided meeting Farrier’s eyes, not wanting to have to acknowledge the pity he knew he’d find there. He stared out at the foliage passing by instead as they drove and wondered how long before they reached their destination.

Unlike that morning, when the dirt path they’d taken had quickly turned into a paved road leading into town, the course they were charting through the forest only seemed to grow more treacherous as time went on. The road, if it could even be called that, was narrow enough that stray branches scraped across the sides of the truck as they pushed forward. Even when Leclair slowed down to almost a snail’s pace, the uneven terrain had Collins and Farrier both reaching for any available handhold to keep from being thrown about.

Collins extended his legs, bracing his feet against the base of the seat opposite. Suddenly he felt Farrier’s foot hooking around his ankle and he glanced over to find the other man smiling softly back at him. Collins didn’t return it, finding himself automatically looking to the driver’s seat of the truck even though he knew that Leclair couldn’t even see them.

Then there was a jolt as the truck drove over another dip in the road, and Farrier’s hand was on Collins’s thigh, his fingers digging in just above the knee as he braced himself against the younger
man. Collins locked eyes with Farrier again, and for just a moment, it was like they were back at Hawkinge, stealing a quiet moment in the mess while no one was looking.

And then just like that, the truck came to a shuddering halt and Farrier snatched his hand back, leaving Collins with the phantom pressure of the touch lingering like pins and needles in his skin.

“Ready?” Farrier asked, hopping out of the truck ahead of both Leclair and Collins. He looked as calm as ever, even though they were about to walk right into the dragon’s mouth, and it was hard not to begrudge him that when Collins felt like he was vibrating out of his skin.

“Be smart,” Leclair cautioned as he circled round to the cargo bin behind the back seats, pulling out a large bag from inside and dropping it onto the ground. “Don’t take any unnecessary risks.” He reached down and opened the bag, pulling out a flare gun and handing it to Farrier, who pocketed it without a word.

“What’s that for?” Collins asked, unable to help his curiosity.

Leclair continued going through the bag as he answered. “In case something goes wrong,” he replied unhelpfully, pulling out two combat knives.

The first, which he handed to Farrier, was recognizable German military-issue. The second was plain and unmarked even after Collins unsheathed the blade to examine it more closely, but by the looks of it, no less deadly.

Collins accepted the knife and carefully tucked it into his belt, acutely aware of the unfamiliar weight of it on his hip.

Finally—and if Collins was reading the man’s expression correctly, reluctantly—Leclair handed Collins a suppressed pistol, which felt awkward and unbalanced in his hand. “Last resort,” Leclair said meaningfully. He then offered the now-empty bag to Farrier, who shouldered it with a grim expression. “You’re looking for any crates with ships stencilled on them in yellow. Grab whatever you can carry and then get out.”

“Is this stuff safe to handle?” Collins asked, suddenly wondering if they were going to accidentally blow themselves up the second they managed to get a hold of the explosives.

“It’s extremely stable at room temperature,” Leclair reassured him. “It shouldn’t go off even if someone puts a bullet into it.”

“Yeah, well, if that happens, I think we might have other things to worry about,” Farrier pointed out. “Ready?” he asked, shifting his attention to Collins.

Collins nodded tightly, gave the pistol a cursory examination to make sure it was in working order, and pretended not to notice the way Leclair’s eyes followed him as he traipsed after Farrier into the woods.

The way the trees seemed to swallow up even the sound of their footsteps as they walked was oddly disquieting. Collins stuck as closely to Farrier as their pace would allow, not wanting to find himself lost and alone in the middle of enemy territory.

“How much further?” he asked once they’d been walking for at least twenty minutes. They were moving uphill at a brisk pace, and the slight incline was starting to take its toll on Collins, who hadn’t been anticipating such a long hike.
At least when they carried the explosives back they’d have an easier time of it.

“Another kilometre or so,” Farrier replied without looking back.

Collins nodded to himself, sucking in a deep breath through his nose, and forced himself to keep walking.

Several minutes later the ground began to level out again. Farrier stopped suddenly, held up a hand signalling for Collins to do the same.

Collins held himself completely still, staring past Farrier into the darkness ahead as he focused his hearing on the ambient sounds of the forest surrounding them. If he strained himself, he could just make out the sound of voices underneath the incessant chirping of crickets.

“Flank or follow?” Collins whispered.

“Follow,” Farrier said. He crooked two fingers and bent at the knees, slowly crouching forward until he nearly disappeared into the undergrowth.

Collins copied Farrier’s movements exactly, but remained several paces behind. He didn’t want to risk giving away Farrier’s position if he were spotted. And vice versa.

Every rustle of the wind in the trees, every animal scurrying by had Collins feeling painfully on edge. He didn’t realize how tightly he was gritting his teeth until his jaw started to ache. He forced himself to relax, uncurling his fingers one at a time around the pistol-grip until it finally felt comfortable in his hand.

The voices grew louder as they crept through the bushes, and finally coalesced into something comprehensible just as the their destination came into view. Farrier motioned for Collins to get down and the two of them went prone just before a truck roared past, only a few yards ahead.

It was immediately clear that the Germans, whether fuelled by military labour or another source, had cut a path straight through the French countryside, felling trees and laying track with little regard for maintaining the integrity of the landscape.

The supply train sat perfectly still at the end of a railway that sliced through a swath of forest like a gaping wound. There were dozens of trucks parked alongside, each of which was either being actively loaded up by men in Wehrmacht uniforms, or used as a place to rest and relax by any soldiers not currently working.

Collins watched as a young man nearby took a long drag on what was barely more than a fag-end before tossing the remains out into the trees. The smouldering debris landed centimetres from Collins’s nose.

Collins started counting the number of soldiers he could see from their position. When he’d finished, somewhere in the twenties, he glanced over to find that Farrier was surveying the caravan with a matching expression of dismay.

“Distraction?” Collins whispered. If they couldn’t clear the area, there was no possible way he could see of getting near the train.

Farrier continued watching the soldiers with a resigned expression. “Any suggestions?” he finally replied.

Collins scanned the long line of trucks, and chewed pensively at his lower lip, trying to come up with
some way to divert the attention of more than twenty men simultaneously. “Give me the flare gun.”

Farrier turned to look at him like he was insane. “If you fire that, we are on our own,” he hissed. “Leclair’s to leave us for dead if he sees that flare go off.”

“Don’t suppose you have a better idea, eh?” Collins retorted.

Farrier glared at him for a moment and then reached into his jacket and procured the flare gun, which looked almost comically tiny in his hand. He offered it to Collins, who tucked the suppressed pistol into the back of his trousers before taking the flare gun.

“Circle round if you have to,” Collins advised as he slowly raised himself up a few centimetres to get a better look at his surroundings. “And don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. Just take whatever opening you can get.”

He waited just long enough to get a nod of confirmation from Farrier before scuttling off toward the front end of the caravan, where the rail met the dirt road leading north toward civilization. The trees were thicker than Collins would have expected, perhaps to compensate for the careless path the Germans had cleared, like scar tissue slowly closing over a wound.

Collins took advantage of the way the trees surrounding the supply yard were almost intertwined and began to climb a tall birch tree near the road. He used the branches of the tree adjacent to ascend the birch quickly, like the trees themselves had conspired to make him a ladder, and from the top of the tree, gently swaying in the wind, he had the perfect vantage point over the camp.

He’d already identified his target. The first of the loaded trucks was sitting parked at the access point to the road, where the treeline had almost closed around the supply yard completely. There was barely enough space for a single vehicle to move through. It was a prime choke point.

And the off-white canvas covering the cargo in the back was like a beacon.

Collins braced himself against the trunk of the birch with his left hand and steadied the gun with his right, placing a quick kiss against the knuckle at the base of his right thumb for luck. Then he pointed the flare gun down and fired.

It sailed across the clearing trailing a plume of crimson smoke. Collins wasn’t sure if it was really moving that slowly or if the adrenaline pumping through him was just messing with his perception of time. But there was a moment after Collins pulled the trigger and before the flare in the back of the truck where he could pinpoint the way every German soldier’s head turned to watch as the glowing flare arced through the air and then exploded into a plume of red smoke and orange flame as it struck the canvas.

It couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but Collins prayed that those seconds had been enough of a distraction to allow Farrier to get himself onto that train somehow.

There was a single beat of silence, where the soldiers seemed frozen even as the fire rapidly consumed the cargo in the back of the truck, and then finally it seemed to register that they were under attack and the screaming started.

Suddenly the leisurely attitudes turned to panic; the half-arsed workmen assuming battle positions behind relative cover. There were two soldiers at the front seemingly trying to get things under control while the truck blocking the road burned brightly behind them.

The first was facing directly away from Collins. He had a clear view of the back of the man’s head. Collins put a bullet in it without a second thought.
None of the other men saw him fall. It was at least thirty seconds before any of them noticed, and by that time, Collins had already determined that taking out the other officer would be an impossibility. He would have preferred it—cutting off the proverbial head of the snake, as it were, and in this case, the snake had two.

But Collins only had seven bullets left and no way to make a clean shot. So he simply watched as the man gestured for some of the soldiers to come examine the body whilst directing others on fighting the flames that had engulfed the truck blocking the road. Satisfied with the level of chaos playing out below him, Collins scanned the opposite end of the yard, now virtually abandoned. He wasn’t sure if he should feel reassured that he couldn’t find Farrier amidst the scattered vehicles and supplies.

But even if Collins couldn’t see him, he could still buy Farrier more time.

He had seven shots left. Killing seven soldiers wouldn’t make much of a dent out of nearly two dozen, but creating seven liabilities would.

The first shot caught his victim in the thigh; the second, the kneecap. It wasn’t until the fourth went down that the remaining officer seemed to finally catch on to Collins’s game. Collins could hear him shouting for his men to spread out and move into the trees.

Collins lowered the pistol and made himself as small as possible, watching as the figures below crept toward the treeline. His distraction had worked despite its poor planning, and perhaps it had worked too well. He hadn’t intended to become the soldiers’ main target, but he’d be safe so long as none of the Germans had the brains to point their rifles up.

Collins found himself holding his breath as most of the men walked straight past him, heading deeper into the trees. But there was one at the very back of the pack whose chin was tilted almost like a bloodhound catching the scent of his prey. It was just as Collins finally started to let the air out of his lungs that the man stopped right at the base of the birch tree in which Collins was perched.

And then he looked up.

Collins jumped down without hesitating. He’d known instinctively that if he’d tried to climb back down the branches, no matter how fast he was, that the German would have been faster. The man would have shot Collins down like a roosting pigeon.

Collins wasn’t aware of much on the way down except for a flash of searing pain in his side and the shockwave that rattled him to the core as he collided with the other man after a ten-meter drop. They both laid there on the ground, dazed, for a moment—but it was Collins who recovered first.

He reached for the knife as his belt, unsheathing it and placing it against the other man’s throat in one fluid movement. That’s when he finally felt it: the first stirrings of unease. It was one thing to shoot down a plane, another to put a bullet in a man from twenty paces, but wholly something else to hold a blade under his chin knowing that with one stroke you could drain the life right out of him.

The man opened his mouth to scream. Collins drew a line in bold, red ink.

It wasn’t difficult to sneak back around to the other side of the supply yard with the German unit’s attention split between treating their wounded, fighting a losing battle against the growing flames, and hunting down an enemy who was no longer there.

Collins still had his knife in hand when he bumped headlong into Farrier, and he lifted it reflexively, not registering at first the bearded face staring back at him.

“Christ, what happened?” Farrier hissed, putting his hands delicately on either side of Collins’s
shoulders as he looked the younger man up and down. Then Farrier lowered them just as quickly, his head darting round as if he’d just remembered that they were standing in the middle of a warzone. Farrier shifted the weight of the bag slung over his shoulder, now bulging with its explosive contents, and grabbed Collins’s hand.

Neither spoke a word until they’d gotten far enough away that the screaming of the man whose kneecap Collins had blown to bits finally faded into silence.

That was when Farrier, looking a bit winded himself, finally stopped. “Let me have a look at you,” he said, turning to face Collins, who—now that they were no longer moving forward—suddenly felt like he might fall over.

He couldn’t feel the pain anymore from the fall, couldn’t feel much of anything really, even though the wind blowing through the trees had left a trail of goose-bumps across his exposed forearms.

It wasn’t until Farrier dropped the bag they’d risked so much for, and reached down to pull Collins’s shirt from his trousers, that Collins noticed the dark stain rapidly spreading across the fabric.

“I fell,” Collins said numbly, before Farrier could even ask him what had happened.

“Oh, Christ alive,” Farrier said with a sympathetic hiss as he pulled the blood-stained fabric away from Collins’s skin to get a better look at the damage. “Can you lift your arms?”

Collins obeyed as if the question had been a command instead, and waited patiently as Farrier pulled the shirt up and over his head before carelessly tossing it onto the ground. Collins could see now what had elicited such a negative response; there was a gash stretching more than ten centimetres across Collins’s torso from navel to armpit, and the ragged edges were weeping blood.

“Don’t move,” Farrier said, and this time it was a command. He quickly undid Collins’s own belt and picked up the shirt he’d discarded, folding it over with a frown until he managed to get a relatively clean side.

He wrapped the ruined shirt around Collins’s torso without issuing a warning first. Collins gasped but did his best not to move.

“Hold this,” Farrier instructed, pulling the shirt tight enough that Collins could barely breathe.

Collins grabbed the proffered end of the shirt. He gritted his teeth against the pain as Farrier looped the belt over the makeshift bandage and tugged the end through the buckle until the leather bit into Collins’s skin.

“It’s clumsy,” Farrier said as he took a step back to examine his handiwork with a critical eye, “but it should hold till we can get back to Leclair at least.”

“You don’t think he saw the flare?” Collins gasped. He had to resist the urge to pick at the edges of the ill-made compress, unable to figure out what to do with his hands. “What happened to him leaving us for dead, eh?”

“To be fair, I didn’t think you were going to shoot the flare down,” Farrier muttered.

He shrugged off his jacket and helped Collins into it, one arm at a time, as if he were a small child off to his first day of primary school. Then he herded Collins backwards, until he bumped into a tree with a quiet yelp, and gently pushed him down into a sitting position.

“If we’re lucky, he saw the fire and decided to wait around for us anyway,” Farrier added as he
lowered himself into a sitting position across from Collins as well. “If that’s the case, then hopefully
the Germans won’t find him before we do.”

Collins arched an eyebrow. “That doesn’t really explain why we’re sitting here, then, does it?”

“You need to rest,” Farrier said. He pulled the bag of explosives closer and pulled open one of the
pockets. He reached inside and procured a canteen before handing it to Collins. “I grabbed a few
extra things,” Farrier explained. “In case we had to hike back on our own.”

Collins nodded, the mouth of the canteen already pressed to his lips before Farrier could get a word
out. He forced himself to drink slowly, but the self-discipline turned out not to be necessary at all—
every swallow pulled agonizingly at the wound in his side.

“Here,” Collins said, handing it back when he’d had enough. He couldn’t help the groan that
escaped his lips as he lifted his arm.

Farrier frowned. His expression was one of unmasked concern, so intense it made Collins feel
physically uncomfortable. “Are you going to be all right to keep going? I don’t want to leave you
here, but—”

“I’ll be fine,” Collins replied shortly. He didn’t even want to entertain the thought of Farrier
abandoning him in the middle of the woods to go get help, hole in his side or no. “How far is it back
to the road?” he asked, closing his eyes against the pain radiating through his chest and stomach. It
was only getting worse as the effects of the adrenaline finally started to wear off.

“Not far. Are you sure you’re okay to move?”

“Just give me a minute,” Collins said. He closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to endure any more of
Farrier’s doe-eyed sympathy and tried to focus on something other than the pain.

A few seconds passed. “Collins?” Farrier said quietly.

Collins opened his eyes. “Aye?”

“Promise me you won’t ever pull something that stupid again, all right?”

Collins huffed out an approximation of a laugh. “You’re one to talk.”

Farrier didn’t respond but the look in his eyes seemed to imply that he disagreed with Collins’s
assessment of his judgment.

“I had to attend two funerals, you know,” Collins pointed out, futilely trying to find a position against
the tree that was even remotely comfortable. “Both with empty coffins,” he added casually, like an
afterthought, though at the time the prospect of not even being able to bury his fallen comrades had
been downright unbearable. “And then of course, they had the audacity to promote me, and that was
even worse somehow.”

That got a smile out of Farrier, though that hadn’t been Collins’s intent. “Pack it in,” Farrier joked.
“There’s no need to brag. I’ll have you know I gave myself an unofficial promotion when I met
Leclair. Guess I should have given myself a medal, too.”

“I’m trying to be straight with you,” Collins insisted. “I thought you were dead, not…gallivanting
around with some French lad or whatever the hell it is you’ve been doing out here for the past year.”

Farrier looked gobsmacked, but Collins couldn’t help but to squeeze in one more jibe while he had
the chance.

“Certainly didn’t expect to find you sleeping around on Nell.”

It took only a split second for Farrier’s expression to turn from shock to anger. “I never made any promises to Nell I couldn’t keep,” he said coldly. “And I never broke the ones I made. If I could have told her about Simone, then I would have.”

It hadn’t been Simone that Collins had been thinking of when he’d made the comment, but he wasn’t willing to correct Farrier now that he’d seen the naked despair in the other man’s eyes. “You really don’t think you’re going to make it back,” Collins realised. “You think you’re going to die out here.”

“I just don’t want to break her heart twice,” Farrier argued, but Collins knew now that it wasn’t true. Farrier was afraid.

“Let’s just go,” Collins said quietly. He tried and failed to get to his feet without Farrier’s help and crumpled with an anguished cry. On the second attempt, Collins sullenly accepted the hand extended to him but waited until Farrier turned away before wiping away the tears in his eyes.

They walked for what felt like hours, though Collins knew from the light slowly fading in the west that it couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. Farrier maintained a slow, steady pace, but after less than a kilometre, Collins was already starting to falter. He felt dazed, a stifling feeling of dread sitting low in his gut, and that’s when he realised that the shirt around his torso was rapidly dampening with blood once again.

Still, Collins was determined to make it back to the road where they’d left Leclair on his own merit, God help him, and if they got there and found that Leclair wasn’t waiting to save them, then at least Collins could die with a little bit of dignity.

But it wasn’t long before Farrier’s stride started to show signs of flagging as well. Collins narrowed his eyes, finally noticing that there was something off about the way he was walking, the way he was suddenly favouring his right leg even though he’d seemed perfectly fine before. Had something happened to Farrier during their raid on the supply caravan, before he and Collins had found each other again?

“What happened to your leg?” Collins asked. He winced at the unexpected loudness of his voice in his own ears after becoming accustomed to the relative silence as they’d walked.

“Pardon?”

“What happened to your leg?” Collins repeated, enunciating every syllable for good measure even though he knew perfectly well that Farrier had heard him the first time.

“Oh, it’s just an old injury. Usually, I—walking’s just put a bit of strain on it is all.”

“How’d you get it?” Collins asked.

There was just the slightest bit of hesitation before Farrier answered, but it was enough. “Gibson and I were stuck—”

“Aye, of course,” Collins replied bitterly, cutting Farrier off before he could explain any further. “Should have expected the tale to start like that.”

Farrier turned to give Collins a sharp look over his shoulder, but didn’t stop walking. “Did Gibson tell you I kissed him?”
“Nay,” Collins admitted, “but I can’t say I’m surprised to hear it.”

Farrier shook his head and kept going, clearly exasperated even though Collins couldn’t see his expression. “I did it because I felt sorry for him, if that makes you feel any better. There was a good chance one or both of us was going to die, and Gibson told me he’d never kissed anyone except some girl in primary school he didn’t even care for. So, you know, I thought, why the hell not?”

“I’m not asking you to explain yourself to me,” Collins replied.

Farrier finally stopped and whirled around to face him. “Then what are you asking me?”

Collins didn’t respond, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Farrier sighed, the flash of anger in his eyes quickly fading into something else, something Collins didn’t want to put a name to.

“Right. So that’s it then.” His voice sounded strained, though Collins couldn’t tell if that was due to the physical toll the hike had taken or the effort needed to keep his emotions in check. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, Collins.”

“It’s not—” Collins stopped himself. “I’m not blaming you, or him, I’m just…. Well, it’s not fair, eh?”

“What isn’t?”

“That he got to have you and I didn’t.”

“You have me now,” Farrier pointed out.

But it still felt all wrong somehow. Like they were standing on either side of a wall made of impenetrable glass, able to see and hear but not touch. Not really.

It was a poor place to leave things off, but in the end, Collins didn’t have much of a choice. Bright lights cut through the trees ahead and for the briefest of moments, Collins thought it was Leclair, finally coming to the rescue.

But then Collins could hear shouting up ahead in the dark, accompanying the low rumble of the truck’s engine as it bore directly down on them.

Farrier’s hand was around his arm before Collins had a chance to react. Collins felt himself being pulled aside blindly, and then Farrier shoved him hard. There was a hand covering Collins’s mouth, muffling the scream that tore its way out of his throat as his back hit a tree without warning.

Farrier moved his hand to Collins’s cheek instead, delicately tracing the other man’s bottom lip with his thumb, as if in apology.

Once he regained his senses, Collins could make out another fainter light sweeping the woods to his right. A torch, he realized. Looking for them.

His breathing quickened despite himself as the light grew closer, and with it, the sound of German voices steadily encroaching on their makeshift hiding place.

There was a single gunshot like a whip cracking through the night air.

Farrier jolted against Collins and went still.
Collins reached up automatically to grab at Farrier’s shirt, tugging his body in closer with a desperate cry—

Farrier’s hand migrated over Collins’s mouth once more, cutting the sound short. “Stay quiet,” Farrier hissed, leaning in close enough that his breath tickled Collins’s ear.

It was then that Collins realised Farrier hadn’t been shot, that they hadn’t been discovered at all. He strained to make out what the voices near them were saying as the torchlight suddenly shifted directions and began to move away.

The men were shouting again, and talking over each other, and it wasn’t until the voices began to fade in conjunction with the sound of the truck driving away that Collins figured out what happened.

“They shot one of their own,” he explained between panting breaths after peeling Farrier’s hand away from his mouth.

“How?” Farrier asked, looking confused. He didn’t make any attempt to put space between himself and Collins even though there was no longer any immediate threat.

“There were two of them,” Collins replied, “not Wehrmacht, I think. The patrol mistook them for us and shot one of them before they realised the mistake. Just our luck, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Farrier said, staring hard at Collins. “Lucky us.” The height difference between them was just enough that when they locked eyes, Farrier was looking up at Collins through his long tawny lashes. For a moment Collins forgot about the stabbing pain in his side, the Germans hunting them like deer in the forest—forgot about everything.

And then Farrier’s mouth was on his and it was like the last year they’d spent apart had never happened at all. Until, too soon, Farrier pulled away and all of reality came rushing back, crashing over Collins like a tidal wave, leaving him breathless and shaking.

“Sorry,” Farrier said as he took a step back. Though the sky above them was a dark orange, too bright still to see any stars, Farrier’s face was drenched in shadow and unreadable. “We should keep moving. In case Leclair’s still waiting on us.”

Collins nodded, but didn’t move. He stood propped up against the tree, still trying to catch his breath.

“Collins?”

“Just a minute,” he said, or tried to at least, but as soon as the words came tumbling out of his mouth he felt the world going sideways.

He came to with Farrier’s arms around him again, feeling like he was dangling precariously from the other man’s fingertips as he tried to regain his bearings.

“Are you all right, Collins?” Farrier was asking, but the words felt like they were all bottled up in a jar, murky and muffled. “You still with me?”

“Aye,” Collins replied, even as Farrier lifted up the corner of the jacket he was wearing to see that the makeshift bandage he’d crafted for Collins was now saturated with blood.

“Fuck,” Farrier hissed. He slung Collins’s arm over his shoulders and tucked his own under Collins’s right armpit, just managing to keep him upright. “You need to stay awake long enough to get back, all right?”
Collins was just aware enough of his surroundings to wonder what Farrier’s plan was if Leclair wasn’t waiting for them where he should be.

He drifted in and out of a state of half-consciousness, his body moving with Farrier’s encouragement even if his mind was gone. And then finally they broke through the endless sea of trees and emerged into a familiar clearing, but there was no sigh of relief from Farrier, just deafening silence.

Collins forced himself to keep his eyes open and swivelled his head drunkenly around to take in their surroundings. They were in the clearing where they’d split off from Leclair, where the road was interrupted by a fallen tree a little further down, but there was no one there. They were alone.

Collins let his eyes drift shut, his body sagging against Farrier’s. There was no point in fighting against the fog swirling round his head anymore.

He heard the stutter of the engine turning over just before the lights hit the back of his eyelids. Collins opened his eyes again to see an old, mud-covered, beat-up German military truck pulling back onto the road from its hiding spot in between two trees. Collins could feel Farrier’s body shaking under his. For a moment he thought Farrier was crying, and then realised it was laughter. They were saved.

Farrier practically dragged Collins over to the driver’s side of the truck, where they were met by Leclair, who helped lower Collins down onto one of the seats in the back. Collins had never been happier to see the French bastard’s irritatingly deadpan expression.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Collins spent the journey back to the farmhouse in a stupor, aware only of the places where his skin and Farrier’s were touching. That’s where he focused all his senses, finally an effective distraction from the sparks of agony that jolted through him every time the truck rolled over a twig or pebble in the road.

Collins felt himself being gently shaken awake when the truck had finally come to a stop, but instead of Farrier, he found himself looking back at Leclair.

“Where’s—” Collins started to say, slurring the words, as Leclair reached under him to try and extract him from the vehicle.


Collins couldn’t understand why that was necessary, but didn’t have the mental capacity to form a coherent question as Leclair carefully walked him back to the farmhouse. It seemed to be an easier journey for Leclair, Collins noted absently.

They walked straight through the open back door into the kitchen area without prior announcement.

The room was empty except for the two figures standing illuminated beneath the single light hanging above the kitchen table. Farrier’s head was bowed, his eyes closed, his forehead pressed to Simone’s. She had her palms pressed against either side of his throat.

Collins knew the image would be burned into his mind forever.

“Simone,” Leclair barked as they entered.

The two separated, Farrier making a beeline for the back corner of the kitchen as Simone approached Leclair and Collins with the same cold expression she always wore. But Collins noticed how she wouldn’t meet his eyes as she helped Leclair lift him up onto the table and began to unravel the compress Farrier had made.
After the wound was exposed, Collins’s vision began to swim. Simone and Leclair lowered him onto his back. Simone accepted a towel and a glass bottle of something clear from Farrier. She replaced the blood-soaked shirt with the towel and pressed hard, eliciting an involuntary gasp from Collins.

“This is going to hurt,” she warned him.

Collins watched as Simone opened the bottle, removed the towel, and then spilled out its contents onto the angry raw edges of the gaping tear in his flesh.

And then he saw nothing.
“Gibson, could you take over for Aimee, please?”

The request cut through the jumbled mess of thoughts swirling through Gibson’s head. He jerked his head up to meet Simone’s expectant eyes and darted away from where he’d been standing with Alex, watching as Simone and the others attempted to stem the flow of blood from Francois’s wound now that the bullet had been removed.

He was vaguely aware of Simone gesturing toward the parlour as Aimee moved out of the way to allow Gibson to take her place at Francois’s left shoulder. When he glanced up to follow Aimee’s progress out of the kitchen, Gibson caught Alex’s eyes, unintentionally. Gibson glanced back down immediately, focusing on Simone’s hands instead as she quickly threaded a sewing needle and wiped it clean with a wet rag that reeked of alcohol.

Though Simone had clearly been anticipating a different reaction, Francois barely stirred as she pushed the needle through torn skin, carefully and methodically closing the wound in just a matter of minutes.

“Alex, Tommy,” Simone said suddenly. Her tone was oddly calm as she worked. “Would the two of you stand watch outside, please? I don’t want anyone taking us by surprise.”

Gibson looked up again, expecting to hear protest from Alex at the very least, but instead he found the two nodding wearily in response as Alex extended a hand to help Tommy to his feet. Gibson turned away before he could be caught watching them, but listened closely as they crossed the kitchen and exited through the back door without exchanging a single word.

It wasn’t until the door shut behind them, the hollow thud echoing in his head like the sound of gunshots, that Gibson realised he and Simone were for all intents and purposes—alone.

He stared down at Francois as Simone bandaged his shoulder, shivering and lips twitching as if whispering a silent prayer. He was still in shock from the procedure, oblivious to everything going on around him even if he was still technically conscious. Dominique and her husband had already gone into the parlour to see to Hugues, and Simone, Gibson supposed, had sent Aimee in to help them.

Gibson lifted his eyes to meet hers. He furrowed his brow in silent understanding as their gazes
“We’re leaving?” he asked quietly.

Simone sighed. “You’re leaving. You and the others. I’ll stay.”

“Alone?” Gibson said, surprised by her reply.

“Someone has to wait for Leclair to return,” she pointed out. “Who else can?”

Even though Gibson knew she was right, he also knew it wasn’t the whole truth. She had been intended to go with Farrier to raid the supply caravan, not Leclair. Gibson knew she wouldn’t rest till she saw Farrier come back in one piece, with her own eyes. He just hoped she wouldn’t have to wait long.

“How bad is it, do you think?” Gibson asked. He helped lower Francois back down onto the table once Simone had finished patching him up, and then ducked into the kitchen to get a towel to lay down under the injured scout’s head.

“Bad,” she finally said once Gibson had returned. She hadn’t moved from Francois’s side, but made no attempt to aid Gibson in trying to make him more comfortable. “They were headed for the supply station when we ran into one of the patrols. Something must have happened with the others.”

Gibson felt a momentary flash of panic, but he stamped it out before it could become a distraction. It wasn’t the first time their countryside base of operation had potentially been compromised, but Gibson could tell by the look on Simone’s face that this time was different.

“Someone should stay with you till Leclair gets back,” Gibson told her. He knew before saying it that Simone would refuse.

“I appreciate the concern,” she replied, her tone softening somewhat as she made an ineffective attempt to wipe the blood from her arms on a discarded towel. “But I’ll manage. You should grab anything important. I’ll help the others get ready.”

Gibson nodded, taking one last glance at Francois before turning and heading back down the corridor to Leclair’s room. There was a rucksack by the bed that Gibson knew contained a loaded gun, a torch, and half a dozen emergency rations.

He grabbed it and moved over to the bookshelf next, pushing up onto his toes to pull out a book from the top-shelf: Volume XVI of Les Hommes de Bonne Volonté, or Verdun. Inside the front cover was a small metal key taped to the first page. Gibson removed the key and quickly replaced the book before walking back around the bed over to a locked trunk in the corner of the room by the door.

He crouched down in front of it and placed the key inside the padlock and opened the lid of the trunk to reveal half a dozen guns. There was one shotgun, two rifles, and three pistols—one of which had jammed the last time its previous owner had attempted to fire a shot, which was why it was currently in Leclair’s possession.

Gibson stuffed one of the working pistols into the bag with the other handgun and then grabbed one of the rifles for good measure. If everything went as planned, there’d be no use for any of the guns at all, but he wasn’t about to take any chances.

With Leclair’s rucksack hanging off one shoulder and the rifle over the other, Gibson began the task of removing every single document pertaining to either Sevard or the Resistance itself—no small task
considering the state of disorganization he, Tommy, and Alex had left the room in while translating.

By the time Gibson finished going through Leclair’s things and re-joined the others in the parlour, Simone had made good on her promise.

Francois was awake, Dominique at his side trying with lacklustre results to ply him with water as he stared off into empty space. His face was bone-white, and Gibson wasn’t sure how he was going to make the hike up the hillside with the rest.

Hugues was lying on the floor in a stretcher that Gibson had seen used only once before. His leg was splinted straight and his clothes were stained with sweat, presumably from the stress of having his knee popped back into place while he was still conscious.

Everyone but Simone had a bag—or two, in the case of Alex and Jean-Marie—on their backs. They looked like a group of war-weary refugees; Gibson supposed that was exactly what they were, even if these ones weren’t looking to escape. He wished he felt the same.

When Gibson looked to Simone, he could see her anxiety slowly bleeding into the lines in her faces. But he knew better than to try to comfort her.

“Ready?” she asked.

Gibson was about to answer when he realised there was still something he needed to do.

“I need you,” he said, hastily grabbing one of the stray pencils Aimee was prone to leaving around the Chateau from the coffee table in front of the sofa and flipping open one of the books lying beside to scrawl a message on one of the blank pages at the back, “to give this to Leclair.” Gibson scratched the words down with large sweeping strokes before ripping out the page and handing it to Simone.

She squinted down at the message in confusion. “‘Vous aviez raison,’” she read aloud. “‘J’en suis navré.’” Simone finished reading and glanced up to meet Gibson’s eyes. “Right about what?”

“He’ll understand,” Gibson replied, all too aware of how the others’ gazes—particularly Alex’s—lingered on him with everything ranging from curiosity to outright suspicion radiating from their expressions.

“And I couldn’t just tell him this myself?” Simone asked.

Gibson readjusted the position of the rifle on his back so it hung more comfortably between his shoulder blades. He shrugged. “Consider it a reminder,” he told her. It was a simpler explanation than trying to tell her that Leclair needed a concrete confirmation from Gibson, and that a written message was the best he could do considering the circumstances.

Simone nodded, apparently content with Gibson’s answer, and carefully folded up the page before placing it inside her breast pocket. Then she took a step forward and did the very last thing Gibson expected.

“Bon courage,” she murmured into his ear with her arms wrapped tightly around him.

Gibson was stunned for a moment, forgetting to reply until Simone had already started to pull away. “Et toi,” he said, even more shocked when the response elicited a small smile from Simone as she stepped back again.

“You should go now,” she said. “We’ve already wasted enough time as it is.”
Gibson nodded, still feeling slightly off-kilter from the unexpected emotional display even as he turned to face the rest of the group head-on. “On y vas,” he told them. Gibson wasn’t used to giving commands—certainly wasn’t used to being a leader in any capacity—so he was mildly surprised when all of them, Tommy and Alex included, obeyed without question, picking up whatever they could carry and crowding around the front door.

Tommy and Alex were the last to leave, with Hugues laid out on the stretcher between them. Gibson held the door open, feeling strangely nostalgic as he watched Tommy walk through first, followed by Alex, whose position Gibson had once occupied.

Simone was sitting on the sofa when Gibson turned to give the Chateau one last look. Their eyes met, but neither said a word, having already uttered their goodbyes.

Gibson closed the door between them with a hollow ache in his gut. He hadn’t anticipated the feeling, but now he knew that someday—when this was all over, if Leclair made good on his promise to help Gibson finally escape France—that he was going to miss her.

Gibson turned and was met with a host of expectant faces, waiting on his direction. “Jean-Marie, you remember the way?”

The man nodded, and Gibson felt his shoulders sag in relief when he realised he wouldn’t have to shoulder the responsibility for escorting the group alone.

“Take point,” he instructed. “I’ll stay with the wounded at the rear.”

Again, Jean-Marie merely nodded and moved to take that position at the head of the group. The others followed without saying a word in either query or protest, and Gibson realised that all of them, even Alex and Tommy, who hadn’t ever been through this before, must have understood the direness of their circumstances.

Perhaps that was inevitable when you’d just watched a man screaming as a bullet was cut out of his shoulder. And whatever Tommy had seen before all that, Gibson knew it must have been worse.

Gibson knew from experience that there were days, weeks even, where one could forget there was even a war going on at all. As the occupation had dragged on, those days had lessened, and since Tommy and the others had arrived, vanished entirely, until every day was merely one horror bleeding into the next, with no end in sight.

They marched east toward the hills with Jean-Marie at the head of the line, Gibson behind Alex at the very back. The moon was waning but still full enough to illuminate the path they forged through the long grass field that stretched out east behind the Chateau before fading into a rocky incline at its farthest edge.

Gibson watched the others carefully, like a shepherd over his flock, as they traversed the winding trail that led up the hillside, ready to take over for Tommy at the front of the stretcher if he showed even the slightest sign of needing a reprieve. Gibson kept an eye on Alex, too, but knew he wouldn’t accept any help if Gibson were to offer it.

“So where exactly are we going?” Alex asked as they crested the first ridge, where the trees began to close in on them, just barely managing to get the question out between grunts of exertion as he climbed.

Gibson glanced up again to evaluate Alex’s progress before answering and it was clear from the taut lines in Alex’s neck and the dark patch of sweat between his shoulder blades that bearing the greater
portion of Hugues’s weight was already starting to take its toll. Still, Gibson was a little surprised that Alex hadn’t asked about their destination sooner.

“There’s a church at the top of the hill,” Gibson told him.

“We’re going to a church?” Alex said, huffing out a barely audible laugh. “In Dunkirk?”

Gibson allowed himself a small smile at that, realising it was oddly fitting. But he didn’t respond further, choosing instead to save his energy for the climb ahead, and Alex didn’t ask any more questions after that.

The most treacherous part of the journey was near the peak, where the ground turned to shifting sand and crumbling shale eroded by the wind gusting in from the sea. Gibson reacted before he fully registered seeing Alex’s foot slipping on the loose rocks, reaching out automatically for his arm to steady him.

“Thanks,” Alex replied, even as he tentatively tested the ground before committing to the next step.

“It’s nothing,” Gibson replied. He realised his hand was still wrapped around Alex’s upper arm and forced himself to let go.

A few minutes later, Gibson heard Jean-Marie call out from the front of the line, and then the trees suddenly parted to reveal the ruins of a church built and abandoned well before any of them were born. Some of the stone façade had been disintegrated by time like the hillside the church stood on, revealing the bones of its wooden foundation, but it still stood tall, a lasting mark on the landscape.

Jean-Marie hesitated when he reached the archway leading inside. There was only one door left sitting crookedly on its hinges; the other half of the entryway a yawning black mouth open wide and waiting for them to pass through.

Gibson broke off from his position at the rear and yanked the rucksack down off of his shoulder to grab the torch from it.

The torch didn’t provide much light. The dim beam illuminated the thick cloud of dust that sprung up around Gibson as he stepped inside, but not much else. Still, it would have to do. He kicked away the pile of debris that had apparently fallen from what remained of the roof since their last visit.

He marched confidently up the aisle that lay between the rows of rotting wooden pews, past the pulpit, barely needing the light at all to find the iron latch on the small trapdoor at the back of the church. Unlike the rest of the structure, this was well-maintained. Like the ladder below it, the members of the Resistance kept the entrance to the cellar ready for their use should the need arise.

After making sure that everything was in order, Gibson returned to the others waiting at the entrance and began ferrying them through the ruins of the old hillside church and into the darkness below.

Once everyone else had made it down, Gibson emerged from the hole in the floor to find Alex and Tommy already waiting up above, Hugues sitting up awkwardly with his good leg draped over the edge of the stretcher.

“There’s no other way,” Hugues pointed out wearily. He was right.

“I’ll wait down at the bottom,” Gibson said, handing off the torch to Tommy while Alex helped Hugues off of the stretcher. “Shine the light down?”

Gibson could just barely make out Tommy’s nod in response. He descended the ladder again
quickly, and by the time he reached the bottom, a faint beam of light shone down from above the trapdoor, creating a little square of light where Gibson was standing.

Gibson stepped back and a few seconds later the light disappeared as Hugues squeezed into the hole. He lowered himself down with his back facing the rungs, making slow progress as he tried to keep his injured leg from getting in the way.

Gibson waited anxiously on the ground, ready to catch Hugues, or at least cushion his fall, if something went wrong.

Nothing went wrong. Gibson was there at Hugues’s side to steady him when he hopped down off of the last rung. He grunted as his foot hit the ground, muscles tensing under Gibson’s hands as he tried to regain his balance.

Someone, Gibson couldn’t tell who in the dark, rushed forward to help them. Gibson allowed Hugues to be pulled away and then squinted up at the light shining down unobscured once more.

“You can lower the stretcher,” he called up to Tommy and Alex.

It was a few moments before they managed to get it down, shoved through the trapdoor diagonally, and with Gibson having to climb the first three rungs before he could even reach it. Alex followed it down, and lastly, Tommy, still bearing the torch, which he handed back to Gibson immediately upon letting go of the ladder.

“This is it?” Alex asked as Gibson swept the torch across the room, trying to get his bearings after standing in almost complete darkness for several minutes.

“No,” Gibson replied curtly. The dim beam of light hovered on a ragged sheet covering a ruined patch of wall. Gibson walked over to it and pulled the corner up to reveal a gaping hole where some of the wooden slats had been ripped away, large enough for a person to fit through. “We’re nearly there,” he told them as he squeezed through the opening. “Stay close. Step carefully.” He knew first-hand how treacherous the uneven stone beneath could be if one didn’t pay close enough attention.

This time Gibson led the way for the group, the torch providing a little more light now that they were in an enclosed space. He glanced over his shoulder once to make sure no one had been left behind, but it was impossible to determine who was following without turning to shine the torch in their faces first.

The air had been thick with dust inside the church, and in the passageway, it was even worse. Gibson knew they were getting close when the stagnant must permeating the tunnel started to give way to the tang of salt on the wind.

He quickened his pace when he spotted the dark mouth at the end of the tunnel just ahead, already basking in relief before they’d even reached the cave. Gibson turned to the left after passing through the opening, not even needing the torch to know where the lantern hung on the cave wall.

Gibson reached into the rucksack for the box of matches he knew he’d find in one of the small exterior pockets, striking one with shaking fingers. He couldn’t suppress the smile that spread across his face as the soft warm glow filled the cavern.

There was an abortive sound of surprise from behind him, and Gibson turned to find both Alex and Tommy surveying the space with matching expressions of astonishment.

“Not what you were expecting?” Gibson asked, directing the question more at Alex than Tommy, though it was the latter who answered.
“You certainly seem…prepared,” Tommy replied, even as Dominique moved past him to start a fire in a small dug-out pit in the centre of the cavern, near which there was already a stock of cast-iron kitchenware, all neatly organized and hanging from track spikes bored into the wall.

On the opposite side of the cavern were several bedrolls, still neatly folded up. Gibson made his way over to them and began unrolling and laying them out by the fire. He’d gotten through three on his own before Dominique suddenly appeared behind him and placed a hand over his.

“You need to rest,” she said quietly.

“But—”

“You’ve done enough,” she told him as she relieved him of the bedroll. “Go sit with your friends.”

Either the tension between himself and Alex wasn’t as apparent to the other members of the Resistance, or Dominique was simply too polite to comment on it, but Gibson didn’t feel the need to correct her. He found Alex and Tommy huddled against the wall near the entrance to the tunnel. Gibson sat down on Tommy’s left, as close as present company would allow, and pulled his knees up to his chest to match the way the other two were sitting.

The trio sat in silence watching as Jean-Marie and Aimee tended to Francois and Hugues, who were lying on two of the bedrolls Gibson had laid out, while Dominique tinkered with the kitchenware, filling a kettle with water from one of the barrels they used for storage.

Gibson was fond of comfortable silence, not ever having seen the need to fill the void with worthless small talk, but this was anything but comfortable. Gibson scratched at the back of his hand, where the blood was flaking off of his skin, and realised just how disgusting he was after the night’s events.

Gibson stood without announcement, intending to scurry off alone into the dark where he could finally be alone with his thoughts, but Tommy stopped him before he could make his escape.

“Where are you going?”

“Wash up,” Gibson replied clumsily.

He wasn’t expecting Tommy to stand up alongside him. Gibson had to stop himself from taking a reflexive step back when their new positions suddenly put them much closer together. “I’ll come with you,” Tommy said. He gestured to the dark stains on his own clothes with dirt-caked hands. “I mean, if any of us is in need of a bath,” he added with forced ebullience.

Gibson nodded, attempting a closed-mouth smile in response. It withered instantly when Alex got to his feet and glared down defiantly at both Gibson and Tommy.

“I’ll go too,” Alex said quickly, daring Gibson to protest.

Gibson flared his nostrils and inhaled deeply, trying to keep the discomfort from showing on his face as he replied. “All right,” he said evenly. “Follow me.”

Gibson spared a moment to collect a few spare blankets and another lantern before heading past the collection of quilts and bedrolls spread out around the fire. He exchanged a quick knowing glance with Dominique, and was all-too aware of Aimee’s eyes on his back as they headed toward the back part of the cavern, where the fire’s light didn’t reach.

“There’s another way outside?” Tommy asked in a voice bordering on a whisper as they reached the forked tunnels at the far end of the main cave and Gibson led them into the path on the right.
“We’re not going outside,” Gibson said. His voice bounced off the narrow cave walls, creating an eerie echo that followed them down the spiralling tunnel as the trio walked with their backs stooped to avoid hitting their heads on the low ceiling. “There’s a cavern down below where a river runs through before emptying into the sea. It’s large enough that we can use it to bathe if we need to.”

Alex snorted, though whether he was impressed or disappointed by the answer, Gibson couldn’t tell. “How did you lot even come across this place?” he asked.

“Leclair found it,” Gibson replied. “During the War, I think.”

They continued down, deeper, until a few minutes later when the ground beneath their feet began to level out again and the passage started to widen. The sound of the water travelled far enough that they could hear it clear as day well before the river itself came into view.

“Careful,” Gibson warned, hugging the right wall as the cavern opened up on their left to reveal a steady rush of water flowing deeper into the cave. He could feel a gentle mist spraying his left cheek and hand as he walked past a small crevice in the wall where water was spurting out like someone holding their thumb over the mouth of a hose.

“I assume you don’t bathe in that,” Alex said.

“No,” Gibson replied. He crouched down and gestured for Tommy and Alex to do the same. “Through here,” he told them, before squeezing into the small hole, no more than two metres high.

Inside the cavern was more spacious, though not by much, and there was little standing room once Tommy and Alex emerged from the hole to join Gibson.

Gibson carefully balanced the lantern on a small bit of rock jutting out from the wall, where he knew it wouldn’t fall, and began stripping out of his clothes—covered in sweat, dirt, blood, and heaven only knew what else.

Gibson felt his face warm as he undid his trousers, hyper-aware of Alex’s presence less than a metre away. He was grateful the flush in his cheeks wouldn’t show in the dim light softly illuminating the chamber.

“Well, this is cosy,” Alex remarked.

Gibson turned to find Alex already half-undressed himself, while Tommy had barely gotten a single button undone. He leant down quickly to avoid catching either’s gaze and pulled off his boots. His trousers were the last thing to join the neat pile of discarded clothing up on the rocks, and then Gibson was stepping into the pool, crouching down until just his head remained above the water. He pushed himself to the far edge of the pool, where the water from the river behind the rocks trickled through tiny crevices, just enough to continually refill any water that would be lost over time.

There was a disturbance in the water, and then another, but Gibson didn’t look up. He trailed his hand through the burgeoning ripples in the water’s surface, sluicing the blood and grime from his skin with pure focus, intent. He wouldn’t allow himself to be distracted. He wouldn’t allow himself to look up. At either of them.

Tommy, however, piped up less than a minute after they’d gotten into the water, unable to let Gibson have even a single moment of peace it seemed. “Oh, come off it, you two,” he said, without explanation or prelude.

Gibson’s head snapped up automatically to find Alex sitting directly across from him, his eyes widened in a twin expression of surprise. Tommy was looking pointedly between them, his mouth
twisted into a disapproving frown.

“Both of you are my friends,” he told them. “Why can’t you just try to get along?”

Gibson exchanged a loaded glance with Alex, realising that Tommy had misinterpreted the tense atmosphere for animosity rather than…well, Gibson wasn’t really sure what to call it.

“Sorry, Tom,” Alex replied suddenly, tearing his eyes away from Gibson to meet Tommy’s plaintive stare instead. “You’re right.”

And then Tommy turned to face Gibson with the same expectant look in his eyes, and Gibson suddenly felt panicked, cornered, like he was being forced into a lie he’d had no say in concocting. But the alternative—telling Tommy the truth about what had happened at the Chateau—he couldn’t imagine anything worse than that.

“Of course,” Gibson said, unable to help flicking his eyes over to Alex for a brief second, finding him curled in on himself now at the edge of the pool, his knees to his chest with his arms wrapped around them. “I’ll do my best,” he added.

For you, Gibson thought, eyes locked on Tommy’s once more. It felt like an unspoken apology, though Gibson wasn’t really sure what he was even apologizing for. He wasn’t promised to Tommy. He didn’t even know if Tommy reciprocated his feelings, for that matter.

But none of Gibson’s rationalising seemed to make any difference to the heavy weight of shame lingering heavily in his chest.

Then Tommy smiled, and suddenly none of that mattered. All the worrying, the guilt—forgotten, at least in that instant.

“I really didn’t think you’d give in so easily,” Tommy said with tangible relief in his voice. “Especially not him,” he continued, jabbing Alex with his elbow for good measure.

Alex returned the gesture by splashing Tommy, leaving him gasping and spluttering with water dripping from his hair.

Gibson forced a smile, watching them scuffle for a moment and wishing it didn’t feel like he was still observing something he wasn’t truly a part of.

His eyes lingered just long enough for Alex to notice. Gibson stood abruptly, embarrassed at being caught, and he stepped past Tommy to get to his clothes. He threw them on hastily, not caring if he’d left a few buttons undone, and then crawled back through the hole that led back out into the tunnel.

It was pitch black without the lantern but the dark hadn’t bothered Gibson since he was small. He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the river rushing through the caves.

“What’s wrong?”

The sound of Tommy’s voice in his ear made Gibson tense up like a gun had gone off. He had to force himself to relax each muscle in his neck and jaw before he could reply.

“Nothing,” he said, turning to look at Tommy’s face, illuminated in the soft glow of the lantern in his hand. Gibson caught movement in the corner of his eye, Alex emerging from the entrance to the pool. “We should head back,” he told them, pretending he hadn’t seen the sympathy tinging Tommy’s expression.
“Okay,” Tommy replied easily. He handed Gibson the lantern, and didn’t press for an honest answer to his question.

Alex said nothing at all.

They were mostly dry by the time they made it back to the main cavern where the others had made camp, with the exception of Alex’s hair, which was long enough that it was still obviously damp. Gibson exchanged their wet blankets for a fresh one as they made their way over to the fire and tossed it at Alex’s head. He caught it with a scowl, but scrubbed at his head without complaint.

Dominique was hovering over the fire boiling water in a kettle. The others sitting beside her were all sipping tea from speckled enamel mugs—aside from Hugues, who was flat on his back and snoring loudly enough that it drowned out all the other noise from around the campfire.

Tommy seemed particularly enraptured by the scene as he sat down next to Gibson on one of the bedrolls lying between Aimee and Francois. Alex hesitated for a moment before following suit, but stuck to the farthest corner, putting as much distance between himself and Gibson as possible.

Were it a day earlier, Gibson would have interpreted the gesture as simple enmity, or jealousy, and it wouldn’t have troubled him as much as it did now.

“How does that work?” Tommy wondered aloud, still staring at the fire with unabashed fascination. “Why is there no smoke?”

“Well, two reasons really,” Gibson told him. He pointed to the main fire pit, over which the kettle was hanging, and then to the smaller dug out trench adjacent, which funnelled into the burning fire. “That vent there regulates the airflow so the fire burns hotter and produces less smoke, and it helps to keep what little smoke there is from escaping. It would work better if there was wind, but…”

As he spoke, Gibson noticed Alex staring at the two of them, Gibson and Tommy, looking almost wistful.

Gibson got up, ignoring the inquisitive look from Tommy, and motioned toward Dominique, who was pouring hot water from the kettle into another mug. She gave it to him without question and moved onto the next.

He sat down again, carefully cupping the warm mug between his palms, and leaned past Tommy to offer the drink to Alex, who looked caught off-guard by the gesture.

“What’s this for?” Alex grumbled, sounding downright suspicious even as he took the mug from Gibson’s hands.

Gibson shrugged and resisted the urge to check Tommy’s face for some sign of approval. “You looked like you needed it,” he said, truthfully enough.

Alex nodded and took a cautious sip.

Tommy was the next to receive a cup, courtesy of Dominique, but when she offered one to Gibson as well, he refused.

“I know you’re not fond of tea,” she said, casting a sideways glance at Tommy and Alex like they might take offense to that, “but it’ll help you sleep.”

Gibson arched an eyebrow. “You really expect me to sleep listening to that?” he joked, jerking his head in Hugues’s direction.
Dominique smiled, but it didn’t mask her exasperation as she replied. “So take a bedroll and go upstairs. You need sleep,” she insisted. “You’ve done enough.”

Not nearly, Gibson thought to himself as he caught sight of Leclair’s rucksack sitting undisturbed where he’d left it next to the other supplies. Now, more than ever, time was of the essence. Leclair may have been right about Sevard’s true identity, but that still didn’t explain her involvement with the Reich, or why she specifically had been chosen to oversee the manufacturing of the Panzer prototypes.

“I suppose you’re right,” Gibson said finally, ripping his eyes away from the rucksack containing the remaining notes to be translated to meet Dominique’s eyes again. “You won’t mind if I take one of the other lamps?”

She shook her head. “Be my guest,” she told him.

Gibson knew to expect the inquisitive stare from Tommy when he got to his feet. “Where are you going?” Tommy asked.

“It’s his bedtime,” Alex replied before Gibson had a chance to answer.

“To take a nap,” Gibson confirmed. He pointed to a series of indentations gouged into the cave wall near the tunnel they’d first come in through. “There’s a smaller cave up through there,” he told Tommy. “Climb up and give me a shout if the others come back.”

Tommy nodded tightly, his expression unreadable. Gibson didn’t extend an invitation for Tommy to join him, and thankfully, Tommy didn’t ask.

Gibson made a show of tying a bedroll and lantern to the rucksack before heading over to the crude stone ladder that led ‘upstairs’. He hauled himself up quickly, catching the scent of the ocean air with a pang of nostalgia as soon as his head popped through the opening.

If he’d actually been planning on sleeping, Gibson wouldn’t have needed the lantern at all. The light from the moon streaming in from the narrow vertical crack running through the far wall was bright enough that Gibson could make out the details of the entire space, a small chamber less than five metres by five metres in dimension.

Gibson hauled himself up and made his way to the natural window that had formed in the side of the hill on where the old church had been built, peering out at the trees and the field of grass from where they’d come. The air there was fresher; the walls of the tiny rock chamber seemed to absorb the salt from the breeze blowing in from the sea less than a kilometre to the north, and amplified it.

Farrier had hated the smell. He couldn’t understand why Gibson seemed to find it so comforting when it should have been a reminder of a week spent knee-deep in sea-foam and sand, fighting desperately—and nearly failing—to stay alive.

But it wasn’t his time spent on Dunkirk beach at the front of Gibson’s mind as he sat down cross-legged on his bedroll with the lantern sat between his feet, ready to dive back into the half-finished transcription of Sevard’s decoded notes. The salt in the air conjured images of summers spent with his father on his little fishing boat in Calais, where he’d spent almost more time in the water than out.

He squinted down at the paper filled with Hebrew characters in the low light, trying to push out the memories so he could concentrate. But staring at his own uncertain handwriting only made the remembering worse, reminded of the way his first Hebrew teacher had criticized his penmanship.

In contrast to the rest of his schoolmates, and even his sister, Gibson had little trouble speaking
Hebrew, but had always struggled with reading and writing. Now, after years had passed since he’d last looked at any scripture and he had to force himself to read each character, pronouncing it in his head before moving on to the next.

He wasn’t sure of how much time had elapsed, but Gibson was barely through translating the first half of the page when he heard Tommy’s voice from the ladder.

“I thought you were sleeping.”

Gibson glanced up to find Tommy staring at him from the entrance to the chamber, his elbows propped up on the floor as he stood with his feet lodged in the indents below.

“This was more important,” Gibson replied. He looked back down at his notes, scribbled down another sentence, and when he looked up again, Tommy hadn’t moved. “You should go back to Alex,” Gibson told him.

“Are those Sevard’s notes?” Tommy asked, ignoring Gibson’s statement. He started to pull himself up into the cave. “I can help—”

“Go back to Alex,” Gibson said again, unable to keep the hard edge out of his voice.

Tommy froze. He stared at Gibson for a long moment, the corners of his mouth gradually pulling into a frown, and then he retreated without a word, leaving Gibson sitting there staring at an empty space with a similarly hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It was for the best, he told himself. Alex needed Tommy more than he did.

Gibson turned back to the translation, hoping it would provide a sufficient distraction from the guilt and anxiety rattling his brain. It worked—but only long enough for his worrying to be replaced by frustration.

He looked over the translation he’d finished of the first page of Sevard’s notes, first transcribed from Phoenician to modern Hebrew before Gibson could even attempt to extract any meaning from it. But what little he’d managed to glean didn’t seem useful in the slightest.

There were some words he couldn’t translate at all, either foreign terms that had been Hebraized, or vocabulary he’d never had occasion to learn. And the rest was, well, baffling to say the least. Gibson hadn’t been expecting a confession of war crimes or an instruction manual on how to dismantle the Germans’ weaponry with the press of a button, but he couldn’t fathom the reason for Sevard’s careful encryption of these notes in particular.

It made little sense to him that she would go to all the trouble of writing down purchase orders and meeting dates in not only Hebrew, but an ancient version of it that had been unused for millennia, when far more sensitive information had been contained in her journalistic letters written plainly in French.

The only item of note that stood out to Gibson as he went over the translation again was a word he hadn’t recognized at first, but eventually determined to be a Hebraization of the name Ferdinand. She’d repeated it several times throughout the document, in association with requests for materials, most of which Gibson could only guess at the translations for. He hadn’t realised at first, but as he compared his translations with what Alex and Tommy had worked on, he began to connect the dots. Ferdinand was Ferry, Sevard’s contact with the Reich who apparently had the means to acquire almost anything she might need at the factory.

He reached for the second page he’d transcribed from Phoenician to Hebrew, looking for any further
mentions of Ferdinand’s name. There were eight in total. Gibson focused on translating those sections to the exclusion of everything else. His hand stilled as he finished with the last of them, the implications of what he had just written finally dawning on him.

Maxine Sevard wasn’t the overseer of the Panzer Mk. VII tanks being built in the cobbled-together factory that had been constructed on Dunkirk’s docks. She was the engineer.

This ‘Ferdinand’, whoever he was, seemed to be merely a mouthpiece, a necessary buffer between Sevard and those members of the military administration who would be opposed to taking orders from a Frenchwoman.

Looking through the first page of translation again, Gibson could see clear references to Sevard’s involvement with the Panzertruppe before she’d come to Dunkirk—before even, the occupation. Which begged the question: just how much of this did Leclair know?

With little recourse to answer that question for now, Gibson resigned himself to the work of completing the translation, finding only more evidence to support the idea that Sevard was the mastermind the experimental tanks as he did so.

As he approached the end of the coded documentation, a date caught Gibson’s eye. It had been difficult at first to keep track of the days with how removed from society they all were at the Chateau, but after the fallout from Jean-Marie forgetting Dominique’s birthday, Aimee had made a calendar, which was still hanging up in the kitchen of the farmhouse they’d been forced to abandon.

Gibson knew without having to think about it that it was the eighth of June, going on the ninth. And on the morning of the ninth, just hours away, Sevard was scheduled to meet with a General Gottschald of the Panzertruppe for an inspection of the completed prototypes.

As Gibson was writing the last few pieces of information down from the transcribed notes, he heard rustling from the ladder. Tommy, he assumed, just as persistent as ever.

“Look, I’m sorry—” Gibson started to say, stopping short when he looked up from the translation to find Leclair straightening up after climbing through the hole in the floor.

“Sorry for what?” Leclair replied with a frown.


What was important was the scrap of crumpled paper clutched in Leclair’s left hand, shaking ever so slightly as Leclair crossed the room to crouch down across from Gibson. Their faces were centimetres apart as Leclair spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. “Are you sure?” he asked, uncurling his fingers to reveal the note Gibson had left for him with Simone.

Gibson nodded, reaching for the original copies of the letters Alex had partially translated. “There were letters amongst her things—she never sent them, but they were all addressed to you.”

Leclair sank down onto his knees as Gibson handed him the stack of letters, a flicker of emotion finally emerging in the lines around his eyes and mouth as he carefully leafed through each page as if it belonged to a sacred text.

“There’s something else,” Gibson added hesitantly. He was loathe to interrupt perhaps the only moment in which he had ever seen Leclair moved to something close to tears, but what Gibson had learned about Sevard’s role at the factory outweighed any revelations about her identity.

Leclair looked up, his expression hardening slightly, but said nothing.
Gibson took Leclair’s silence as an invitation to proceed, and inhaled sharply before spitting out the words in one breath. “Maxine is the one who came up with the plans for the new tanks.”

Leclair stared at Gibson for a long moment. His eyes widened slightly in surprise, and then as if he’d realised, narrowed again, almost to the point of apparent suspicion. “Are you sure?” he asked again, but gone was the hopeful note in his voice, replaced with the icy edge Gibson had grown accustomed to in the past year.

Gibson passed him the notes he had meticulously translated and carefully watched Leclair’s face as he attempted to ascertain the veracity of Gibson’s claim. But there was nothing to be learned from Leclair’s carefully schooled expression.

It was nearly a full minute before Leclair spoke again, and when he did, he did so without looking up to meet Gibson’s eyes. “We’ll have to find a way to get her out of the city before we sabotage the factory. It’ll be more difficult if we’re forced to work out of the caves, but we should have enough time to—”

Gibson coughed lightly to get Leclair’s attention, not wanting to interrupt.

Leclair’s head snapped up. “What is it?”

Gibson leaned forward to point at the page where the meeting between Maxine and General Gottschald was indicated, along with their plans to follow. “They’re hosting a banquet at the hotel she’s been staying in tomorrow,” Gibson said, even though Leclair could have read the information for himself. “And then they’re taking a train to Vichy together in the morning.”

Leclair didn’t react at first, continuing to read silently for a moment before glancing back up. “Go fetch your friends and bring them up here,” he said, his voice not betraying even the slightest hint of his true feelings.

“What do you want me to tell them?” Gibson asked as he got to his feet. His left leg was numb. He stood completely still, waiting for the feeling to come back.

“Nothing,” was Leclair’s curt reply. Gibson should have expected it. He felt foolish for asking. “I’ll explain once they’re here.”

Gibson stopped once he reached the ladder, turning back to look at Leclair. He couldn’t suppress the question that had been quietly nagging at the back of his mind since the moment he’d realised Sevard had coded her notes in Phoenician Hebrew. “Why didn’t you tell me that you’re a Jew?”

Leclair paused a moment before responding, but if he was surprised by the question, he didn’t show it. “She was. I’m not.”

‘Was’, he’d said, as if there was ever a state of past tense for her, as if any of them—Maxine, Gibson, Farrier—had a choice in denying their birth.

Gibson didn’t respond to Leclair’s revelation; didn’t acknowledge it at all. He climbed back down into the main cavern and steeled himself for whatever resistance was about to come: Tommy’s questions, Alex’s reluctance, whatever form it happened to take.

He wasn’t expecting to be mobbed by the two of them as soon as he turned around. “Leclair wants to meet with us upstairs,” Gibson bit out quickly, before either had a chance to delay the message.

“Thank Christ,” Alex muttered before pushing past Gibson to make the ascent without so much as a word of complaint.
Gibson looked to Tommy in confusion.

“Leclair wouldn’t answer anyone’s questions,” Tommy explained, watching as Alex pulled himself up through the hole. “We wanted to know what happened to Collins, but he just said he needed to talk to you first.”

“Oh,” Gibson said. He gestured for Tommy to follow once Alex had disappeared into the cave above, leaving the ladder usable once more. He felt a bit sick again when he realised that he’d been so caught up in everything to do with Maxine that he hadn’t even bothered to ask after Farrier.

Gibson found Leclair sitting on his bedroll after he followed Tommy up, the latter standing awkwardly next to Alex, who was leaning against the right-hand wall, glaring at Leclair with his arms crossed. It wasn’t until Gibson sat down opposite Leclair that the other two followed suit, Alex sprawling out on the ground with his back to the rock, Tommy tucking his limbs into himself like he was trying to appear as small as possible.

It felt strange for the three of them to be sitting on the ground around Leclair like this, like they were children being read a bedtime story instead of covert wartime operatives preparing for a mission.

“Let’s have it then,” Alex said as they settled in, while Leclair sat still looking over the translations lying in his lap.

Leclair gave Alex a sharp warning glance as he looked up, but there was no verbal reprimand to accompany the statement. “Plans have changed,” he told them instead. “The sabotage operation will take place tomorrow at sundown.”

Gibson remained silent, but Tommy and Alex both exploded into questions on either side of him.

“Why so soon?” Alex demanded, even as Tommy asked, “What about Collins and Farrier?”

Leclair held up a single hand to quiet them. “Collins and Farrier are back at the Chateau with Simone,” he explained. “They’re to keep watch until dawn and report back here if they determine that the location has been compromised. As for our timeline…” He trailed off with a pointed look at Gibson, who suddenly felt the weight of Tommy and Alex’s eyes as they turned their attention to him instead.

“There’s a military official coming tomorrow morning to inspect the factory,” Gibson told them. “Sevard is leaving for Vichy with him the day after.”

Leclair added on before either Tommy or Alex had the opportunity to respond with more questions. “Instead of a five-man team handling the charges, the two of you, and Collins, will sabotage the factory as planned while Gibson, Farrier and Simone capture Maxine. She’ll be in attendance at a banquet at her hotel tomorrow night, so we should have ample opportunity to safely extract her.”

Alex shook his head in clear disbelief. “If we’re already planning to run in there half-cocked, why wouldn’t we just blow the damn place up while she and this military bloke are both inside?”

Gibson’s eyes flitted back to Leclair just in time to watch the man flinch in response to Alex’s question. “New information about Sevard has recently come to light,” Leclair said, almost tripping over his own words. Gibson had never seen him look so flustered. “She would be far more valuable to us alive,” he concluded, mouth tight with some carefully suppressed feeling.

“So you want us to risk our lives on a bloody suicide mission so you can capture some French traitor, and for what, information?” Alex demanded.
“Yes,” Leclair said coldly. “I do.”

Alex looked over at Gibson and Tommy, as if to say, ‘Can you believe this?’ but Gibson, knowing full well that Alex had no chance of convincing Leclair to abandon this new plan, returned the glance with a warning stare of his own, silently pleading for him to drop it.

Still, Gibson was surprised when Alex actually cooperated, offering no further argument even as Leclair quietly stared him down.

“How is the sabotage operation supposed to work with only three people?” Tommy suddenly asked in a soft voice. He was clearly trying to avoid incurring Leclair’s ire after watching the exchange between him and Alex. “We hadn’t even decided on a strategy for when it was still all five of us.”

“I’m still working through the details,” Leclair replied. He glanced down at the notes still sitting in his lap and spread out next to him, as if he’d find the answer written there instead.

There was a beat of silence, and then Gibson opened his mouth, not even really thinking about it until the words were already coming out. “I should switch places with Collins.”

“Pardon?” Leclair asked without even looking up.

“Collins is the best option we have for infiltrating the banquet,” Gibson replied, the words like lead ball bearings as he forced them out of his throat and onto his tongue. “He can pose as Luftwaffe so Sevard doesn’t recognize him. Farrier could disguise himself as a French waiter, even.

“Tommy, Alex, and I should go through the canals and lay the charges there,” Gibson added. “They lead right underneath the factory and it poses the least amount of risk. We can steal one of the dinghies from the docking area under the pier and leave that way, since the outer perimeter will likely be understaffed because of the banquet.

“Plus,” he said, “I’m the strongest swimmer. It makes the most sense for me to carry the extra charges.”

Leclair slowly lifted his head to look at Gibson. From that one look, Gibson knew that Leclair knew that Gibson had only suggested his alternate plan now, instead of in private, because Leclair couldn’t argue against it without revealing the reason why he really wanted Sevard alive to Tommy and Alex.

Gibson was vaguely aware of Tommy and Alex’s eyes on him after outlining his plan, but he kept his gaze locked with Leclair’s, waiting for a verdict.

Leclair swallowed heavily, casting his eyes down for a brief second before replying. “Seems like you’ve put some thought into this,” he said finally, and Gibson could practically feel the reluctance radiating from his voice. He slowly stood, looming over the trio like a sentinel, like a physical manifestation of the dread that had begun to slowly seep into Gibson’s bones ever since he’d realised that time was running out.

Leclair’s face was shrouded in shadow as he spoke. “I’ll go down and apprise the others of our current situation. Gibson, if you would, make sure to keep an eye out for the signal.”

He walked past Gibson to reach the exit down at the other side of the chamber, surprisingly drawing no more complaints from any of the trio as he carefully lowered himself into the hole and then climbed down out of sight. When Gibson turned his head, he found Alex sitting in the same position he’d last been in, as if Leclair leaving wasn’t worthy of the effort it would take to turn his head ever so slightly to left to watch him go.
It wasn’t until a few seconds after Leclair had gone that Alex turned to Gibson with fire in his eyes. “Do you know something about this Sevard woman that we don’t?” he demanded.

“It’s complicated,” Gibson replied uncertainly as he got up and attempted to organize the notes Leclair had left spread out across his bedroll, “but Leclair’s right, she is important. We need her alive.”

“Apparently more than he needs us alive,” Alex retorted.

“Oh come off it, Lex,” Tommy chided, finally piping up at last. “Go get us some more tea would you? And a couple more bedrolls,” he added with a hesitant glance in Gibson’s direction. “You don’t mind if we sleep up here, do you?” Tommy asked, even as Alex got up to do as he’d asked, grumbling under his breath the whole time.

“No,” Gibson replied, surprising himself with the answer. “I could use the company.”

He finished tidying up Sevard’s notes and moved over to the window again to look outside. The light was fading, the moon moving westward to the horizon, leaving the trees below indistinguishable from the rest of the darkened landscape.

“Can we light a fire in here?” Gibson heard from behind him.

He turned to find Tommy hunched over a small fire pit nearly identical to the one they used for cooking in the main cavern. This one wasn’t really necessary except in the winter, but Gibson didn’t see any reason that they couldn’t use it now.

“Of course,” Gibson replied, nodding. He pulled the box of matches out of Leclair’s rucksack and re-arranged what little kindling had been left in the firepit the last time he’d been here before lighting it.

Tommy paced around the chamber as Gibson patiently stoked the fire, finally wandering over the window outside and stopping in front of it to look out over the forest and the field. His expression was almost childlike in its uninhibited display of curiosity, and Gibson felt a pang of something that wasn’t quite envy. There wasn’t enough resentment for that.

“Is that a building out there?” Tommy asked.

Gibson was surprised he could even make out that much in the dark. “Yes,” he replied, “the Chateau, actually.”

“Is that what Leclair meant? About you keeping watch?”

Gibson nodded. “The lantern in the attic,” he explained. “We use it to mark whether that Chateau is safe. Simone should light it around midnight if nothing’s amiss, and keep it lit until dawn. If it goes out….” He let Tommy fill in the blanks.

Tommy remained at the window a moment longer before finally coming round to the fire and sitting down across from Gibson. “Are you sure it’s okay for Alex and me to sleep up here?” he asked, his tremulous voice belying his placid expression.

“It’s not that I didn’t want you here earlier,” Gibson confessed. “It’s just that Alex—” He stopped, struggling to find the right words for what he wanted to say. “He needs you around, you know,” he finally said.

“So I should make all my choices based on what Alex needs?” Tommy snapped. The words had
barely left his lips before his face softened into something apologetic. “Sorry, I know you’re just trying to help.”

“No, you’re right,” Gibson conceded. “It’s not fair.” To any of them; though Gibson also knew, that like a starved and beaten dog, Alex’s behaviour wasn’t intentionally malicious. Hurt people hurt people. Gibson remembered reading the phrase in one of Leclair’s books, back when he’d still been trying to learn English. Never had the phrase seemed more fitting than when applied to Alex.

“Can I ask you something?” Tommy asked suddenly, his voice cutting through the jumbled mess of thoughts roiling around in Gibson’s head.

“Yes, of course,” Gibson agreed easily, only growing apprehensive when he looked up to find Tommy’s face set in a taut grimace.

“Have you—?” Tommy stammered, in a voice just barely louder than a whisper. The fire cast dancing shadows across his face, and the light reflecting in his eyes made Gibson want to look away.

“Have you ever killed someone?”

Gibson’s face creased into a frown as he stared at Tommy for a long moment before answering, wondering just what had happened to Tommy out there in the woods with Simone. “Yes,” he replied finally, thinking of the man who had nearly jeopardised their identities that morning at the fact, of Pierre and Moussa, of the countless other men whose eyes he’d looked into while watching the life slowly drain out of them. He remembered thinking to himself, the first time, that he’d never forget that moment, but no matter how hard he tried now, Gibson couldn’t conjure the man’s face in his head.

There was no response from Tommy, and when Gibson looked up again, it was to find the other boy staring down intently into the fire, as if he hadn’t heard.

Two muffled thuds cut through the heavy silence and signalled Alex’s return; the bedrolls Tommy had requested, being tossed up onto the floor from below as Alex climbed up the ladder with just one hand, the other clamped tightly around the handles of three steaming mugs.

Gibson was mildly impressed, but also confused as to why he hadn’t asked Dominique for something easier to carry, like one of the teapots.

Gibson and Tommy both got up simultaneously to lay out the bedrolls while Alex stood over them, now cradling the mugs protectively between his arms and chest. He handed them to Tommy and Alex in turn when they’d finished, and the three sat down around the fire again. The fire crackled loudly as the seconds dragged on without any of them saying a word.

“So, you said you’re from Belfort,” said Alex unexpectedly.

Gibson wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be a question. He lifted an eyebrow. “Yes?” he asked with a pre-emptive grimace as he took a compulsive first sip of his tea, only to be surprised by the taste.

“Did you put brandy in this?”

Alex went bright red as Tommy’s head spun around to gaze at him in shock. “Shit,” Alex replied. “I gave you the wrong mug.”

“You took brandy from the Chateau?” Gibson asked, dumbfounded.

“Well, to be fair, I did ask Jean-Marie first.” Alex ended the statement with a pointed cough. “So, uh, Belfort, yeah? You still have family there?”
Gibson shook his head. “My sister and grandmother went to America before the war.” He didn’t mention his parents, and Alex didn’t ask.

“Do they know you’re still here?” Alex said instead. “In Dunkirk?”

Tommy’s eyes flitted between the two like he was observing a tennis match.

“No,” Gibson replied flatly. “I expect they think I’m dead. Or captured maybe.” He narrowed his eyes at Alex, wondering where the line of questioning had sprung from. “And you?”

“What about me?” Alex mumbled into the rim of his mug.

“Do you still have family in France?”

Gibson could see Tommy’s eyebrows shooting to his hairline in his peripheral vision, but Alex didn’t seem unduly disturbed by the question.

“Not that I know of,” Alex replied casually. “I don’t even know if my father’s still alive, to tell you the truth.” He wrinkled his nose after taking another sip of his tea and then motioned for Gibson to pass along his own mug.

Gibson acquiesced easily, not being much of a drinker even though the brandy had been a surprising improvement on the taste of the tea itself. When Gibson looked over at Tommy again, who had been noticeably quiet throughout all of Alex’s questions, he appeared visibly uncomfortable. Gibson couldn’t help but wonder if it was the topic of family that had caused Tommy’s discomfort, or if they’d mentioned something else during the conversation that had caused his apparent distress.

“Do you have family waiting for you back in England?” Gibson asked tentatively, knowing even as he did so that he was potentially probing an open wound.

“No,” Tommy replied quietly. “Not waiting, no.”

Gibson waited patiently for him to elaborate.

“My mother doesn’t know I joined the army,” Tommy added after several seconds had elapsed. “She wanted me to finish school, become a doctor, or a lawyer or something.”

“And your father?” Gibson asked, trying to be delicate about it despite the curiosity bubbling under his skin.

Tommy sucked in a short breath before replying. “My father killed himself when I was a baby. Because of the war, I guess.”

“And that made you want to join the army?” Alex replied, sounding genuinely bewildered.

Tommy didn’t seem bothered by the insensitivity of the question. “It didn’t make me want to do anything,” he replied with a shrug, sounding more exhausted than annoyed. “I joined the BEF because I needed to get away—” The sentence dangled, unfinished, like an automobile teetering on the edge of a cliff, about to go over.

He hadn’t said that it was his mother he was trying to escape, but Gibson could read the truth in Tommy’s trembling hands, in the way Alex stared at him sympathetically with his lips pursed and didn’t press for further explanation.

If Gibson had any faith in surviving the following night, he might have hoped that someday, Tommy
would feel close enough to confide his past to Gibson. But that door, the one that led to a free life in England—with Tommy, and Farrier—had all but closed, shut by the very person he’d placed his trust in in the first place.

Gibson wished he didn’t know Why, so he could resent Leclair without the internal conflict of knowing that he might have made the same decisions under the same circumstances.

“You should get some rest,” he said finally, as the flames dwindled into embers, glowing cherry-red like the end of a lit cigarette. It made him think of Maxine, and the acrid stench wafting off of her cigarillo. Gibson stood up quickly, and the resulting head-rush momentarily wiped her image from his brain.

“You’re not going to stay up all night are you?” Tommy asked, standing up as well. Alex merely scooted away from the fire and over to the nearest bedroll, not paying any attention to the other two as he crawled under the top layer and laid down.

“I’ll be fine,” Gibson said as he leaned down to extinguish what little remained of the fire, plunging the cave into sudden darkness.

“Please,” Tommy pleaded, his upright figure barely discernible in the light from the window behind him. “At least wake me if you start to feel tired.”

“All right,” Gibson replied, knowing full well that he wouldn’t have been able to fall asleep even if he’d wanted to, regardless of the long hours he’d already spent awake with no opportunity to rest since before dawn.

Gibson grabbed the blanket from the bedroll he’d brought up originally and tucked it around his shoulders as he sat with his head leaning against the rock at the edge of the crack running through the wall. He watched the little black shape in the distance as Tommy rustled around behind him before finally quieting down, his slightly ragged breathing slowing after a few minutes into a rhythm that Gibson knew meant he’d fallen asleep.

Alex was still too quiet despite lying down before Tommy.

“You’re still awake?” Gibson whispered, not sure if Alex would even answer, or if he’d pretend to be asleep.

“Mm,” came the unexpected response. “Can’t stop thinking.”

“Because of—” Gibson couldn’t bring himself to say the words out loud, even though he knew Tommy was out cold on the floor between them.

“No,” Alex said after a long moment, and the denial took Gibson by surprise, pulling his head around to look at the tangle of thick brown hair poking out from under the blanket. “I can’t get it out of my head.”

“What?”

“The song,” Alex replied cryptically.

“What song?” Gibson asked. He couldn’t piece together what Alex could possibly be referring to.

The Alex-shaped lump tucked into the bedroll turned over, and Gibson could just make out his eyes shining as they caught the last remnants of the moonlight casting a dim illumination throughout the chamber.
A throaty croon suddenly emanated from the spot where Alex was lying; shaky, uncertain, but loud enough to carry the familiar melody as he softly sang.

“Au claire de la lune, mon ami Pierrot. Prête-moi ta lune pour écrire un mot.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, trailed by a faint echo, and then there was only the sound of Tommy’s quiet breathing to punctuate the silence.

“Why’d you stop?” Gibson asked, the tune he hadn’t heard since childhood replaying itself again in his head.

“I can’t remember the rest,” Alex admitted, the words slurring together into an almost unintelligible mess.

Gibson didn’t respond, and then without even thinking, he opened his mouth and let the words flow freely from his lips, drawing only from half-forgotten memories. His voice cut through the night air, louder than Alex’s had been, more confident in the soft simple melody.

“Ma chandelle est morte,” he sang as Alex’s breathing slowed to match Tommy’s. “Je n’ai plus de feu. Ouvre-moi ta porte pour l’amour de Dieu.”

Gibson didn’t finish the song, realising that Alex had drifted off before he’d even finished. He turned his head back toward the Chateau. There was a faint orange glow now, like a dying star, where before there had been only darkness.

*

Simone (Jessica Parker Kennedy):

Maxine (Alexandra Daddario):
Nell (Kate Mara):

Maggie (Jane Levy):
Chapter Notes

This one was kind of a whole thing lmao but I hope you enjoy! Critics have raved that this is my "best chapter yet" but I will let you decide this for yourself. I'm not sure if I should change the rating because I kind of feel that the Explicit rating gets used incorrectly on AO3 in general and that the fic overall should still be considered Mature just because it isn't purely smut, but be warned, there are some naughty words I agonized over typing.

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Farrier sat on the back porch of the Chateau with his head in his hands as he dutifully kept watch for any sign of the enemy patrol that had been hunting them. There was nothing, only an orchestra of crickets chirping in the grass and the occasional breeze rustling the leaves on the peach trees.

But the cacophony of Farrier’s thoughts was more than enough to make up for the quiet of the French countryside.

He kept replaying the events of earlier over and over in his mind, trying to figure out where things had gotten wrong. When he’d let Collins go off on his own, Farrier supposed, without first forcing him to reveal the foolishly suicidal plan he’d come up with as a distraction.

In a startling turn of events, Farrier’s part had gone about as well as it could’ve—which he had to concede meant Collins’s plan had worked, no matter how ill thought-out it had been. He hadn’t been spotted by a single soldier. Hell, he’d barely seen one during the chaos Collins had caused at the depot. And now they had nearly a dozen blocks of Trialen to sabotage the Panzer factory with, once Leclair had decided on a final course of action for them.

Farrier hoped that would be soon. The SOE had given them a narrow timeline with which to work, and that window was closing fast.

And now Collins’s injury had thrown another spanner in the works.

Farrier was used to playing the role of the martyr. He was somewhat surprised to learn that it wasn’t easier being on the other side of it, watching someone else fling themselves into the fire, powerless to do anything about it.

Farrier continued looking out into the darkness, as if the shadowy landscape would provide some measure of comfort to him now that it hadn’t yet procured in the last twenty minutes or so that he had sat there alone on the porch with his regrets.

He didn’t turn when the door opened behind him, followed by the sound of socked feet shuffling across the wooden landing before growing quiet. A familiar weight settled onto his left shoulder. The old planks that made up the rickety porch creaked loudly as Simone sat down beside him. Farrier closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of lavender soap, tinged with the slight musk of dirt and sweat.
He leaned into her hand on his shoulder, only to have her pull it away unexpectedly.

“He’s resting,” Simone told him. When Farrier looked up at her face she was staring out into the darkness, pointedly avoiding meeting his eyes.

Farrier had been lying to himself the past few days, pretending he couldn’t see the way she put careful distance between the two of them every time they so much as shared a room. He’d given her space at first, knowing from experience that confrontation would only result in Simone shutting him down, but his patience was wearing thin now—and time was running out.

But Farrier had barely even opened his mouth to speak before Simone cut in. “I don’t think we should do this anymore,” she said in a tone that made it clear she wasn’t looking for an argument.

Farrier glanced up at her again and followed her gaze down to his hands, where he’d been unconsciously twisting his ring around his finger. “You said it didn’t bother you that I was married.” He couldn’t help but wonder why she was choosing to focus on it now, after everything that they’d been through already. She’d never asked him to take off his ring, not once in the half a year they’d been involved.

“As long as you didn’t let it bother you,” Simone replied, diverting her gaze away from him again to the field of grass stretching out into the dark as she spoke.

Farrier scowled, unable to help the bolt of anger that coursed through him at her words. He wouldn’t let her pin the blame for this on him. He’d never lied to her. “Then why are you so distant all of a sudden?” he demanded. “You knew I was going home.”

Her chin sank down to rest gently on top of her hands, one folded over the other, scarred and callused and as familiar to Farrier as his own.

“I didn’t expect you to bring your home here.”

The brief flash of irritation Farrier had felt faded just as quickly as it had come. He was silent for a long time before replying. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously, afraid even as he said the words that he might already know the answer.

“I wonder what your wife would disapprove of more,” Simone replied cryptically, still refusing to look at Farrier, “you sleeping with me, or the way you stare at your former squad-mate when you think no one else is looking?”

Farrier stood up abruptly. When he looked down at Simone, she was finally looking up at him, wearing a surprised expression at the heat in his gaze. Even with Simone’s naturally sharp tongue, the dynamic between the two had always remained mutually temperate.

“My relationship with Collins has nothing to do with my wife,” he told her. “And neither of them have anything to do with me and you.”

Simone let out a bitter laugh. “Most people wouldn’t see it that way.”

“Well, maybe they should,” Farrier replied. Beyond what was strictly necessary, he’d never cared much for what other people thought. He stood there for a moment longer after Simone had turned away before finally giving up and heading back inside.

Farrier closed the door behind him and stood just inside the doorway to the kitchen, waiting for the resurgence of anger simmering just under his skin to subside again before he made his way into the parlour.
Leclair was sitting in the armchair by the fireplace with Collins asleep flat on his back on the sofa. Farrier sat down opposite Leclair and avoided looking at Collins at all.

“I suppose the others went to the caves?” Farrier asked. He caught himself reaching for his ring again and forced himself to place his hands safely on either side of the chair.

Leclair nodded without looking up. “I should head up there myself and meet them,” he said, sounding almost dazed.

Farrier narrowed his eyes in confusion as he stared at the other man, wondering what had happened in the brief amount of time Farrier had been waiting outside that had left Leclair looking so visibly rattled.

“They’re all right, aren’t they?” Farrier asked, suddenly worried that they might have lost someone again, or—he couldn’t help his reflexive glance toward the sofa—that Collins’s wound was worse than it seemed.

“Francois and Hugues were both seriously injured,” Leclair replied, “but they’ll live.” He pushed himself up out of the chair with a quiet groan. “I should go,” he said flatly. “Simone’s still outside?”

“Round back,” Farrier replied with a nod. He stared at Leclair’s left hand, clenched tightly into a fist around something he couldn’t identify.

“I'll leave the truck for you near the grove,” Leclair told him, and with that, he was gone.

Farrier sat listening to the clock hanging over the mantle as it softly ticked in counterrhythm to the sound of Collins’s breathing and waited. He was only semi-aware of the murmur of voices from outside, followed by the growl of the lorry’s engine and the gravel crunching beneath its tires as Leclair pulled away from the Chateau.

Even the din didn’t wake Collins, whose face bore the tell-tale signs of constant stress even in slumber. Farrier stared at him openly now that Leclair was gone, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest—bare but for the gauze Simone had wrapped around the wound in his side.

It was a few minutes before Farrier finally mustered up the nerve to scoot his chair closer to the sofa until he was near enough that he could comfortably reach over and put his fingers in Collins’s long blonde hair. It had always been just skirting regulation, but in the year they’d spent apart Collins had clearly grown careless about trimming it, and it hung down past his ears, curling ever-so-slightly at the ends.

Simone had always hated when Farrier tried to do the same with her, and she’d told him as much. She said it made her feel like she was his pet cat.

Farrier supposed she had a point. Like petting an animal, the act of threading his fingers through Collins’s hair had always been a selfish one, an almost compulsive method of grounding himself. Unlike Simone, however, Collins had endured the treatment—albeit under feigned protest, as if Farrier couldn’t tell that he practically craved the touches.

Farrier had nearly fallen asleep like that himself when Collins finally groaned and shifted under his hand.

“What happened?” he grumbled. Collins slowly opened his eyes, rubbing the sleep out of them with one hand while trying to push himself up into a sitting position with the other, but Farrier’s palm pressed firmly against his head kept him pinned in place.
“How much do you remember?” Farrier asked, leaning over the armrest to get a better look at him.

“How coming back here, and then—” He released a forceful sigh. “I don’t know exactly.”

Collins flicked his eyes up to meet Farrier’s and Farrier had to resist the sudden urge to duck down and kiss him. Again. It wasn’t the right time.

“It’s quiet,” Collins said pointedly.

Farrier nodded. “The two SS we captured this morning escaped,” he explained. “There’s a hideout we use in situations like this. Gibson and Dominique would have taken everyone there. Leclair just left to go and meet them.”

“And Simone?” The intonation of Collins’s voice was packed full of things Farrier didn’t want to address.

“Outside,” he said simply.

Collins didn’t respond, looking away with a taut frown instead.

Farrier finally extracted his hand from Collins’s hair and got to his feet. “I’ll go make us some hot chocolate,” he announced.

Collins snorted, twisting around to face Farrier before he’d taken even a single step toward the kitchen. “Should’ve guessed a year in France would put you off tea.”

Farrier shrugged. “I don’t dislike tea,” he argued. “Chocolate’s just better.”

Collins snorted. “Aye, of course it is.”

Farrier suppressed the childish urge to roll his eyes and headed back into the kitchen. It had been left in disarray after the others’ quick exit from the Chateau and Farrier found himself cleaning up the mess of dishes scattered about while he waited for the hot water to boil.

He couldn’t help but glance out the window at the shape of Simone still sitting out on the porch. Farrier stared at her for a long while, wondering if he should go back out there and apologise just for the sake of repairing whatever was left between them. He knew ultimately it didn’t matter. He was going home soon. To Nell. To his son.

He and Simone…they didn’t have much time left.

“Farrier?” Collins’s voice calling out from the parlour jerked Farrier back to reality, and he suddenly became aware of the sharp whistle emanating from the kettle on the stove.

He quickly wrapped a rag around his hands and yanked it off the flame, muttering curses under his breath as placed bits of chocolate in the bottoms of two mugs and then poured the hot water over them.

Collins was sat upright on the sofa when Farrier came back bearing two mugs filled to the brim with steaming hot chocolate. Farrier frowned disapprovingly as he passed one to Collins, who staunchly ignored the look as he accepted the drink.

Collins blew on it only a few times before taking a cautious sip, ever the impatient one. Farrier merely set his on the coffee table and waited for it to cool down on its own. He watched as Collins nursed the beverage, the colour gradually coming back into his cheeks as he drank.
Farrier finally started in on his own drink as well, savouring the slightly bitter edge to the chocolate after each sip, leaving a lingering flavour similar to coffee on the back of his tongue. Despite the summer weather, Farrier enjoyed the occasional warm drink in the evenings, finding it helped him relax before bed.

“S good,” Collins mumbled from behind the rim of his mug.

Farrier shrugged non-commitally, and then realised that Collins had likely never had a proper cup of chocolat chaud, and certainly nothing like the kind Leclair used to make back when they’d been able to get the rare bottle of milk from in town.

“Feeling any better?” he asked once Collins had finished his drink and set the empty mug down on the coffee table with a quiet sigh.

Collins briefly glanced at Farrier out of the corner of his eyes and then peered down at the gauze covering the lower half of his torso. “Didn’t hurt much at first,” he mused. “Stings like a cunt now, though.” His head flopped back against the cushions and he stayed like that for a minute before turning to Farrier with a look in his eye that the other man knew to watch out for from past experience.

“Could you do me a wee favour?” he asked, cocking his head to the right ever-so slightly as he spoke.

Farrier squinted suspiciously at the sheepish tone in his voice. “Depends,” he replied warily.

Collins had long since learned he could convince Farrier to do nearly anything when given enough time to wear away at his resistance with puppy-dog eyes and a wheedling smile.

“I—ah!—there’s a bottle of brandy,” Collins said, flinching in pain as he tried to reposition himself on the sofa without aggravating his injury. “Under my pillow, up in the attic.”

Farrier was already shaking his head in exasperation before Collins had even finished. “What happened to all that talk about laying off the booze before we left?” he asked, thinking back on a conversation they’d had more than a year ago now, after a particularly nefarious pub crawl.

“I’m Scottish,” Collins replied, completely deadpan. After an unimpressed look from Farrier, Collins waved a hand dismissively. “We took some time off,” he continued, sounding perfectly cavalier though Farrier could tell from just looking at him that there was more to the story than that. “Sobriety didn’t agree with me. Turns out the secret is moderation.”

Farrier snorted. “I could have told you that,” he quipped.

Back in the RAF, he was lucky if Collins ended a night out still vertical. Moderation simply wasn’t in his vocabulary. More often than not, it had been left to Farrier to make sure Collins made it back to his bunk every morning, usually with Collins already unconscious, or close to it, before they made it back to barracks. But even still, Farrier knew a losing battle when he saw one.

“Where did you say you put it?” he asked, already getting up out of the chair.

“Pillow,” Collins reminded him. “And thank you,” he added offhand, just as Farrier reached the stairs.

Farrier chuckled, mostly at himself and his own inability to deny Collins seemingly anything despite his awareness of this fact. He took the stairs slowly, feeling his bad leg protest slightly with every step after the strain of his journey with Collins through the woods.
The attic appeared to be in more or less the same state of organised chaos in which they’d left it, though Gibson’s area was now noticeably bare, and the blankets in each of the cots—including Farrier’s own, which he always took care to tidy in the mornings—were rumpled or missing entirely.

Collins’s cot appeared untouched however, and when Farrier got closer, he couldn’t help but lift up the corner of the wrinkled quilt, bringing it to his face and breathing in the familiar scent. There was no real reason for him to do so, especially not when Collins was sat just downstairs, well within his reach, but Farrier couldn’t force himself to ignore the urge regardless. He sat crouched there for a long moment with the quilt still pressed to his face before finally letting it slip out of his fingers with a resigned sigh.

Farrier then lifted the single pillow lying at the end of the cot. He blinked a few times in confusion. There was nothing underneath it at all.

Collins wasn’t the forgetful type; it was unusual for him to misplace something, much less forget the location of an item he’d specifically requested. Farrier smoothed a hand over the indent in the bedding. It was possible, he supposed, that Collins had moved the bottle before going to sleep and simply hadn’t put it back.

Farrier scooted down to the foot of the cot and reached for Collins’s bag, the flap hanging loosely over the top as if Collins couldn’t be bothered to close it properly. He quickly rifled through the mess of belongings inside, realising within a few seconds that the brandy wasn’t there either. But Collins’s sketchbook was.

Farrier extracted the journal, caressing its familiar leather-bound cover almost reverently before flipping through to the end to see what Collins had drawn in his absence. The last pages were empty. Farrier turned the previous pages, going backwards through the journal until thick strokes of black and grey finally caught his eye. His heart sank once he saw the angles of his own face staring back at him, a year younger than he was now, and he snapped the journal shut, stuffing it back into the bag with shaking hands.

Farrier went back down the stairs with less care than he’d ascended them, in a hurry to get back to Collins in the parlour. He had almost made it to the last step went he finally stumbled and had to catch himself against the wall with a loud thud.

“Farrier?”

“I’m fine,” he called out, tentatively moving his feet from the stairs to the ground as he continued to use the wall for leverage.

Collins didn’t appear to have moved an inch in all the time Farrier had spent in the attic, but his face was pinched and pale now, like before they’d gotten back to the Chateau with Leclair. Farrier quickly hobbled over to the sofa to check on him.

“I’m fine,” Collins said sourly as Farrier pressed a hand to his clammy forehead, the beads of sweat trailing down from his hairline leaving streaks in the dirt and grime that still coated his face.

“Hush,” Farrier murmured with a frown. Satisfied that Collins wasn’t running a fever at least, he straightened up and collected both of their mugs from the table. “Couldn’t find your brandy,” Farrier told him, not sure what to expect in response.

Collins huffed out a sigh and rolled his eyes. “Fucking Alex,” he grumbled.

Farrier, who had been intending to return to the kitchen to refill their drinks, slowly sat down again
instead and stared at Collins with a curious expression. “You think Alex took it?”

“I know Alex took it,” Collins retorted. He shook his head. “If you think I can’t hold my liquor…. .”

Farrier settled back into the chair, waiting for Collins to elaborate, but nothing came. “You seem quite close,” he prompted, earning a sharp side-eyed glance for his trouble.

“I suppose so,” Collins hedged. “We spend a lot of time together at the cottage in Weymouth. Everyone’s close.”

“But you and Alex—”

“Alex and I have a lot in common,” Collins said sharply. “We’ve been through a lot,” he added in a softer tone. “Sometimes I think Tommy puts us to shame really, the boy’s terrifyingly well-adjusted.”

Farrier stared at Collins with a contemplative frown. Collins scowled back in challenge and crossed his arms.

“I just think you’re giving Tommy too much credit,” Farrier said finally, giving in to the unspoken query. “Clearly he’s just putting on a brave face. You should pay more attention to him.”

Collins’s fingers curled into claws, his blunt fingernails digging into the meat of his upper arms as he glared at Farrier. “Maybe you should put off giving me advice about parenting my subordinates until you’ve had a chance to father your own child, eh?”

Farrier met his fiery gaze with a cool stare of his own, letting Collins simmer down some before responding. “More chocolate?” he asked casually.

Collins replied with a tight chin-jerk in affirmation. “Sorry,” he bit out.

Farrier nodded placidly as he got up from the chair and headed back into the kitchen to put the kettle back on.

Then at the last moment, before heading back into the parlour with fresh chocolate, he decided to grab a bottle of red wine out of the trunk where they stored any spirits they were lucky enough to acquire during a supply raid, or received in trade from various contacts throughout the countryside.

He mixed it into both mugs of chocolate, adding a generous helping to Collins’s, and carried both plus the bottle back into the parlour.

Collins didn’t notice the wine in Farrier’s hand till he took another immediate sip of his piping hot chocolate and did a double-take, his eyes honing-in on the bottle like that of a predator who had just caught scent of its prey.

“Wine?” he said, raising his eyebrows even as he took another sip. “I’m not twelve, Jack.”

It was strange for Farrier, hearing his name on Collins’s lips after so long. They had rarely used each other’s given names in the past, and almost never when others were present. The familiarity of it would have stuck out like a sore thumb at Hawkinge, and the two had been the subject of whispers amongst their peers in the RAF already.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Farrier told him, taking a cautious sip of his own concoction, savouring the way the wine went straight to his head. It was a quicker, more mellow buzz than when he drank scotch, and would hopefully spare him the headache in the morning as well. The Europeans had gotten something right, at least.
Farrier received a playful scowl from Collins in response. He watched openly as Collins drank, noting how his cheeks gradually reddened with each sip.

“I almost feel like a real Catholic,” Collins joked once Farrier handed him the bottle to refill his empty mug.

“Keep drinking and you won’t feel much of anything.” Farrier warned, only to receive a two-fingered salute for his troubles.

Farrier ignored the gesture and slouched further into the armchair, perching his mug on his sternum between careful sips and savouring the pleasant warmth emanating throughout his chest and stomach.

“We haven’t really spoken about what you told me before,” Farrier ventured after a minute or so had passed between the two of them in comfortable silence.

“Aye, I suppose we haven’t,” Collins replied curtly.

“Care to elaborate?” Farrier asked after a long pause.

“What exactly do you want me to tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Farrier replied, finally cracking under the frustration of trying to avoid a row. “How’s Nell? The baby? You’re the one who’s spent the last year with them.”

Collins laughed hollowly and took another swig from the wine bottle. “Well, it wasn’t all sunshine and daisies, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“I’m not hoping for anything,” Farrier replied with a heavy sigh. “I just want to know what I missed is all.”

“You didn’t miss anything,” Collins retorted bluntly. “You caused it.”

Farrier shook his head, trying desperately to maintain his composure. It was plain as day that Collins was trying to avoid talking about Nell in any capacity, but Farrier couldn’t understand why.

“You know I’m not going to be upset if you talk about her,” Farrier reassured him. “You and her, I mean. You know that.”

“I know,” Collins replied in a quiet, almost timid, voice. “It’s not that.”

“Then what?” Farrier could feel pinpricks of irritation whittling away at his careful control, the urge to resort to baser tactics to get a straight answer out of Collins nearly overwhelming. “I mean, was it a year-long honeymoon?” he joked. “Are you too embarrassed to talk about what the two of you got up to while I was gone?”

The attempt at humour didn’t work. Collins looked back at him with a horrified expression bordering on disgust. “It’s not like I was fucking your wife while she was up the spout,” Collins spat out angrily.

Farrier had no intentions of backing off now that he’d gotten an actual answer out of him. “But you were fucking her, weren’t you?” he pressed.

Collins took another sloppy drink from the bottle, this time managing to spill some of the wine down his front. “A few times,” he said, swiping at the liquid running down his chin and chest, soaking into
the edges of the gauze and staining them pink. “Only when she asked. It wasn’t exactly the best time. For either of us.”

“Well, aren’t you the gentleman,” Farrier replied, regretting the quip when Collins’s face immediately soured in response. “Look,” he added hastily, “I understand—”

“You don’t,” Collins interrupted. “You know you don’t.”

Farrier waited until Collins looked up again to reply. “I know,” he conceded. “But I’m trying. I can’t even do that if you won’t let me.”

“It’s not—” Collins started to say, but he stopped himself, and started again. “Things were all right at first,” he continued, “but I think we were both still in shock. There wasn’t really time to think of anything else beyond the obvious.”

“So after the funeral is when…things…changed?” It felt strange for Farrier to be discussing his own funeral so casually.

Collins nodded. He scratched swirling patterns into the sofa’s upholstery with his free hand, the other keeping the mouth of the wine bottle close to his lips. “Even before she found out about the baby, she wanted me to be you, I think, more than she wanted me to replace you. But I don’t love her,” he said, meeting Farrier’s gaze again for just a brief second, before tearing himself away. “Not like you do. I don’t think I ever could.”

“Since when did love matter?” Farrier asked delicately, thinking of the endless string of nameless, faceless girls Collins had pulled with barely a word exchanged between them.

“That’s different,” Collins protested, immediately catching on to what Farrier was referencing. “With Nell…it’s different with her.”

“How?”

Collins opened and closed his mouth a few times, struggling to find words to explain what he meant. “You know that we’ve always felt differently,” he finally settled for, “about that kind of thing.”

A wave of cold realisation washed over Farrier. “Yeah,” he replied, his voice hollow. “I wish we didn’t.” He shook his head, worrying at his bottom lip. “I wish I could fix it,” he admitted, and it wasn’t the first time he’d expressed the sentiment.

“It’s not your responsibility to fix me,” Collins replied. It wasn’t the first time Farrier had heard that reply.

Nothing at all had really changed between them, even after everything.

“Did you tell her no, then?” Farrier asked casually, hoping his tone wouldn’t come across as judgmental. He glanced down at the floor, waiting until he was confident that Collins had looked away before flicking his eyes back up to him again.

“Not at first,” Collins confessed. His knuckles were bone-white where his hand was clenched tightly around the neck of the bottle. Farrier was almost afraid it might shatter under the force of his grip, and leaned forward to carefully extract the bottle from his fingers as Collins continued speaking. “Once she found out she was pregnant, it was harder, especially since at first—”

“You thought it might be yours,” Farrier concluded, knowing it would have been the last thing Collins would have wanted. Hell, even Nell hadn’t been sure about having a child the last they’d
spoken about it, and that had only been a few months before the evacuation.

“Aye. But once she saw a doctor, they told her she’d conceived before you left.” Collins’s eyebrows drew together in a frown and he looked down at his empty mug, still sat on the table with the aroma of chocolate and red wine wafting throughout the parlour. “I think that must have made it more difficult for her than if it had just been mine—to move on, you know. After that…” He swallowed loudly. “We had some…problems, at the end, and then after, once Henry was born.”

“Problems?” Farrier asked, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand straight up as if the word had triggered some kind of animalistic fight-or-flight response. He tried to remain calm for Collins’s sake, in spite of himself.

It was difficult, though, watching as Collins’s face morphed into an expression of visceral distress, knowing that whatever had caused it was long past, and that there was nothing Farrier could do to stop it.

Collins eked out his reply slowly, almost one word at a time, in a voice just barely loud enough for Farrier to hear even sitting just a few feet away. “It’s just that…every time I so much as looked at her,” Collins said, “I’d remember what the sisters told me about my mother.”

Farrier felt his heart and lungs ice over as a flash of primal fear raced through his veins. “She didn’t…?” he managed, remembering what little Collins had told him about his childhood growing up in a Catholic orphanage, and how he’d come to be there in the first place.

“No, no,” Collins said quickly, “it never went that far. I would have told you if she—if something had happened.”

But something had happened—to Collins, something that he wouldn’t talk about. He’d said things had gotten harder after they’d discovered the pregnancy, but that didn’t mean they were easy at the start. Farrier recalled how uncomfortable Collins had seemed around Nell when they’d first met, something he’d originally attributed to jealousy—but now he wasn’t so sure.

“Does she look like your mother?” Farrier asked, wincing sympathetically at Collins’s full-bodied flinch in response to the question.

“What?” Collins replied breathily. He looked cornered by the question, almost panicked, and Farrier had the feeling that if he could have gotten up and ran out of the room to escape the question, he would have done so.

“Does Nell look like your mother?” Farrier clarified.

Farrier had always tried to avoid paying much attention to the droves of Collins’s lady friends—if one could even call them that—but he’d seen enough of them in passing to notice just one thing: none of them had ever had red hair. Like Nell.

At the time, Farrier had chalked it up to just coincidence, or personal preference, though Collins had never really struck him as the sort to care about that sort of thing.

Certainly not like some of the other pilots they’d had the misfortune to serve with who used to delight in pointing out which of the regulars in the pubs were actually gingers, outing any girls with chemically-coloured hair that they’d slept with before so the other blokes would know to give them a miss. There’d always been talk like that in the barracks, but it had only gotten worse in the wake of Irish neutrality.

But Collins, who had never known either his father or mother, must have gotten his strawberry beard
from somewhere. If the nuns at the orphanage had known enough about his mother to tell him what had happened to her, maybe it wasn’t so far-fetched that he had also seen her likeness in a painting or a colour photograph, though Farrier knew the latter was unlikely. Maybe even just the description of her had been enough to leave some lasting imprint, deep enough to count for Collins’s apparent aversion to women who shared a particular likeness.

It was a long time before Collins finally answered, but Farrier didn’t push him.

“No,” Collins said roughly, without looking at Farrier, “not like my mother.”

Farrier sat back in his chair, looking for the unspoken truth in Collins’s clenched jaw, the muscles in his neck and shoulders flexed like he was anticipating a physical blow.

“One of the nuns, then,” Farrier finally said after a long, drawn-out silence, and Collins didn’t have to answer for Farrier to know that he was right. “How old were you?” he asked, not sure if there was any answer Collins could give that wouldn’t destroy Farrier to think about.

He didn’t anticipate the one he got.

“When it started?” Collins asked, squinting at Farrier in confusion.

Farrier stared back, trying not to let his horror show through as he asked in a hesitant voice, “When did it stop?”

“When I left.”

Farrier knew that Collins had fled the orphanage at fifteen, picking up the first opportunity afforded him to get a job and find some means of supporting himself. Collins had spent the better part of a decade in steelmaking before being recruited to the RAF, only a year or two ahead of the onset of the war.

He also knew what Collins had told him about his birth-mother: that she’d been a nun at the same orphanage he’d grown up in, still young when she became pregnant under unknown circumstances—though there’d been rumours—and that she’d tried to kill herself late into the pregnancy and had died shortly after the emergency caesarean that had saved Collins’s life.

Farrier knew that Collins wasn’t his mother’s surname, but that of one of the priests at the orphanage, and that his given name, Asher, had been taken from the Bible, like the given names of many other children he’d grown up with at the orphanage. He knew that Collins’s childhood there hadn’t been a happy one.

But despite everything he already knew about Collins, Farrier hadn’t been expecting this revelation. He also knew from the drained look in Collins’s eyes that now wasn’t the time to press him for details. There was one thing, however, that Farrier still needed to know, for his own sake.

“When we…” Farrier began cautiously. “I didn’t—pressure you into anything, did I?” He poured more wine into Collins’s mug although Collins had already drank nearly half the bottle on his own; a peace offering—an apology.

Collins didn’t so much as glance at the mug, instead staring at Farrier with a bewildered, almost affronted expression. “Of course not,” he replied. “I know, with us, it took time, but—”

That was an understatement, in Farrier’s opinion.

In their first six months together on Fortis Team, Farrier had quickly learned that Collins and he
didn’t actually see eye to eye when it came to women. Farrier had been with Nell for years; their relationship was practically glacial, yet somehow it worked for them.

Collins, on the other hand, could barely keep a girl around long enough to see the sun come up, let alone remember her name. If he wanted to blow off some steam, he’d find some bird in a pub and go back to her flat for a quick shag, no strings attached.

It wasn’t until much later that Farrier discovered that Collins’s frequent bed-hopping wasn’t out of a desire for company—if he wanted that, Farrier would suddenly wake up in his bunk with Collins curled into a ball against his back, no advance warning given.

For a while the two spheres of Collins’s personal life had remained mutually exclusive, but as the war dragged on, shore leave, as it were, became more and more scarce.

Farrier had been secretly grateful for that at the start. He’d assumed that Collins and his seemingly insatiable sexual appetite would immediately crack under the pressure from the lack of opportunity—but he was wrong about that too.

The only difference at first was that Farrier caught Collins wanking a few more times than he had before. Occasionally in the showers, mostly in his bunk, once in an otherwise empty hangar—and that had been quite the shock.

But at least outwardly, Collins showed no signs of suffering any real frustration due to their reduced leave. Farrier, on the other hand, hadn’t been able to stand it.

He was the one who had propositioned Collins, fully aware of everything he had to lose if things between them went tits up. Collins’s reluctance hadn’t been unexpected, but Farrier was nothing if not persistent. And now, he couldn’t help but wonder if that had been part of the problem. If he should have given Collins more space, more time. Maybe Farrier was no better than that nun who—

“It’s not the same,” Collins said suddenly, perhaps seeing the reel of Farrier’s thoughts scrolling by in the pained expression on his face. “It wasn’t—I just needed time to get used to the idea, you know? I hadn’t really considered it before you and I ended up…involved. And what we had, it was different than everything else, and I suppose I didn’t want to ruin that somehow.”

The way Collins spoke about sex had always carried with it a tone of mild disgust, like he thought it was beneath him, whereas Farrier had always thought of it as the purest form of connection between people.

Farrier wondered if that was why Collins seemed to resent Gibson so much more than Simone, if he was afraid that Gibson could more easily take his place at Farrier’s side. If Farrier had been the jealous type, he might have feared the same with Alex. Farrier didn’t doubt that had things been different, had he not survived, Collins and Alex would have fallen together naturally in time, with or without Tommy and Gibson in the picture.

Farrier contemplated getting up out of the chair and going over to Collins on the sofa, and touching him, kissing him again, but looking at Collins now, he didn’t think it would help.

“I don’t want you to be afraid because of me,” Farrier said instead.

Collins jerked his head up in surprise. “I’m not,” he replied, not understanding.

“I don’t want you to ever think that I would leave you,” Farrier clarified.

“What if you don’t have a choice?” Collins retorted.
“Then I’ll come back.”

Collins was trembling slightly as Farrier stared at him, though Farrier wasn’t sure if the cause was the conversation or his injury. But the tense lines in his face had finally smoothed out somewhat and he seemed more relaxed now. Farrier wondered just how long Collins had been carrying all this anxiety around with him, buried deep enough that no one would even know to look.

“More wine?” Farrier offered, even though Collins had drank more than his fair share already. He was surprised when Collins refused.

“Nay, I’ll be out my nut before midnight at this rate.” He inhaled deeply and scratched at the line of gauze at his stomach with a pensive frown. “Let’s turn the crack, eh?” he said, suddenly forcing a smile back onto his face.

Farrier nodded, willing to go along with anything Collins might suggest after the conversation they’d just had.

“I expect you want to hear about how the baby’s doing, aye?”

Farrier nodded again in spite of the roiling mass of anxiety that flowed upward from his gut to his throat in response to the suggestion.

“He was pretty big when he was born,” Collins told him, a fond smile spreading across his face, “growing like a weed, too. Maggie, Peter’s lass, she took to him immediately. And Alex, too; you’d never guess the boy grew up an only child after watching him play with Henry.” Collins pressed his lips together tightly, pausing a moment before he continued.

“He looks like you,” Collins said finally, and Farrier got the impression that it hadn’t been what he’d originally intended to say. It also hadn’t escaped his notice that Collins hadn’t mentioned Nell once in discussing the child.

But Farrier wasn’t about to press the issue. And he didn’t have the chance.

Both men turned their heads sharply in the direction of the kitchen as they heard the door suddenly swing open and hit the wall with a loud bang. Simone burst in a few seconds later, her hair windswept and her brown eyes wide and bright.

She was on Farrier before he had a chance to ask her what was wrong. Her lips coaxed his into opening, a familiar dance for the two of them even though he’d been caught off guard by the unexpected assault.

Even while Farrier was drowning in her, Collins’s voice cut through the haze that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

“Christ alive,” he complained, “at least wait till I’m out of the room, would you?”

Simone pulled away from Farrier, leaving him sitting there feeling dazed and off-rhythm. She straightened up, took one look at Collins still sitting on the sofa, and kissed the scowl right off of him.

Farrier stared at the two of them with his mouth hanging open. There was a warmth low in his belly that radiated outward and stained his cheeks pink with a hot flush as he watched Simone practically insinuate herself into Collins’s lap, chasing his mouth with hers as he leaned back against the sofa.

When she finally pulled away, her lips were wet and shining, and Collins’s were bright cherry-red.
His expression mirrored Farrier’s, but he couldn’t take his eyes off of Simone.

“What exactly just happened?” Collins asked, sounding far-off, lost in his own jumbled thoughts, if the baffled musings tumbling around inside Farrier’s own head were any indication.

“I’m sick of playing games,” Simone said darkly as she took a step back. She leaned down toward Farrier again, but this time, wrapped her hand around Farrier’s fingers, still clutched around the open wine bottle. She pulled it up to meet her mouth, lifting his hand with it, and took a prolonged swallow.

Farrier didn’t take his eyes off of her for a second.

When she’d finished, the bottle was empty. She let go without warning and Farrier’s arm dropped limply back onto the armrest.

“I’ll be upstairs in my room when you’re ready,” she said, and there wasn’t an ounce of doubt in her voice.

Farrier spun around in the armchair to follow Simone with his eyes as she stalked out of the parlour. They could hear her footsteps on the stairs, tapping a quick pace and then fading as she reached the landing on the first floor.

When Farrier glanced back at Collins, it was like staring into a mirror, the glazed look on the other man’s face surely a reflection of his own.

“That just happened, right?” he asked.

Collins nodded dully and continued to stare at the empty space in the doorway leading out of the parlour. “I think so,” he replied hesitantly before turning to look at Farrier. “She wasn’t serious, was she? About—?”

“Yeah,” Farrier replied, “I think she was.” Then he remembered the damned conversation he and Collins had just had, and his expression morphed into one of concern. “But you don’t have to—”

“For God’s sake,” Collins interrupted, shaking his head in frustration, “I wouldn’t have told you anything if I’d known you’d start treating me like I’m made of glass. If I don’t want to do something, then I won’t bloody well do it, eh?”

Farrier held his hands up in surrender as he stood. “Shall we, then?” he said, extending a hand out to Collins as if he were a debutante Farrier was asking for a dance.

It wasn’t until they reached the landing, after Collins had slowly dragged himself up the steps even with Farrier’s help, that he started to voice second thoughts.

“Shouldn’t someone be outside keeping watch?” Collins asked, stopping dead in the corridor. He refused to move even when Farrier tugged at his hand.

“Afraid you’ll get caught with your pants down?” Farrier joked, but Collins didn’t return the smile. “I’m sure we’ll hear anyone coming,” Farrier added reassuringly.

They managed another few steps before Collins hesitated again. “Well, what about the stitches?” he questioned, brows angled in a blatant display of nerves.

“I’ll be gentle,” Farrier replied. He pursed his lips. “Asher, if you don’t want to do this—” Farrier knew it was a dirty tactic, but it had the desired effect.
Collins’s feet started moving again and they traversed the rest of the short corridor at a snail’s pace, finally ending up outside the second door on the left side. It was cracked open just an inch or so, enough that Farrier could see the soft glow of a candle emanating from within, but not much else.

Simone was dressed in only her shirt and a pair of knickers when Farrier pushed open the door and walked in with Collins still in tow. The too-large trousers she favoured were lying in a heap next to her bed, a tiny little thing crammed into the left corner of the room opposite Aimee’s. Farrier eyed it sceptically, not quite sure how they were going to all fit.

“Get undressed,” Simone instructed as she made short work of the buttons on her blouse.

Farrier steered Collins over to the bed, nudging him down and helping him peel off his trousers once he was sat on the edge with his legs sticking straight out, too long to match the rest of him. Once Farrier was in nothing but his pants as well, he turned back toward Simone, who was sitting like Collins on Aimee’s bed, her toes just barely brushing the floor. It was hard to keep his eyes off her breasts, showing through the loose fabric of her unbuttoned blouse, still draped over her shoulders.

“How do you want to do this?” he asked.

Simone leaned back onto her elbows, casting her face into shadow. “I want to watch,” she said, and Farrier heard Collins emit a strangled sound of surprise in response.

Farrier nodded and spun back around to face Collins. He was backed up against the wall now with his legs extended, his toes almost hanging off the end of the bed even with his knees bent. He stared up at Farrier with wide eyes as the other man slowly approached, feeling unnervingly like a predator that had trapped its prey.

It was surreal kissing Collins with an audience, more so than when Simone had kissed him downstairs. Farrier was hyperconscious of her eyes focused on the two of them as he settled in between Collins’s legs and moved his lips down to Collins’s shoulder, collarbone, nipple, in turn.

Collins grabbed Farrier by the hair and yanked him up again like an overexcited dog when Farrier’s mouth moved to his chest. Collins gave him a reprimanding stare, to which Farrier responded with an apologetic smile before leaning down to connect their lips again.

It felt somewhat strange to not be able to press his weight into Collins for fear of aggravating his injury, to not be able to align themselves like they were used to, with Farrier melding himself along Collins’s back—though it hadn’t always been like that.

Collins had been rather gun-shy the first few times they’d shagged, not wanting to stray too far outside his realm of expertise, as it were. Farrier hadn’t given a damn. He was content with whatever was offered him, and if that meant lying back and thinking of Scotland, then so be it.

Farrier hadn’t pushed Collins for anything else, not wanting to potentially scare him off. So he’d been surprised when, mid-blowjob in a secluded corner of one of the lightly-used hangars, Collins had suddenly stopped him and asked in a small voice if they could try something different.

Farrier hadn’t really expected Collins to enjoy being on the receiving end as much as he’d seemed to, but after that, they’d really never gone back. It had become almost routine by the time things had ended for them.

But maybe that wasn’t the right way to describe it, because Farrier’s hands on Collins’s hips felt more like resuming after a long pause rather than a new beginning.
If Collins was at all self-conscious about Simone watching them, he showed no signs of it, eagerly kicking off his pants and then getting to work on removing Farrier’s as well.

There was no need for talk, and no desire for it, both of them too caught up in the overwhelming sense of closeness that had been missing even after their reunion on the beach.

Pulling back from Collins a few moments later, Farrier reached down and pulled a bottle of oil out of Simone’s bedside drawer. He pressed it into Collins’s hands before sitting back on his heels and letting Collins take care of the rest, knowing from experience that Collins had little patience for Farrier’s tendency to draw out the foreplay.

Farrier glanced over at Simone as Collins occupied himself, staring at the hand clamped tightly between her thighs, moving in time with the rise and fall of her chest. Farrier let out a little grunt of surprise when he suddenly felt Collins’s hand close around him, and then a strangled hiss as his cock was gradually enveloped by tight, wet, heat.

Farrier screwed his eyes shut for a brief moment, trying not to move while Collins panted raggedly underneath him. When he opened them again, Simone was suddenly stood there at the side of the bed. She was as bare as both he and Collins now.

Farrier stared at her wordlessly as she leaned down to cup his face between his cheeks and kissed him again. “Careful,” he warned her as she pulled away, already guessing her intent from the look in her eyes.

Simone arched an eyebrow in silent reprimand for even daring to doubt her, before turning around to put her hands on the metal bedframe behind Collins’s head, using it as leverage to swing her legs up onto the bed so that she was straddling Collins’s waist.

Collins looked conflicted, or maybe just nervous. Farrier contemplated once again just putting a stop to all this, before it could lead to something he had no chance of ever being able to repair, but it wasn’t his call to make. Collins wasn’t a helpless child Farrier needed to keep out of harm’s way. Farrier reached for his hand on the bed and squeezed it tight, reassured when he received an answering squeeze in return.

She pressed the curve of her arse into Farrier’s hips, teasing her cunt over Collins’s cock until Farrier finally caught on and began to mimic her rhythm. With Collins distracted by Farrier’s slow movements, Simone lifted herself up again, quickly grabbing the discarded oil from beside Collins’s head and reaching back to slick herself up just as Collins had done earlier.

Farrier felt Collins tighten around him as Simone slowly guided herself down onto Collins’s cock. Farrier grabbed at her hip with one hand, looking for some measure of stability as he increased the speed of his thrusting, no longer able to see Collins’s reactions, but knowing that he was coming undone from the loud breathy whines that Farrier knew he would have been too self-conscious to vocalise otherwise.

The three of them moved together not as one single being, but as distinct units in a complicated bit of machinery—not the most romantic way to think of it, but one of the few things Simone and Collins had in common was their universal disdain for schoolgirl fantasies of love and intimacy, which Farrier supposed left him the odd man out.

Farrier finished first. Familiar with both of their needs, Farrier moved his right hand from Simone’s hip and wrapped his arm under her breasts, pulling her off of Collins and into his chest. He fingered her roughly with his left, his knuckles scraping against Collins’s own hand, working quickly to finish himself off before Farrier could slip out of him.
Simone came first, Collins following only seconds after; her moans as Farrier rubbed his palm over her clit drowned out Collins’s halting gasps. Farrier could only tell he’d come from the way he clenched down around Farrier’s oversensitive, already softening cock.

Farrier rolled onto the bed beside Collins when he finally pulled out, tugging a reluctant Simone into the cramped space between them. Their skin melded together with sweat, hot and uncomfortable, and Simone wouldn’t stop fidgeting against Farrier’s chest, her back to Collins’s as the three of them lay there in near silence.

Simone would wriggle free sooner or later, but for now she seemed content to bask in the afterglow, or at least would allow Farrier to do so. Farrier could already tell by the slowing of Collins’s breathing that the other man was already drifting off to sleep. He likely wouldn’t wake for some time, if past experiences were anything to go by.

Farrier traced patterns onto Simone’s skin, not even the floaty post-orgasm haze unable to fully distract him from his racing thoughts.

It hadn’t been Farrier’s first time with either of them, but it still felt illicit somehow—the three of them together like this—like a stolen kiss with a girl at fourteen after drinking half the liquor cabinet during a party at her parents’ estate. Farrier could only hope that none of them would regret this in the morning.
Simone had never been so uncomfortable in her life.

Farrier, at her front, radiated heat like a living furnace; Collins, his back pressed against hers, was colder than a corpse. Instead of cancelling each other out, the contrast only compounded the uncomfortable itching feeling under her skin as she twisted and turned in a futile effort to find a spot between them that didn’t make her feel like she was suffocating.

“Move over,” she hissed in Farrier’s ear, finally giving up on the matter altogether after just a few minutes of lying there, the afterglow already long-flushed from her mind and replaced with the omnipresent buzz of paranoia that had plagued her since she could remember.

Not that she didn’t have her reasons. Tonight, even more than usual.

Farrier shifted just enough to allow Simone to push up onto her elbows to climb over him. She could tell he was already half-asleep.

Collins let out a loud snore, but didn’t show any signs of waking even when the bedsprings squeaked, or when Simone nearly kicked him in the face as she vaulted out of the bed.

Her clothes were still scattered across the floor, but she ignored them for now, leaning down instead to pick up her watch lying on the bedside table. She couldn’t help but glance at Collins, his mouth hanging open as he dozed, the sharp angles of his nose and jaw cast into sharp relief in the candlelight.

It was later than she’d thought, closing in already on midnight even though it didn’t feel like more than an hour had passed since sundown.

There were clean linens in the hall closet. Simone tidied herself as best she could without the luxury of a bath and redressed before heading up to the attic. She sat at the window and stared out at the darkened hillside in the distance where she knew the others were holed up and waiting out the night in safety, waiting for her signal to assure them that the Chateau remained safe as well.

Simone was surprised, frankly, that the Germans hadn’t shown up by now. Surprised—but not ungrateful. The Chateau had been her home since before the occupation even, and there were few places out of the many in which Simone had resided during her life that merited the title of ‘home’ in her mind. She would be sorry to give that up.

Not least of which because it was her mistake that had led to the prisoners’ escape in the first place.
It wasn’t the first time they’d captured German soldiers. It wasn’t even the first time Simone had been in charge of managing them until they were ready to be questioned. She knew the protocol, knew exactly what precautions needed to be taken—and still she’d let herself become distracted, hadn’t taken the time to search them properly before leaving them in the care of Francois and Hugues at the Tower. She was lucky they’d both survived, at least, so that she wouldn’t have their deaths hanging over her head, too.

Simone stared down at the hands on her watch as they ticked ever closer to midnight. It was the costliest possession she owned, and she took care of it accordingly, though once upon a time she’d considered tossing the damn thing into the sea just to be rid of the memories. She was glad now that she hadn’t; it was the only thing left to remember her father by, and as much as she’d resented him when he was alive, it felt…unkind to think ill of him now.

Leclair had always reminded Simone in a lot of ways of her father, both good and bad, and she thought now that their similarities might have helped her forgive the latter posthumously, whether he deserved it or not.

But despite all that, not even Leclair knew about the watch’s significance to her. She’d only ever told Farrier, while they’d sat together in the very spot she was sat in now, after Farrier had told her about how he used to name the constellations with his own father.

Simone’s pleasant childhood memories, particularly the ones that included her father, had been few and far between.

She finally ignited a match just as the hands on the watch crossed twelve and coaxed the lantern on the windowsill into life. It flickered ominously for a few seconds and Simone leaned in close to check the oil, reassuring herself that she could leave it alone for at least an hour or two before exiting the attic and heading back down the stairs to her bedroom.

Simone poked just her head inside to check on Farrier and Collins, both of whom were still asleep, though Farrier had moved into the space she’d vacated in the middle of the bed and wrapped himself around Collins like a marmoset clinging to a tree branch. She felt her lips start to quirk upward in spite of herself and quickly darted out of the doorway, though neither were awake to witness the miniscule lapse in control.

Simone continued downstairs to the ground floor, walking into the parlour with every intention of cleaning up the empty bottle of wine and the used mugs sitting on the table next to the sofa. Somehow, she ended up curled up in the armchair Farrier had been sat in before when she’d first come in from outside with a fresh bottle of wine dangling loosely from her fingertips.

All of a sudden it felt like the day was catching up to her. The wall of utter exhaustion she’d slammed into was unexpected, but the haze clouding her thoughts was almost pleasant. For once it didn’t feel like she had to think about anything at all. She didn’t have the energy to.

There was a loud rumble in the distance.

Simone jerked wildly in her chair, sending the bottle of wine in her hands flying. It landed on the floor with a loud crash as it shattered, the explosion radiating a fine spray of glass and alcohol throughout the parlour.

She scrambled to her feet, muttering a string of curses under her breath as she sprinted for the stairs, taking care to avoid stepping in the dangerous debris littering the floor. Taking the steps two at a time, she raced up to the first floor and burst into the bedroom where Farrier and Collins were still sleeping.
Farrier woke as soon as she entered, bolting upright and glancing around frantically as if looking for what had woken him even as Simone stood on the other side of the bed shaking Collins awake.

“They’re here,” Simone hissed.

Farrier didn’t respond, but he seemed to understand, jumping out of bed and hastily tugging on his clothes while tossing Collins’s over to Simone, who felt uncomfortably maternal as she helped him back into his trousers.

“What should we do?” Collins asked in a low voice.

Simone’s eyes lingered on the way his arm was wrapped around his waist; the pained set of his mouth despite his obvious attempts to hide it. She looked at Farrier, and the brief glance they exchanged was enough to confirm her suspicions. Even if this was just a small patrol, Collins was too much of a liability for them to even think about an ambush.

“Get him under the bed,” she told Farrier, jerking her head toward Collins, who still couldn’t quite pass for fully conscious. “I’ll hide the guns and meet you downstairs.”

Farrier simply nodded. That was enough to reassure Simone that he had things under control.

She moved throughout the farmhouse on autopilot, darting from room to room and making sure any contraband that wasn’t already hidden somewhere under a floorboard or behind a bit of wall panelling was moved to join the others. All the while the rumbling of the engine outside grew steadily louder, an inescapable reminder of the imminent arrival of the enemy.

Simone’s hands were shaking when she made her way back to the parlour. She knelt down on the floor, glancing up to meet Farrier’s eyes from where he was standing in the entryway between the parlour and kitchen, and then looked down again to begin cleaning up the mess of broken glass littering the floor.

There was a knock at the door. Simone froze.

She looked up at Farrier again, watching his face blanch as he slowly reached for the door.

It creaked open to reveal three soldiers decked out in full Wehrmacht regalia standing casually on the front porch. Simone was relieved to see that they at least didn’t have their guns already drawn, which meant there was still a possibility they might be able to avoid a potential conflict if they played their cards right.

“Bonsoir,” said the first, a tall skeletal man with slicked back brown hair a shade lighter than Farrier’s. He stepped inside without waiting for an invitation and nodded for his compatriots to follow him.

“Bonsoir,” Farrier replied, quietly closing the door behind them as they continued into the parlour where Simone was still kneeling on the ground, futilely trying to clean the mess she’d left.

He’d managed to force his expression into something appropriately neutral, but his accent stood out like a sore thumb. Simone hoped that the soldiers either hadn’t been in France long enough to notice, or like most of the Germans, simply didn’t care enough to pay attention to that sort of thing.

“I hope you don’t mind indulging us at this hour,” the soldier continued, “but we’ve had some trouble in the area as of late.”

“Trouble?” Farrier said, and Simone winced. If their positions were reversed, she would have just
kept quiet, let the Germans do the talking, stayed out of their way and off their radar.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option. The three soldiers took another few steps forward with the French-speaking soldier at their head, and then stopped just short of the eclectic arrangement of furniture sat in front of the fireplace. The leader’s eyes focused in on Simone’s kneeling form, and she quickly looked down again, not wanting to invite any opportunity for him to take offense.

From just the quick glimpse at his uniform, she could tell he was a Gefreiter, a lower-ranking officer, but one that came with its share of privileges and responsibility. The way the man carried himself seemed to indicate that he took immense pleasure in reminding others of his rank, despite how unimpressive it really was.

“Oui,” the Gefreiter said slowly, and Simone could feel his eyes lingering on her as she brushed the last remnants of the broken wine bottle into the dustpan. Her skin was crawling. “Is there anyone else in the house with you?”

“Just my wife,” Farrier replied.

Simone’s head shot up reflexively to find Farrier gesturing casually toward her as all three Wehrmacht stared in poorly-concealed disgust.

“I hope we didn’t interrupt your…argument?” the Gefreiter asked, gesturing toward the wine still staining the floor. There wasn’t much Simone could do about it now.

“It was an accident,” Farrier said quickly. “I can be rather clumsy.”

Simone stood and moved out of the way of the Wehrmacht as they prowled the room, looking for any reason, she presumed, to shoot the two of them dead and be done with it. She stared at Farrier out of the corner of her eyes, noting the way his hands were trembling—and how he suddenly tucked them behind his back as if sensing her gaze lingering on them.

There was nothing for the soldiers to find in either the kitchen or the parlour, so Simone wasn’t worried. Farrier was her only concern at the moment: whether he could keep up the façade long enough to satisfy the Gefreiter into leaving. Though she had a sinking feeling somewhere in the back of her mind that it might not matter if they passed the Germans’ test or not.

They perused the ground floor with all the nonchalance of a couple newlyweds browsing for a flat, seemingly oblivious the tension permeating the air.

After going through both the kitchen and parlour to his satisfaction, the Gefreiter stopped suddenly in the mouth of the corridor that led down to Leclair’s room. He turned to the younger-looking of the other two soldiers, nodding sharply toward him.

He barked out something in German that Simone didn’t have a hope of understanding. When she looked at Farrier, she found a similarly confused expression on his face.

Simone had picked up just enough German to be able to hold someone at gunpoint—which is about the only use she’d ever had for it. Understanding it when spoken was another matter entirely, and whatever the Gefreiter had said to his subordinate was far too complex for Simone to pick out any individual words or phrases she might already know.

The younger soldier replied affirmatively with a customary military salute and then marched out of the Chateau back through the front door.

The sick uneasy feeling in Simone’s gut grew stronger as she watched the door swing shut behind
him. She’d felt safer, somehow, with all three in her sight, though it had meant she and Farrier were outnumbered.

“The two of you,” the Gefreiter said suddenly, leaving Simone with little opportunity to dwell on her anxiety for the time being, “come with us.”

They were led down the corridor by the two soldiers and into the bedroom at the very end, where Simone had spent the majority of her efforts on hiding various sensitive items from the Germans’ prying eyes; not least of which was the remainder of their weapons cache, now stashed securely in the floor underneath the trunk in which they’d previously been kept. She’d filled it with clothing instead, hoping it would appear real enough even though she hadn’t had much time to spare when she’d done it.

As expected they searched the trunk first, the lower-ranking soldier carelessly rifling through its contents while the Gefreiter watched with narrowed eyes.

Simone watched nervously from the doorway as the trunk was slowly inched sideways by the soldier’s movements, but after an agonizingly long moment, he finally gave up, conceding that there was nothing of note inside. Simone started to let out a quiet sigh of relief, only for it to catch in her throat when the Gefreiter whirled on them instead, suspicion etched in every line in his face.

“You’re well-read,” he said with a nod toward Farrier, sounding almost accusatory. He turned and walked over to the bookshelf on the right side of the bed to take a closer look.

“Not much else to entertain in the country,” Farrier pointed out as the Gefreiter traced a curious fingertip over the spines of Leclair’s books.

“I suppose you’re right,” the Gefreiter replied, his gaze lingering on Simone long enough that she couldn’t repress the slight shudder that rippled through her in response. If the German noticed her unease, he gave no sign of it, turning instead to his subordinate and uttering another unintelligible string of German.

The other soldier gave a curt nod and resumed searching the room under the Gefreiter’s supervision. Now that their attention had strayed from the cache of guns hidden under Leclair’s trunk, the tightness in Simone’s chest began to ease.

Still, she found herself inching closer to Farrier as soon as the two had their backs turned to her, finding his presence calming even though there was little he could do to improve their situation.

Simone had been enamoured with Farrier from the very start, and when he’d first come to stay at the Chateau a year ago, that irrepressible infatuation had been a source of cognitive dissonance for Simone, who’d never felt the need to indulge in romantic interest or any relationship lasting longer than a single night. She’d learned early in life that vulnerability invited injury and had lived her life accordingly.

And then Farrier had showed up out of nowhere and obliterated any chance of living out the uninterrupted solitary life Simone had planned for herself.

She had known, long before the start, that he planned on going home someday. To his wife. But it hadn’t seemed real at the time, and it still didn’t almost—though Simone knew that one way or the other, this would be the end for them, whether they lived or died. Simone had even caught herself wishing on occasion, perversely, that she would die, or that Farrier would, just so she wouldn’t have to go through the rest of her life knowing that Farrier was still out there somewhere, just out of reach.
Simone brushed her hand against Farrier’s, subtly enough that it could have been mistaken for an accidental touch, though she hoped Farrier would recognise it for what it really was: an apology.

“How many rooms upstairs?” the Gefreiter asked as he finally turned around to face them again, the other soldier finishing up his inspection of the drawers in Leclair’s bureau.

“Four,” Farrier replied, and Simone prayed the hesitation in his voice was apparent only to her because she knew what he was afraid they’d discover inside one of those rooms.

“Lead the way,” the Gefreiter said, gesturing for them to move toward the door.

They obeyed without question, Simone sticking as close as possible to Farrier’s back, hyperaware of the Germans following just behind. The stairs produced a cacophony of creaks and squeals underfoot as the four ascended the stairs to the first floor. Simone noticed as they climbed that Farrier’s limp seemed to be back, and hoped that wouldn’t present a problem for them in the event that they needed to make a swift exit.

When they reached the landing on the first floor, Farrier and Simone started down the corridor without pausing, but the footsteps behind them suddenly stopped. Simone grabbed the hem of Farrier’s shirt and turned to find the Gefreiter standing on the landing with the other German soldier at his side, his head tilted upward.

“You didn’t tell us there was an attic,” he mused, looking up at the plain wooden door at the very top of second set of stairs.

“You didn’t ask,” Farrier replied coolly.

Simone glanced up at Farrier in warning, and then back at the Gefreiter, nervously anticipating his response. She was surprised when instead of threatening Farrier for his insolence, or worse, the man merely laughed and then continued past them down the corridor to the last door on the right.

It opened to reveal the bathroom. Neither of the two soldiers seemed to find it worth searching, as they merely took a cursory glance inside before moving on to the room on the opposite side of the corridor: the one Simone and Aimee had shared.

Simone had to force all of her muscles to relax as the lower-ranking soldier reached for the door handle, watching him struggle to force it open as a feeling of dread spread through her, like the sensation of ice water slowly trickling down her spine.

The room was as they’d left it: a mess.

Simone cast a nervously glance at the Gefreiter, whose eyes widened infinitesimally as he took a step inside, but he said nothing until after the others had followed him in. Simone trailed in last behind the rest and lingered reluctantly near the doorway.

She hated all this, the deception, the sick anticipation of waiting for the flood after the hurricane, not knowing when their luck would inevitably run out. Lying came with the territory, of course, but Simone had never felt suited for it, certainly not like Leclair, whose real name Simone still didn’t even know.

Simone was a fighter, not a spy, and every centimetre of her skin itched with the suppressed desire to do what she did best.

But it wasn’t time—not yet, anyway.
The Gefreiter hummed contemplatively as he surveyed the room and then turned to Farrier again with an expectant look. Simone held her tongue, reassuring herself that Farrier was plenty clever enough to catch on to the nature of the German’s unspoken query.

He was. “We had visitors recently,” Farrier replied.

It was a weak excuse, but there wasn’t much they could say to explain away the extra beds, particularly Simone’s, which was still a mess from recent use. Aimee’s bed stood out in sharp contrast, the quilt and pillows arranged as neatly as ever.

“Friends?” the Gefreiter asked, turning back around to take a closer look at the desk between the two beds.

“Family,” Farrier replied. Simone could see an uneasiness seeping into his expression as he spoke. “Cousins, from Calais. They left earlier this afternoon.” He didn’t offer an excuse for why these theoretical visitors had come, and Simone found herself at a similar loss for a reasonable explanation.

This was where their story would fall apart, Simone realised. She hadn’t expected the patrol to be so thorough in their inspection of the Chateau; certainly, she hadn’t anticipated that they would send an officer of any rank instead of just grunts, much less one who was fluent in French.

Something wasn’t right. Simone had the feeling now that there was some unknown variable at play here, one they couldn’t have accounted for. They’d made a mistake. They should have taken their chances and scrambled an ambush, banked on shooting all three soldiers, and then run.

It was too late for that now.

But there was no question about Farrier’s family that followed. Nor did either soldier give any indication that they suspected it was a farce. The Gefreiter was silent for a long moment, and then when he finally spoke again, it was in German. He remained standing at the desk, with his back still turned to the other three.

Whatever he’d said was long enough that Simone could see the expression on his subordinate’s face shifting from careful neutrality to obvious bemusement. Simone thought that she heard ‘Sevard’ mentioned somewhere in the middle, but she wasn’t sure, and there was no way to determine the context even if she had heard correctly.

Instead of the ready and silent agreement from earlier, the other soldier replied to the long string of German in kind, casting a hesitant glance toward Simone and Farrier as he uttered something that might have been a question.

The Gefreiter’s response was clipped, harsh—a reprimand, perhaps. Still, he didn’t turn, even when his subordinate backed out of the room, squeezing past Simone with a doubtful expression plastered across his face.

The Gefreiter brushed his fingers across something lying on the desk, something Simone couldn’t see from where she and Farrier were stood near the open doorway. It was her only source of comfort, even now that they outnumbered the enemy two to one; three to one, if Collins could be counted from under the bed.

“Votre femme,” the Gefreiter said abruptly. The sharp edge of disdain in his voice made it clear he viewed Simone as more of Farrier’s possession than partner, as Farrier had intended when he’d introduced her as his wife downstairs. “She speaks French?” He glanced over his shoulder and Farrier nodded affirmatively, casting his eyes briefly at Simone as if to confirm that he hadn’t made a
mistake in doing so.

The Gefreiter raised his hand and crooked his index finger, beckoning her over. Simone took a few hesitant steps forward, almost involuntarily. She craned her neck to get a look at whatever was on the desk that had caught the man’s interest, but his body blocked it from view until Simone had strayed close enough that she could have reached out and touched him if she’d wanted.

“Do these belong to your visitors as well?” the Gefreiter asked, finally spinning around with several pages clutched in his right hand, his left hidden behind his back as he gradually turned to face Simone.

She leaned forward reflexively and caught a glimpse of the markings on the papers the Gefreiter had lifted from Aimee’s desk. Simone felt the sick lurch of realisation too late when she recognised them as the diagrams Alex had stolen from Maxine’s office.

The Gefreiter’s hand shot out and grabbed Simone’s arm, releasing the diagrams in the same movement. The pages fluttered to the ground as he tugged her in close to his body, and she heard the sound of a pistol being cocked next to her ear only seconds before she felt its pressure against her temple.

Farrier was staring at her with a face frozen in a mask of horror, but he didn’t move except to raise his hands in surrender. Simone could have commended him for that, if she wasn’t currently being held at gunpoint. The last thing they needed right now was for one of them to do something stupidly heroic.

Simone could hear a soft fading rumble of an engine from outside as she stood there, waiting for something to happen, and she wondered what purpose the other two German soldiers could possibly have for driving away from the Chateau, particularly when it would mean abandoning their commanding officer. Unless they were leaving to get reinforcements. She wished she could see the Gefreiter’s face, to determine if the soldiers’ departure had been part of his orders, as he had given no other discernible reaction to the sound.

“You don’t seem like a stupid man,” the Gefreiter said calmly to Farrier after the faint noise of the truck had trailed off into an overwhelming silence. Simone shuddered as the man’s breath warmed her ear, but tried not to let her discomfort show on her face as she stared intently into Farrier’s eyes, willing him silently to keep his head. “But lying to me was very, very stupid of you.”

“We aren’t armed,” Farrier reasoned. “There’s no need for this to get messy.”

The Gefreiter let out a rasping laugh. “You think this isn’t already a mess?” he asked, toeing the corner of one of the discarded pages on the floor.

Farrier’s eyes shot downward to take a look at the diagrams scattered across the floor. Simone saw only the briefest flicker of recognition in his eyes, but apparently that was the only confirmation the Gefreiter needed, his grip tightening around her arm as he pulled her even closer.

Farrier was still desperately, futilely, trying to negotiate. “She had nothing to do with this, please, just let her go. I’ll cooperate, anything you want, I swear to God.”

“You say she’s not involved, but she’s your wife, is she not?” the Gefreiter replied, sounding far-too casual for someone holding a gun to Simone’s head. “Should a wife not bear responsibility for the crimes of her husband?”

Farrier shook his head slowly. Simone could see it in his eyes, the knowledge that they he was
fighting a losing battle. “Please don’t do this,” he pleaded quietly. “Surely you have a wife at home, as well? Surely you’d want mercy shown to her if the positions were reversed?”

“I have no sympathy,” the Gefreiter replied frigidly, “for terrorists.”

Simone found his use of the term ironic. She almost wanted to laugh. The Resistance weren’t the reason why ordinary people were afraid to walk out their front doors.

“Besides,” the Gefreiter unexpectedly, “we probably would have burned this shithole to the ground even if we hadn’t found proof of Sevard’s little conspiracy.”

Simone didn’t have even a second to mull over the implications of the German’s words before she found herself and her captor being tackled to the ground. There were hands on her—Farrier’s, she realised—as she struggled to catch her breath, but she still had enough sense to grab for the pistol lying on the ground as she was pulled toward the bedroom door.

She could see now that there was enough distance between them, that it was Collins tangled up with the Gefreiter on the floor between the beds, his blonde hair whipping around wildly as the two attempted to wrestle the other into submission.

Simone glanced up at Farrier, who was still standing over her, as the two struggled, wondering what he intended to do. For the moment, Collins seemed to be holding his own; trying to insert themselves into the fight might do more harm than good. But when she looked up at Farrier’s face, she found him wearing an utter helpless expression, his fingers twitching vainly at his sides as he watched the brawl progress.

She had never seen him freeze up like that.

Simone looked away from Farrier, and then down at the gun still clutched loosely between her fingers. She scooted backwards until she was sat against the door-frame and raised the pistol with both hands. Simone took a deep breath to steady herself, hardly aware of the quiet gasp behind her and the panicked “Don’t—” that followed when she placed her finger on the trigger and fired.

The Gefreiter’s hands went limp around Collins’s throat, falling away when he scrambled out from under the German’s body to put his back against Aimee’s bed. He looked panicked still, like he was worried the Gefreiter would suddenly get up again and attack him.

There were red marks blossoming on the pale skin of Collins’s throat. Simone’s chest felt oddly tight as she stared at them for a long moment before feeling Farrier’s hands under her arms again, lifting her up.

“We should grab what we can, get out of here,” Farrier said hurriedly. He grabbed the pages off the floor and shoved them haphazardly into his trouser pockets before crossing the room to help Collins to his feet as well.

“Where in God’s name did you learn to shoot like that?” Collins asked breathily, looking like a baby deer as he used Farrier for leverage to stand on trembling legs.

Simone frowned, unsure of the implication he’d meant with his question. “Surely you didn’t think all of us just sat on our arses drinking chocolate, did you?” she replied, glancing away from him as she did so to check how many bullets were left in the Gefreiter’s pistol. Not that they would have much of a chance if it came down to a firefight, even with the other guns that were stashed throughout the Chateau. “You can walk on your own?” she asked, looking up at Collins again to confirm.

He nodded, letting go of Farrier as if to prove it.
“Good,” Simone said, relieved that they wouldn’t have an additional problem added to the mountain of things they already had to worry about. “Head up to the attic; we’ll grab whatever we can and meet you there.”

Simone followed Collins out of the room, watching as he discreetly wrapped an arm around the bandages covering his wound. There wasn’t any sign of blood showing through just yet and Simone hoped it would stay that way, at least long enough for them to get far away from the Chateau. If the man collapsed of blood loss now, there was little she or Farrier would be able to do for him.

Just as Farrier’s name passed through her mind, Simone felt his fingers curl unexpectedly around her bicep with almost bruising pressure, preventing her from following Collins through the doorway. Simone found herself reminded nauseatingly of the Gefreiter’s similarly harsh grip.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Farrier hissed in her ear, too quiet for Collins to hear from the corridor.

Simone met his gaze coolly and ripped her arm out of Farrier’s hold. “There are a lot of things I shouldn’t have done,” she said evenly before moving past him to join Collins on the landing.

“Seems like I need some help after all,” he said a bit sheepishly from the foot of the stairs. His chest rose and fell like he’d just finished a sprint as he leaned back against the wall and there was a sweaty sheen glistening on his chest and shoulders.

Simone glanced back to find Farrier still standing in the doorway, staring at her with a wary expression. She jerked her head meaningfully toward Collins, feeling incensed even when the gesture worked as she’d intended and Farrier came trotting down the hallway like an obedient puppy.

“Get him up there and just stay with him,” Simone ordered, confident that Farrier would be only too happy to do as directed. “I can take care of the guns myself.”

“You’re sure?” Farrier asked, already reaching over to Collins as he replied. It wasn’t a protest, Simone noted, merely a courtesy.

“I’m sure,” she said, before turning on her heel and taking the stairs down two at a time, not giving herself the chance to look back.

Simone didn’t regret sleeping with either of them, with both of them—but it hadn’t changed anything. She couldn’t stop time, and even if she could, she didn’t think she wanted to. Her time with Farrier would end as it was meant to, like the fleeting beauty of the ocean’s horizon at dusk, fading too quickly into absolute darkness. And someday, even the memories would fade, too.

It was quiet when Simone reached the ground floor. She ducked into the parlour to peer out the window to confirm that the winding gravel drive out front was indeed vacant once again. But she knew the Germans would be back soon, and that it wouldn’t be long before they realised their superior was dead.

She hurried down the corridor to Leclair’s room and shoved the trunk on the floor aside, grabbing the guns she’d stashed there earlier and tossing the heavy bag over her shoulder with a soft grunt of exertion. Simone glanced around the room once before leaving, at all the books lining the shelves on the opposite wall, most of which she’d never had the opportunity to read. She knew it was a foolish hope, but she couldn’t help but wish that somehow, she’d manage to come back here again someday.

Simone remembered what the Gefreiter said about burning the whole place to the ground and her
grip on the strap over her shoulder tightened until it was almost painful.

She was halfway up the first set of stairs when she heard the rumbling of an engine again. The noise made her falter, tripping on the last step and sending her sprawling onto the landing, the guns rolling out of the bag on her back and onto the floor.

Simone scrambled onto her hands and knees without missing a beat. She ignored the stinging pain in her left ankle as she quickly shoveled the weapons back into the bag before darting up the remaining steps to the attic. Her ankle gave an alarming twinge with each step. Simone cursed her luck. Between her ankle, Farrier’s bad leg, and Collins’s injury, it’d be a miracle if the three of them managed to escape.

The two men had managed to scrape together what little they could carry in the time Simone had been gone. Both looked up at her expectantly from where they were stood next to the lantern in the window as she entered the attic and quickly shut the door behind her.

“Help me move this,” she ordered breathily, already moving toward the dusty bureau crammed into the corner of the attic, all of the drawers either missing or jammed shut. Farrier hurried over to her and together the two of them pushed the bureau up against the door while Collins watched nervously from the window, the muffled sound of shouts outside growing louder with every passing second.

“You’re not planning to hold them off, are you?” Collins asked in a loud whisper.

Simone wiped away the sweat trickling down her forehead and crossed the attic to meet him over by the window. “No,” she said simply as she took the lantern and extinguished the light, tying the handle to her bag for safekeeping. They’d need it when they reached the church, even with the moon overhead. “Try to stay close,” Simone told Collins, and then she vaulted over the windowsill and onto the ledge below without any further warning.

She looked up to find Collins looking down at her with his head poking out the window, his blonde hair sticking up in all directions like a haystack. Simone motioned for him to follow.

There was little room on the eaves underneath the window, so Simone carefully made her way along the side of the house as soon as she saw Collins swing a leg over the windowsill. She crept over to the edge of the roof overhanging the portion of the farmhouse where the kitchen was located and paused, turning back to check on the others’ progress.

Collins had made his way down, presumably with Farrier’s help. The other man was hanging halfway out the window when they heard the thud of the door being kicked in downstairs. Simone ducked down reflexively even though the soldiers were on the other side of the house and wouldn’t have been able to see any of them up on the roof.

She glanced up to find Farrier looking at her expectantly, frozen in place with his hands still gripping the windowsill tightly. Simone sighed and beckoned for him to follow as she turned around again and jumped down lightly onto the lower part of the roof. She waited there for the other two to catch up to her before proceeding along the roof’s peak to the chimney at the very end.

Simone could see the headlights shining from multiple vehicles parked around the Chateau, but all the voices sounded like they were coming from inside, so she wasn’t too concerned that they’d be spotted as they made their way down.

The gaps in the stone brick made perfect handholds for climbing. Simone descended effortlessly, jumping down just before she reached the bottom. She looked up to measure Collins’s much slower progress, avoiding Farrier’s eyes when he peeked over the edge of the roof to do the same.
“Should we steal one of their trucks?” Collins asked in a low tone between panting breaths once he’d joined her in the grass. They both stared up at Farrier’s back while he climbed down with even more gradual deliberation than Collins.

Simone weighed their options as they waited. The pain in her ankle was likely a minor sprain, nothing more, and thus far hadn’t actually hindered her at all. But Farrier’s leg was clearly bothering him more than he’d let on, and there was no telling what complications the wound in Collins’s side would cause if they tried to make the journey on foot.

“No,” Simone decided finally, “we can’t risk leaving a trail for them to follow. We only have to make it as far as the grove. Leclair will have left the truck there for us.”

Collins grimaced but kept any disagreement to himself. Simone was grateful for that; she knew if it came down to an argument that she would inevitably lose, two to one.

Finally Farrier made it down, with both Simone and Collins at his side before his feet had even touched the ground to help him. He made a show of pushing them both away, but where Simone let go immediately, Collins remained attached to Farrier’s side like a leech, refusing to do the same.

Simone readjusted the bag of guns slung over her shoulder and forced herself to look away from them, taking point as the three of them marched into the woods, taking a wide berth around the German military vehicles parked in front of the Chateau before heading east in nearly a straight line.

There was a grove of copper beech near the farmhouse. Simone wasn’t sure if it had come to be through natural or manmade means, but the vivid purple leaves stood out in the sunlight like gems in the forest canopy. She knew Leclair would often go there to be alone, to think things through free from any distraction. She and Farrier had gone there on occasion as well, for similar reasons, though neither had gotten much thinking done in the process.

It was an effective hiding spot for the truck they’d stolen some time back, used whenever they got word that a German patrol might pass through the countryside nearby. The thick dense foliage obscured from view almost everything within the grove itself, and it was unlikely that someone not familiar with the landscape would find the gap between the trees they used to get the truck inside.

The beech trees signified refuge in Simone’s mind. All they had to do now was make it there.

Thoughts of safety were quickly pushed out of Simone’s head altogether, however, by the sound of Collins’s ragged breaths, sawing agonizingly through the still night air. She glanced back to find him limping alongside Farrier with his arm still cradling his side, taut lines of pain carved deep into his face.

She could tell from once glance at Farrier’s expression that he wasn’t faring much better, but Simone knew that Farrier could fight through the pain from his old injury if it was necessary to do so—and it was.

But Simone couldn’t ignore the dark stain spreading rapidly through the gauze she’d wrapped around his torso, darkening the cotton around where his hand was pressed over the wound.

“Stop,” she said suddenly, trying to keep the panic from leaching into her voice.

“What is it?” Farrier asking, looking around confused for a second before his gaze alighted on the blood seeping through Collins’s bandages. He reached over and pulled Collins’s hand away, hissing sympathetically as the extent of the damage was revealed. “Goddammit,” he muttered. He glanced up at Simone. “How much further?”
She bit her tongue against the answer she wanted to give. The honest answer. Too far.

“Another half a kilo to the grove at least,” Simone said instead.

Farrier pursed his lips and pulled the bags he’d been carrying for both himself and Collins off his back, thrusting them out toward Simone. “Can you carry these?”

“You can’t—” she started to say, but Farrier didn’t give her a chance to finish.

“Can you carry them or not?” he demanded.

“Yes,” she snapped, snatching the bags from Farrier’s hand and then nearly tumbling forward from the unexpected weight. But she’d endured worse, so she balanced the bags out as best she could on either shoulder and stared grimly as Farrier crouched down next to Collins, who was already shaking his head.

“I’m too tall,” he protested. “And your leg—”

“Collins,” Farrier growled, and there was no hint of playfulness in his tone as he spoke, “I swear to God, if you don’t climb on right this second I will knock you out myself and carry you over my damn shoulder.”

Collins made a face and glanced hesitantly in Simone’s direction. She responded with an expression that she hoped communicated her belief in Farrier’s ability to make good on his promise.

It seemed to do the trick. Less than a minute later, Collins was astride Farrier’s back, too-long limbs criss-crossed over Farrier’s chest and waist, clinging tight as the older man slowly got to his feet.

“Ready?” Simone asked, surveying the determined set of Farrier’s face for any sign of hesitation.

He nodded curtly and continued without responding, forcing Simone to jog a few steps to catch up with him again. Her ankle radiated bolts of white-hot throbbing pain every time her foot struck the dirt but she ignored it in favour of quickening their overall pace.

Simone glanced over her shoulder every so often to check on both Collins and Farrier as they continued through the trees. The latter was faring better than she’d expected; the former, worse.

Collins was almost unconscious again by the time Simone spotted the thick trunks of the beech trees through the sparse cover of the surrounding pines.

She helped pull him off of Farrier’s back once they reached the truck. Leclair had left it tucked away just under the lowest branches of two trees whose canopies had intertwined, leaving little light for them to see by until after Simone had relit the lantern she’d taken from the attic.

“There should still be medical supplies in the back,” Simone murmured to Farrier after the two of them had laid Collins out flat on his back, a thin folded up blanket between his skin and the grass. She slowly peeled away the soaked bandages as Farrier rummaged around in the truck for the first-aid case they kept inside for emergencies.

He returned to Simone’s side just as she had finished revealing Collins’s wound to the air. The stitches at the highest point of the gash had torn, leaving a fresh trail of blood oozing down from his ribcage into the waistband of his trousers.

“There’s a needle and thread in the kit,” Farrier said, but even he sounded less than enthusiastic about the idea.
“No, it’s too dark,” Simone replied. “We can tape it up for now and worry about the actual fix once we get to the caves.” She didn’t envy Collins the inevitable pain when it came time to remove the surgical tape, but it was their best chance for halting the blood loss long enough to make it to the hillside hideout where Leclair and the others were waiting.

Collins’s breaths came out harsh, but remained steady as Simone cleaned the wound quickly and efficiently before placing a thin strip of gauze over the portion where the stitches had torn. She carefully pressed the edges of the gash together with her fingers, ignoring the feeble twitch from Collins in response, and nodded for Farrier to apply the tape.

After they’d finished, Simone sighed and scooted away from Collins, sitting cross-legged in the grass with her head in her hands as she tried to catch her breath. Farrier leaned back against the side of the truck and tilted his head to look up at the ceiling of leaves hanging over them.

“We should wait until morning,” he said suddenly.

“For what?” Simone replied, confused by the statement that had come seemingly from nowhere.

He lowered his chin to meet her eyes. “To meet the others at the cave. We should rest here until dawn.”

Simone shook her head emphatically. “No,” she said, moving closer to him purely on instinct, without thinking about Collins lying passed out between the two of them until she’d nearly bumped into him with her knees. “They’re already waiting for us to arrive,” she pointed out. “If we don’t show up, they’ll think we’ve been captured, or worse.”

“Then let them!” Farrier retorted. He looked surprised afterwards, as if he hadn’t intended to raise his voice. “So what if they worry about us for a few more hours,” he continued, softening his tone once more. “Leclair’s not stupid enough to send someone after us and we could use the daylight.”

Simone didn’t reply but her silence wasn’t agreement, and Farrier knew it.

“We can take the truck up the far side of the mountain to the southeast, but eventually we’d still have to climb,” he said. “Neither Collins nor myself have a prayer of making that trek in the dark. I’m not moving him. If you want to go without us, then be my guest.”

For a moment, Simone was tempted to do just that, to storm off into the night and leave Collins and Farrier behind her, where they belonged. But she knew if she did, even if nothing went wrong and all of them ended up safely in the caves together the next morning, she’d regret the decision. And she knew Farrier would never forget what she’d done.

Simone stood up without saying a word. She could feel Farrier’s eyes following her as she walked around Collins to the back of the truck. She grabbed another blanket, this one even more threadbare and full of moth-holes than the one they’d laid Collins down on and returned to Farrier with the item extended out to him like a flag of truce.

He accepted it with a tight nod, but he didn’t move away when she sat down next to him, practically curled into his side. Farrier spread the blanket out as best he could over the three of them and then leaned his head back against the truck once more and closed his eyes.

Simone watched him for a few minutes before she followed suit, and it wasn’t long before she settled in to sleep that she felt Farrier’s hand worming its way under the blanket to entwine itself with hers. He squeezed it just once, and then let his fingers go expectantly limp.

Simone hesitated, knowing the gesture was more than just an apology. Finally, she wrapped her
fingers around Farrier’s and squeezed back, pretending the cold metal on his finger was only a trick of her imagination as she drifted into sleep.
III. Gibson

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lateness in getting chapters up! I'm still trucking along & will try to be a bit better about updating. Hopefully you enjoy this first foray into part 3!

PS. Thank you for all the comments & sorry for my late replies to them!

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Gibson woke suddenly to the sound of raised voices bouncing off of the stone walls of the cave, the incomprehensible echoes jolting him into alertness like church bells ringing out at dawn. And it was dawn, he noted, the sky outside still a deep blue, just barely tinged with a warm peachy glow on the horizon.

He peeled his face away from the wall his head had been resting against. It took him another few seconds to remember that he’d been meant to keep watch, and another moment before he realized that the night had passed and the lantern in the attic window had gone dark.

Gibson glanced wildly around the room as the voices from below grew even louder. Maybe Tommy, or even Alex, had woken sometime during the night and kept watch in his stead, but both were still dozing steadfastly in their bedrolls on the floor, seemingly undisturbed by the loud commotion emanating from the main cavern.

A cold panic set in as Gibson realised there was a distinct possibility that the enemy had found them. And if they had, it would be all due to his own incompetence. He swallowed down the bile rising up in the back of his throat and crawled over to where he’d left Leclair’s rucksack lying in the corner, reaching in with shaking hands to extract the pistol inside.

He was still debating whether to rouse Alex and Tommy, potentially risking alerting someone below if he couldn’t manage to keep them both quiet in the process, when Gibson heard the tell-tale scrape of boots against the rock. Someone was climbing up.

Gibson awkwardly scrambled over to the opening in the cavern floor and pressed himself up against the adjacent wall, quietly readying his weapon as he watched the flickering lantern light steadily growing brighter as the scraping and shuffling increased in volume.

He waited until a head and shoulders emerged through the hole, indistinguishable except for the broadness of their shape in the darkness, before he pounced. “Don’t move,” Gibson hissed as he grabbed the man by the collar and pressed the thin barrel of the pistol against his throat, forgetting in the heat of the moment to use what little German he knew instead of French.

The laugh that followed was unexpected, as were the familiar features that gradually came into view as the man lifted the lantern to illuminate his face, revealing distinctively full lips and pointed ears.

“Fuck,” Gibson gasped, dropping the pistol to the ground and sitting back heavily. He sucked in a deep breath as Farrier heaved the rest of his body up through the hole. “I almost shot you.”
“Lucky for me you’ve never had an itchy trigger finger,” Farrier replied with another chuckle, sounding unexpectedly good-humoured for someone who’d almost ended up with a hole in his neck. “It was my mistake anyhow; I should’ve called up first, but I figured you’d be asleep.”

“I was,” Gibson admitted, before adding, “The noise woke me.” He tipped his head pointedly at the entrance through which Farrier had just emerged, where the murmur of voices was still audible despite having quieted somewhat from the din that had originally startled Gibson awake.

“Ah, yeah,” Farrier replied with a grimace as he sat back against the opposing wall. “Leclair’s not too happy.”

Gibson could guess why. “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep,” he pointed out. “I was supposed to keep watch in case something happened.”

Farrier shook his head dismissively. “What’s done is done,” he said. “And it’s not as if anything bad came of it anyhow.”

“So I only deserve the blame for fucking up if something bad happens?”

Farrier gave Gibson a look that made it clear he didn’t appreciate words being put in his mouth. “It was a mistake. You’re human. It happens. Leclair shouldn’t have expected you to keep watch on your own to start with. I know you barely slept yesterday.” Farrier’s frown deepened and he looked away from Gibson as he continued. “I’m worried about you,” he confessed in a low voice. “I don’t like how much responsibility he puts on you alone.”

Gibson contemplated telling Farrier that it was only because Leclair was too afraid to trust anyone else—but there was a reason for that trust. “Jealous?” he quipped instead, receiving a small smile in return when Farrier looked up at him again.

“You caught me.” Farrier stared contemplatively and Gibson was briefly worried that he might press for details on just why it was that Leclair had placed so much faith in him.

Even Simone had known for some time now that Gibson was not the British soldier eager to return home that he had pretended to be for the last year, his true identity hidden from everyone else for fear that they might resent him for running away when he had no right to do so, that they might think him a coward.

But neither she nor Farrier knew about the bargain Gibson had struck with Leclair. Neither knew that the only reason they were all involved in this sabotage operation turned suicide mission was because Gibson had insisted on it, or that he’d spent most of the last six months since first finding out about the Panzer prototypes trying to ascertain whether Sevard was really who Leclair suspected she was.

And now that Gibson knew exactly what Leclair was willing to risk because of her…. Gibson didn’t think he could cope with Farrier’s disappointment if he told him the truth.

But instead of forcing Gibson to explain any of that, Farrier simply said, “We lost the Chateau.” He stretched his arms back behind his head and winced when his shoulder produced an audible pop. “I reckon you already figured that much yourself, but—it’s a shame.”

Gibson hummed noncommittally. “It’s not as if it makes much of a difference to you though,” he pointed out.

“Nor you,” Farrier retorted, lifting his eyebrows almost accusingly, as if he’d thought Gibson meant not to come with him to England after all—provided they both lived through the night, of course.
“But the others, Simone—” He stopped. “I suppose it would have been nice for her to have something left once this is all over.”

Gibson thought about suggesting that Farrier ask Simone to come with them as well, if only just to wipe the morose look off his face, but he knew there’d be little hope of success. “She’s all right, though?” Gibson asked him. “And Collins?”

Farrier hesitated before replying. “We had a bit of a scrap when we raided the supply train for the explosives, and there were some… complications before we left the Chateau, but we all made it here in one piece.”

There was something in his voice that made it clear that Farrier wasn’t telling the whole story, but Gibson couldn’t muster up the energy to much care. “But you got the charges?” he asked, trying and failing to suppress the yawn that emerged at the end of the query.

Farrier nodded again and emitted a short little yawn of his own before replying. “Leclair mentioned that the plans have changed, that you found something,” he said, “but I wasn’t exactly in the mood to wait around down there for him to explain it.”

“So you left Simone and Collins to the wolves.”

Farrier chuckled. “Simone can handle herself,” he pointed out. “Collins is probably out cold already. Boy could sleep through a damn hurricane.”

The ability to sleep anywhere through anything was a highly-coveted ability for soldiers on the ground, and it was one that Gibson had never quite mastered. He’d spent his first few weeks in the army running on a few hours of fitful napping once a day or two, earning endless jokes about the permanent dark circles under his eyes from the peers he’d never grown comfortable calling friends.

He’d forgotten how awful it felt, the chronic sleep deprivation he’d once been so accustomed to before starting his cosy life at the Chateau, like all the synapses in his brain were simultaneously on fire. Under other circumstances, it might have been enough to tempt Gibson into drinking himself unconscious, but there was too much at stake to risk clouding his mind, even just long enough to get some shut-eye.

Gibson suddenly realised that he had been staring blankly at Farrier without speaking, and that Farrier was staring back at him, his expression an equal mixture of confused and expectant.


“I asked what you found that inspired Leclair to change things up on us at the last possible minute,” Farrier replied patiently. “You’d best give me the shorthand version; don’t want you falling asleep on me midsentence.”

Gibson leaned forward, putting his weight on his palms and using the sting of sharp grit biting into his skin to keep his eyes open. “It was my plan actually,” he said automatically, his stomach filling with the heavy weight of embarrassment once the childish phrase had spilled out of his mouth. “I mean—”

“No, credit due where it’s deserved,” Farrier said graciously. “Sorry, do go on.”

“Right.” Gibson’s thoughts felt murky. Trying to find the right words—in English no less—was like digging through sludge with his bare hands. “There was a schedule amongst the things Alex took from Sevard’s office,” he explained. “She’s meeting with a Panzertruppe General in a few hours to test one of the prototypes and the two of them are leaving tonight for Vichy.” Gibson yawned again.
“Leclair wants her alive,” he continued, before hurriedly adding, “because she’s the one who designed the tanks. Information,” he tacked on lamely.

Farrier’s eyes widened slightly as he mulled over what Gibson had said. “Well, I suppose it’s only a few days shy of our original timeline,” he replied, but he didn’t sound thoroughly convinced himself. “I should hope we’re not still planning on some half-cocked strike at the Wehrmacht?”

Gibson shook his head. “No,” he said delicately, “I think Leclair’s more concerned with the long-term consequences of extracting Sevard than temporarily crippling the military presence here.”

Farrier sighed and pressed the fingers of his left hand against his temple. “And I don’t suppose we’re taking the safe route and ambushing them before she can make it to the station?”

Gibson’s sheepish grimace was answer enough. ‘Safe’ had never really been in Leclair’s vocabulary to begin with, and learning the truth about Sevard had only made things worse, leaving him with a blind spot a kilometre wide.

Gibson knew that Leclair didn’t want to risk even the slightest chance of letting Sevard slip through their fingers, spirited off somewhere in Vichy amongst a den of vipers, with little recourse for tracking her down once she stepped off the train.

Farrier sighed again, sounding more resigned this time. “All right, so what’s our plan of attack?”

Gibson laid out the basics of each plan in as few words as possible, carefully omitting the fact that Leclair had originally wanted Collins to help Alex and Tommy plant the charges in the canal, instead of handling Sevard’s extraction at the hotel.

Farrier listened intently, his brows furrowed in concentration. He remained silent until it was clear that Gibson had finished speaking. “And you said this was your idea?” he asked.

Gibson felt his face warm. “Well,” he hedged, “the finer points, more or less.”

Farrier nodded, but Gibson wasn’t sure whether to take the gesture as approval until he said, “Could’ve used a few more brains like yours in the RAF.”

Gibson laughed lightly. “You couldn’t pay me to set foot in one of those flying death traps.”

“Yeah? How d’you plan on making it across The Channel then?”

Gibson hadn’t considered that. “A good right hook should do it,” he said after a moment, prompting Farrier to burst out laughing.

The sound was loud enough that Alex suddenly sat bolt upright, like a vampire rising out of its coffin. He mumbled some sort of gibberish and then coughed. He leaned forward, squinting into the dim light emanating from the lantern sitting at Farrier’s feet.

“When’d you lot get back?” he asked groggily. There were imprints on his cheeks from where his face had been pressed into the blankets and he still looked more asleep than not despite his apparent state of consciousness.

“Half an hour or so,” Farrier replied, making a clear effort to lower his voice with a furtive glance toward Tommy, though the boy hadn’t so much as twitched despite all the noise. “You can go back to sleep,” he added, already starting to stand up before he’d finished speaking. He groaned quietly and winced as he braced himself against the wall for leverage. “I should head back down and check on the others.”
Alex flopped back down and rolled over onto his face uttering so much as a single word of protest. Gibson scoffed lightly in disbelief at the other boy’s frankly enviable ability to fall asleep on command before turning back toward Farrier to find him staring at Gibson with a stern expression.

“You too,” he said before leaning down to pick up the lantern he’d brought up. “You look like hell.”

“I’m fine,” Gibson replied automatically, but Farrier wasn’t having a word of it.

“Sleep,” Farrier ordered, pointing an insistent finger in the direction of Alex and Tommy, who were doing just that. “At least try to get a few more hours under your belt before tonight. Who knows how long it’ll be before you get the chance to rest?”

As much as Gibson hated to admit it, and as much as his mind wanted to resist in favour of doing something that felt useful instead, Gibson was wiped out. Physically and mentally. Farrier was right. He could use the rest.

“All right,” Gibson relented in a soft voice. He accepted the hand Farrier extended to help him up before stumbling over to the bedroll he’d abandoned and cocooning himself in the blankets. Against all odds, Gibson was out within seconds, before even the light from Farrier’s lantern had disappeared along with him back down the ladder, plunging the cavern into near-dawn darkness once more.

The first time he woke, not much had changed. The cave was still dimly illuminated from outside, the sun evidently no higher in the sky than before. Only Gibson had moved, having apparently crept closer to where Tommy was lying in the indeterminate amount of time that he’d been asleep.

Tommy, who was still flat on his back and breathing lightly through parted lips, didn’t so much as stir when Gibson scooted even closer, practically tucking himself into the crook of Tommy’s shoulder. He stretched out his legs in the process and then froze when his foot unexpectedly collided with something warm and solid.

Gibson held his breath, waiting for a reprisal, but the shapeless lump of blankets only shifted ever-so-slightly in response to the unintended kick. And instead of shying away, Alex’s back pressed up against the sole of Gibson’s extended foot, radiating heat even through the several layers of fabric between them.

Gibson didn’t pull it away, telling himself that he didn’t want to risk waking Alex with any further movement. He fell asleep again like that, wedged between the two of them, and didn’t wake until hours later.

When Gibson did wake again, he immediately rolled over to face the sun streaming in through the narrow window before even opening his eyes. He let the warmth soak into his skin for a moment before finally sitting up with a loud yawn, already aware without having to look that Tommy and Alex were no longer asleep in their bedrolls next to him.

Gibson wiped the sleep from his eyes and peered out the window, guessing from the sun’s position above the treeline that it was well into mid-morning, if not close to noon. Which meant that he might have actually gotten the full amount of sleep needed for a human being to carry out basic functions. Farrier would be proud.

“You must have been exhausted.”

Gibson whirled around to find Simone standing against the far wall in the corner, her arms crossed casually over her chest as she watched him.

“How long have you been there?” he asked, heart beating slightly too fast. He winced at how
accusatory it sounded once the words were out of his mouth.

Simone either didn’t notice, or didn’t care. She shrugged. “Not long,” she said. “I hadn’t decided if I should wake you. I know you’re usually a light sleeper, so I thought you would already be awake by the time I made it up here.”

Normally, she would have been right, but it seemed that the lack of real sleep Gibson had been suffering from ever since Tommy and the others had arrived on Dunkirk Beach had finally caught up to him. A yawn suddenly wrenched itself from Gibson’s chest and he found himself wondering uncharacteristically if he could get away with lying back down again and napping just a few more hours.

“Quelle heure est-il?” he asked through another yawn, the already fluid mixture of French vowels emerging from his mouth like soft mush, understandable only because of context.

“Early afternoon,” Simone replied. “But Dominique’s just making a late lunch now.”

She peeled herself off the wall and straightened up, surprising Gibson when she moved a bit closer before sitting down on Alex’s unoccupied—and disastrously messy—bedroll. She sat cross-legged amongst the nest of wrinkled blankets and leaned forward to rest her chin on her hands, looking somewhat expectant, though Gibson didn’t know what it was she was waiting for.

“Tommy and Leclair went down to The Mole this morning,” she said by way of explanation. Startled, Gibson opened his mouth to interrupt, but he didn’t even get a single syllable out before Simone steamrolled over him with the rest.

“They were out doing some last-minute recon,” Simone told him. “Leclair wanted to see the prototype they were testing. He had Farrier look over your transcriptions to get the details.”

She looked vaguely uncomfortable as she said the last bit, and Gibson wondered if she hadn’t known until now that Farrier was half-Jewish. It wasn’t something that either Gibson or Farrier ever really talked about even with each other outside of the occasional late-night conversation up in the attic, so it didn’t surprise Gibson exactly to find out that Simone had been in the dark. What did surprise him, however, was how perturbed she seemed by the revelation, as if she thought Farrier had been hiding it from her intentionally.

“The verdict?” Gibson asked, knowing better than to attempt to mediate any sort of conflict involving Simone and opting to focus on the rest of what she’d told him instead.

“Depends on how you look at it,” Simone replied, shifting her weight to the side to get comfortable again.

Gibson could sympathise. After spending so much time in comparative luxury at the Chateau, even though the cot he’d slept in had never been glamourous, being forced to sit and sleep on the ground once again was already starting to take its toll on his sore muscles.

“The Germans seemed happy with the results,” Simone elaborated, “and from what Leclair said, we may have something to be worried about if they ever start producing enough of them to put on the front line.”

“Well,” Gibson pointed out, “as long as we’re successful tonight, that won’t happen.”

The look Simone gave him in reply made it clear she wasn’t confident that they would be successful. Gibson couldn’t blame her. He wasn’t sure of anything anymore either.
“Did Leclair tell you about the new plan?” he asked her.

Simone shook her head. “Just that he wants me handling the extraction and that I should coordinate with you—apparently you’re the mastermind behind it now.”

Gibson went beet-red and felt a flare of irritation at Leclair putting all the responsibility for things on him, when it was Leclair who had wanted to drastically change everything to account for Sevard’s safety.

“Hardly,” Gibson mumbled sheepishly. “I made a few suggestions.”

“Let’s hear them, then,” Simone replied, raising an eyebrow in expectation as she changed positions again, propping herself up on her palms.

The sun lit up her skin as she leaned back, and Gibson could see now the clear imprints of fingerprints on her arm, just below where the sleeves of her shirt had been rolled up past her elbow. He stared for longer than he should have before remembering himself and abruptly glancing away, clearing his throat to outline the new plan for her.

She listened in silence as he went over the same details he’d given Farrier the night before, displaying no indication whatsoever that she’d heard any of it before. Gibson hesitated slightly before he finished by telling her that the priority was making sure that they captured Sevard alive. Simone’s brow creased slightly at hearing that, but it wasn’t until after he told her that Collins would be impersonating a Luftwaffe pilot that she stopped him.

“Farrier didn’t tell you what happened?” she cut in quickly.

Gibson frowned, shaking his head. “Not really,” he told her. “Why? What did happen?” He didn’t understand why Farrier wouldn’t have told him that morning if it was bad enough that even Simone was worried about it.

She pursed her lips, hesitating. “It’s probably nothing, just—” She paused again. “Collins wasn’t exactly in great shape when we got here.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing Leclair didn’t get his way,” Gibson muttered to himself. He looked up again to find Simone looking at him patiently, waiting for clarification. “He wanted me on the extraction team instead,” Gibson explained.

“Why?” she replied simply. The question was simple. The answer wasn’t. And despite having convinced Leclair to let Simone handle the extraction in his stead, Gibson knew that Leclair would probably skin him alive if he let slip the personal nature of Leclair and Sevard’s connection to anyone, even Simone.

Gibson shrugged. “Maybe he thought it would be easier on Tommy and Alex, having Collins in charge still,” he suggested, already trying to convince himself of the rationale even as he was constructing it in his own head. It was easier that way, lying. “You don’t think he can handle it?” he asked, not bothering to wait for an answer before rambling on. “How bad is the injury? Maybe Farrier could just—”

“No,” Simone interrupted bluntly. “I’m sure he’ll be fine now that he’s had some time to rest. It’s not deep, just…he lost a lot of blood is all.” Her cheeks had flushed slightly as she spoke, and Gibson wondered if that was because she’d realised how transparent her protective instincts over Farrier had been.

“Ohay,” he said easily. He didn’t like the idea of Farrier going in there on his own either. “I was
thinking that Farrier could still help though,” Gibson continued cautiously. “Maybe pose as one of
the hotel staff, that way it wouldn’t seem suspicious that he doesn’t speak German.”

Simone nodded tightly, still looking less than pleased by the idea, but she didn’t disagree.

Shortly after they finished going over everything else that still needed to be hammered out, like drop-
off and rendezvous points and mentally taking stock of their limited inventory of weapons and
supplies, Dominique popped her head up through the hole in the floor to announce that lunch was
ready.

Gibson followed Simone down into the main cavern and felt almost embarrassed as he walked into
the dim lamplight to join the others who were already digging into their food, a few—like Tommy,
and Farrier and Collins—pausing just long enough to look up at Gibson as he grabbed a dish and sat
down.

Gibson squeezed into the space between Tommy and Jean-Marie, trying to subtly look Collins up
and down as he ate for any sign that Simone was wrong, that he wouldn’t be up to carrying out what
might possibly be the most important deception of all their lives. Injury aside, Gibson didn’t doubt
Collins’s abilities to get the job done; he’d performed exceptionally well as SS on their
reconnaissance mission. For a former pilot, posing as Luftwaffe would be a piece of cake.

Gibson watched for a few moments as Collins and Farrier ate together on a shared bedroll by the fire.
The two of them exchanged a few words in between digging into their own meals but their
conversation was inaudible over the clamouring of Dominique trying to make sure that everyone had
enough food.

Collins’s expression was harder to read, as he often tended to look mildly annoyed when he wasn’t
actively annoyed, but Gibson could tell by the soft smile on Farrier’s face and the fond look in his
eyes as he watched Collins eat that whatever they were discussing, it wasn’t an argument at least.

Gibson looked away once he was satisfied that Collins was well enough to do what needed to be
done, only to connect with Leclair’s eyes from the opposite side of the cavern, every bit as intense as
the fire between them, but cold.

Gibson glanced away quickly and turned instead toward Tommy, who was staring out over the fire,
silently chewing with a contemplative expression.

Neither of them had spoken a word to each other since Gibson had first sat down, but if they’d
learned anything from each other since their first meeting on Dunkirk Beach a year ago, it was that
talk wasn’t necessary.

Even with the sombre mood that hung heavy over the group despite Farrier’s and Dominique’s warm
smiles and attempts at conversation, there was some degree of comfort in sitting like this with
Tommy—quiet without even really touching apart from the occasional brush of their elbows as they
ate.

Gibson only glanced over once at Alex sitting on Tommy’s other side. There was a slight tremor
running through his right hand, agitation etched into the lines around his mouth. Alex flicked his eyes
over and Gibson quickly averted his gaze, embarrassed at having been caught staring.

What little comfort Gibson had derived from Tommy’s presence vanished after that. He endured the
remainder of the meal trying in vain to ignore the tendrils of restless dread worming their way
through his chest and stomach, and knew by the end of it that his expression now mirrored the one
he’d seen on Alex’s face.
When Aimee got up and started to gather up the used dishware as things started to wind down, Gibson stood without waiting for an invitation and rushed over inelegantly to help.

Aimee glanced up at him in surprise as he reached over to relieve her of the stack of dirty plates she’d piled on top of the cookware she’d collected first, the whole mess looking like it might spill out of her arms without any warning. Gibson forced himself to smile reassuringly back at her before turning around to head deeper into the cave system to wash the dishes in the underground river below.

He caught sight of Farrier frowning in his peripheral vision as he passed, but Gibson didn’t stop—at least not until the lack of light in the passage leading out of the main cavern made it impossible to continue.

Gibson stood there for a moment, counting quietly under his breath in the dark as he waited for Aimee to catch up. Finally she did so, the warm light of the lantern preceding her, and together the two of them continued their trek downward until they finally reached a portion of the river where there was little danger of falling in, near the pool they used to bathe.

Gibson knelt down and began to scrub with almost mechanical movements as he endeavoured to focus solely on the sound of rushing water filling his ears. There was no use worrying about what was ahead, but Gibson couldn’t help it. He couldn’t keep himself from dwelling on the paranoid thoughts of what might happen to Farrier and the others without him there, and then feeling equal parts foolish and selfish for even entertaining the idea that his presence would even make a difference.

Gibson was so caught up in his own head by the time he’d finished that he’d almost forgotten Aimee was there next to him. He jerked in surprise when she suddenly grabbed his hand after he’d neatly set down the last of the plates and she winced sympathetically in apology, but didn’t let go.

Aimee uncurled his fingers and slowly began to trace letters into his palm. $T\ldots u\ldots then quicker: vas\ldots me\ldots$.

Gibson closed his hand over hers before she could finish and then flipped it over so her palm was facing him instead. I’m going to miss you too, he wrote.

Gibson let go of her hand as soon as he’d finished tracing the last letter, but before he could move away, Aimee suddenly leaned over and kissed him.

It was nothing more than the gentle press of her lips against his, reminding Gibson more of the innocent schoolyard peck he’d received in school than the unexpected assault he’d experienced at Simone’s hands—and Gibson didn’t care to classify the latter as a real kiss in any case.

Still, Gibson surprised even himself when he wasn’t the first to pull away. Aimee blinked dreamily back at him, and he wondered if she’d felt whatever it is you were supposed to feel when you kissed a girl, the feeling he’d only ever had with Farrier that one time, or as much as he hated to admit it—with Alex.

If things had been different, Gibson found himself thinking, if he’d been different…. He liked Aimee, and in another life, he could have been with her. They could have been happy. Gibson wished he could tell her that, but there wasn’t enough time in the world to trace the words it would take to explain how he felt into the palm of her hand.

Gibson sighed as she started to move back from him. Before he could think better of it, he put a hand on the back of Aimee’s neck, pulling her back in so he could place a quick kiss on her forehead,
hoping the wordless apology would be enough.

He pointedly avoided looking at her as they gathered up the dishes, staring blankly ahead even when she broke into a half-jog to keep up with him as they returned to the main cavern.

Not much had changed in their absence. Everyone was still huddled together around the fire, but instead of roast vegetables, the smell of coffee now permeated the space, and Gibson could see Dominique handing out mugs as he and Aimee approached.

Gibson grabbed one from her as well on his way back to the vacant space next to Tommy, who gave Gibson a fleeting smile as he sat down.

Leclair was the only one standing after Gibson and Aimee re-joined the others near the fire. He hovered over Dominique’s shoulder with his arms crossed, coolly surveying the group for a moment as they drank their coffee amidst the low murmur of conversation.

Gibson stared at him over the rim of his mug, knowing that some sort of grand speech was imminent.

Leclair coughed once, crossing his arms over his chest expectantly, and the entire space fell silent. “The road ahead,” he said and then abruptly stopped, clearing his throat before continuing. “The road ahead won’t be easy,” he began again. “And for some of us, our paths will be diverging after tonight.”

Gibson tried to pretend he didn’t notice how almost every head in the room slanted ever-so-slightly to cast a glance in his direction.

“But we can save the farewells for later,” Leclair said, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. “For now, I just want to take a moment to thank you—to thank all of you—for everything you’ve done.” His face twitched slightly into something that, on any other man, might have been construed as a smile. He turned to look at Dominique, adding, simply: “Thank you.”

Leclair cleared his throat again and took a step back, finally uncrossing his arms as if to indicate that he was done speaking. But before anyone had the chance to so much as lift their mugs back to their lips, Leclair turned to Jean-Marie, who was still translating the last of Leclair’s impromptu speech into sign language for Aimee’s benefit.

“Could you go with Simone once you’re finished to get the rest of the things from the truck?” he asked, leaning in to address Jean-Marie directly. He seemed oblivious to the fact that everyone else was still hanging on his every word. “I want to start preparing as soon as possible.”

Jean-Marie nodded and exchanged a look with Simone from across the circle. She sighed and stood up, dusting off her trousers before walking over to join Leclair and Jean-Marie on the other side of the fire. She’d been sitting next to Hugues and Francois, Gibson noticed, their bedrolls and Hugues’s outstretched leg putting several yards between Simone and where Farrier and Collins were seated next to each other, inseparable once again.

What they had—at least from an outsider’s perspective—it was the very thing Gibson had always wished he could have with someone, assuming he’d never have the chance. He glanced over at Tommy and Alex again, finding them still facing away from each other. Gibson wondered if they’d fought at some point, but their body language didn’t indicate the sort of tension he would expect if that were the case.

Gibson cocked his head slightly as he examined Tommy’s vacant expression and wondered if it was worth it to ask. “Simone said you went with Leclair this morning to do some recon,” Gibson finally
ventured instead.

Tommy just nodded and stared blankly into the fire.

“Are you all right?” Gibson pressed hesitantly.

“Yeah, of course,” Tommy replied with a frown, his eyes flicking briefly over to give Gibson a sceptical glance, as if he couldn’t understand why Gibson would even ask. “It was…educational.”

His gaze moved over to Simone and Jean-Marie who were still huddled together speaking to Leclair, too quietly now for any of them to hear.

“Shouldn’t we go with them?” Tommy asked suddenly, the question taking Gibson by surprise.

Gibson looked over again to find Simone and Jean-Marie finally marching away from the fire, heading toward the narrow passageway that led back out into the basement of the church. “No,” he replied quickly. “There might still be patrols out; we don’t want to risk drawing their attention.”

Alex scoffed at that, but Tommy simply didn’t react at all. Gibson stared at him for a little longer with a frown before finally turning back to his coffee, already grown cold, and sipping at it miserably as he waited for Simone to return.

They were back in just under an hour, Simone laden with most of the bags herself. Gibson stood up as she entered the main cavern, but he’d only taken a few steps in her direction before Leclair suddenly cut in ahead of him to relieve her of one of the larger bags.

“Have Dominique and Aimee make any necessary alterations to the Luftwaffe uniform,” Gibson heard Leclair tell Simone, before shooing her and Jean-Marie away. Then he turned and approached Gibson with an unflinching gaze. “You ever handle explosives?” he asked in a quiet voice after the distance between them had closed to only a few steps.

Gibson shook his head. It was something he’d been trying not to think about: the fact that he was going to be carrying a pack full of highly-combustible substances, powerful enough to take out an entire building.

“All right,” Leclair replied with a curt nod. “I’ll show you, then.”

It was impossible to avoid associating the image of Leclair, sitting on the floor across from Gibson, Tommy, and Alex, with that of his father teaching himself and his sister how to repair a fishing net. But it wasn’t a net in Leclair’s hand as he carefully demonstrated how to set the detonators on the plastic explosives to five minutes—the maximum amount of time they could set for each of the charges.

They went over the plan again while Collins stood on the other side of the campfire undressing with little shame before pulling on the Luftwaffe uniform. Gibson glanced over a few times out of curiosity as Dominique and Aimee poked and prodded, trying to make quick work of any tailoring necessary to make sure that at least the thing wouldn’t slide right off of him as soon as he took a step.

When Gibson looked back at Leclair, he was tracing lines in the dirt for Alex and Tommy’s benefit as he explained where they would set their charges along the canal. “Alex, you’ll place three here, at the mouth,” Leclair told him. “Tommy, you’ll put two right here at the first bend. Gibson will place the remaining five all along the straightaway, just here.”

“When do we leave?” Gibson asked.
Leclair glanced up, looking almost surprised by Gibson’s eagerness. But it wasn’t excitement so much as anxiety that fuelled his impatience. He just wanted to get it over with.

“Once they’re finished over there,” Leclair replied, jerking his head over his shoulder toward Collins and his temporary entourage.

Gibson could practically hear Tommy’s heart rate triple in response to the words. He had to suppress the urge to reach over and grab his hand, but when he looked over to give him a look of reassurance instead, he was startled to find that Alex had beaten him to the punch, his right hand already overlaid on Tommy’s left.

Even Leclair raised an eyebrow at that as he rose, prompting Alex to suddenly snatch back his hand, as if the action hadn’t been entirely conscious. Gibson coughed pointedly as Tommy’s face began to redden, trying to draw Leclair’s attention back to himself.

“These are our packs?” Gibson asked, indicating the smaller rucksacks Leclair had pulled out of the large bag Simone had carried into the cave. It was a pointless question; Gibson had just watched Leclair divvy up the charges and accompanying detonators between each of the packs, but he was desperate to distract from the thought of Tommy’s hand in Alex’s.

Leclair nodded. “There’s a knife in each of them,” he added, “though hopefully you won’t need to use it.”

Gibson peered into his pack to find about what he’d expected: a dull multi-tool with rusted hinges. He expected he’d have more luck stabbing someone to death with his fingernails if it came down to it.

Once Leclair had wandered off again, Gibson turned to Tommy and Alex, both of whom were very pointedly looking around at nothing in particular. He sighed, shook his head, and got up to go refill his coffee by the fire.

Gibson was worried it would feel like forever before they finally set off, but by the time Collins was shaved and suited up and they were all ready to go with their supplies, it felt like no time had passed at all. Gibson kept waiting for the hyperventilation, the hysteria—whether from himself, or Tommy, or one of the others—but it never came. The six of them faced Leclair with stony expressions at the mouth of the cave, rucksacks slung over their shoulders like they were merely headed off to school, and not venturing straight into the mouth of the enemy.

“Ready?” was all Leclair said after Dominique and the others had all said their farewells to the departing soldiers. And regardless of their lack of official status, soldiers were what they were once again.

Gibson nodded and continued staring straight ahead. He guessed that the others standing beside him must have done the same, because Leclair simply nodded back in acknowledgement before turning around and heading down the passageway to the church.

The hike back through the ruins of the old church and halfway down the hill was easier going in the daylight. Gibson was just relieved he didn’t have to lead this time now that Leclair was with them. The truck had been parked precariously on the side of the hill where the path upward abruptly turned into a mess of rubble and overgrown weeds.

Simone took charge when they reached the vehicle, gesturing for the others to help her load up their packs in the back. Tommy and Alex both seemed hesitant to hand her the bags of explosives after watching her inelegantly shove the rest of the supplies into the cargo hold, but they finally shrugged
off their packs after Gibson handed his over.

He was the last to get into the truck while Leclair stood by, arms crossed over his chest again as he coolly evaluated the scene. It was hardly the tear-filled send off a departing soldier might expect.

Gibson finally caught Leclair’s eye as he lined up behind Alex to climb into the back, and Leclair’s careful mask relaxed as their gazes met. His hands twitched slightly before falling to his sides, and for a moment, it seemed like Leclair might take a step forward to embrace Gibson one last time before he left, but Leclair’s hesitation extended just slightly too long. The moment was past.

Gibson climbed into the truck after Alex with one last look over his shoulder at Leclair, who still seemed frozen halfway through the act of stepping forward towards them.

With both Tommy and Simone—who had by far the least mass of any of them—up in the front seats, there was a notable lack of room in the back. Gibson found himself squished up uncomfortably close to Alex, who immediately made a futile attempt to put some room between them.

“Anyone need a wee?” Alex joked once they were all packed into the truck like a tin of sardines. No one laughed.

Simone started the engine and whipped the truck around without any warning, causing Alex’s head to smack loudly into Gibson’s as they were thrown to the side. Alex yelped loudly, but Simone didn’t even bother to look back. He turned a baleful gaze instead toward Gibson, who just ignored him and rubbed his own head with a grimace.

“Meet back here in a few hours?” Simone called out loudly to Leclair. She leaned her head out the window so she could be heard over the sound of the engine.

Leclair nodded and waved them on.

Gibson watched the trees flying past with a feeling reminiscent to the one he’d had when he left Belfort for the last time, on his way to training camp with no real idea that it would be the last time he would ever see home. It was strange to realise he felt the same way now, that after all the suffering he’d experienced in Dunkirk he could ever consider it his home.

The drive felt shorter than it should have by the time they reached the spot where the canal opened up on the beach, an almost sickeningly familiar sight after what they’d gone through the first time they’d infiltrated the factory.

Gibson and Alex tumbled out of the truck, one after the other, shortly followed by Tommy, who stepped out of the cab with considerably more grace. Farrier and Collins followed suit (with Collins looking a bit green as he tried to keep his eyes away from the water flowing down the canal), leaving only Simone seated in the driver’s seat of the truck, staring steadfastly forward as if the rest of them weren’t even there.

Gibson understood. He knew it was easier for her to forego the goodbyes, to pretend this was just another routine mission.

He didn’t see Farrier reaching out to him until his head was suddenly buried in the other man’s neck. Gibson could feel Farrier’s warm breath in hot puffs against his scalp as Farrier squeezed him tightly.

“Be safe, all right?” Farrier mumbled into his hair before letting him go.

Gibson stumbled back a bit, feeling slightly off-kilter after the unexpectedly fond farewell, and nodded in response. He could see Collins with one arm each around Tommy and Alex and then he
let go of them and stepped over to Gibson instead.

“Take care of them,” Collins said to him in a low voice, extending his hand for Gibson to shake.

“I will,” Gibson replied as he grasped Collins’s hand with his own. He wished the two of them had had more time to get to know each other, more time for Gibson to match the man standing in front of him with the one Farrier sometimes talked about, whenever he was in a particularly good mood—or particularly bad.

He glanced over at Tommy and Alex again as Collins and Farrier climbed back into the truck. His promise to Collins hadn’t been a lie. He’d risked his own life to save theirs before—nearly died doing it—but it didn’t matter. He’d do any of it again in a heartbeat, even knowing the outcome.

Gibson was yanked out of his musing by the sound of Simone shifting gears, and he hurried over to the passenger-side window to peer in at her before she could drive off.

“What?” she said exasperatedly, one hand still on the gear-stick, the other cranking the wheel as far to the left as it would go.

“Just…thanks,” he said simply, before stepping back with a little wave and watching as she drove on.

Gibson followed them with his eyes as they rumbled down the long road that led away from the beach toward the city checkpoints until the truck became nothing more than a speck on the horizon and finally disappeared.

When he turned back to Tommy and Alex once again, they were both looking back at him wide-eyed and expectant. Gibson surveyed their faces in silence, thinking to himself that even if this time he did die, he’d be at peace with it, because this had been more of a second chance than he could have ever hoped for.

But there was just one more thing.

“So I guess I should go first,” Alex said as Gibson walked back over to them. He examined the canal’s edge with no small measure of trepidation in his expression, and he clung to the straps of the rucksack on his back like it was a life-jacket instead.

“You sure you’re ready?” Tommy asked, clutching at the collar of his shirt nervously, as if readying himself to pull it over his face and hide.

Alex huffed out a derisive laugh. “Are you?” he asked. He spun around and jumped before either Tommy or Gibson had a chance to respond.

Both leaned over the edge to watch as Alex vanished out of sight and then just as quickly broke the surface of the water again and emerged sputtering and laughing. “It’s warmer than it was before,” he called up to them. “Nice day they picked for a swim.” He ducked down under the water again and this time he didn’t come back up. Gibson could see the faintest trace of a wake from his feet as he disappeared into the enclosed portion of the canal running below the factory.

“I guess we should go after him,” Tommy said as he readied himself to jump in, but before he could step off the edge, Gibson reached out and closed his hand around Tommy’s wrist.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” Gibson said, rushing to get all the words out in time. “I—I need you to know that I—”
“It’s okay,” Tommy said calmly, cutting Gibson off before he could finish. “I already know.”

“You know,” Gibson replied, surprised by the enormous weight suddenly sliding off his shoulders, replaced by an overwhelming sense of relief. He waited for Tommy to say something back, to say anything really, any indication that Gibson’s feelings weren’t purely one-sided, but Tommy just stared at him, squinting a little, like he was confused.

“Why are you telling me this now?” he asked finally.

Gibson detected a note of something that seemed like irritation and snapped back. “What do you mean, why? If we die in there, I don’t exactly want to go with this still hanging over my head.”

Tommy looked even more baffled. “Wait, what—?” But there wasn’t any time to argue, and Gibson had already gone on the defensive, feeling the brunt of Tommy’s unspoken rejection slamming into him with unexpected force.

“Go!” Gibson urged, shoving Tommy back toward the edge of the canal. “We only have a few minutes!” He watched Tommy disappear into the dark water and straightened out the straps on his pack, the weight of it incomparable to the heavy stone sitting in the pit of his stomach, even with the added charges inside.

Gibson took a deep breath and jumped.
Greetings! It feels good to not be updating after a month-long hiatus.

Quick little life update: I’m being laid off my job (which is both good & bad for various reasons) and since I’ll have more free time I’m going to try to keep updates on a weekly basis: Thursday for Patrons, Sunday for AO3.

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @TerranAlleen (writing updates)

They were a mile outside the checkpoint when the nerves started to set in. “I don’t like this,” Farrier said, leaning forward in between Simone and Collins with his hands clenched on either side of the front seats.

“Like what?” Simone replied automatically. She didn’t take her eyes off the road, sounding bored by Farrier’s comment, but he knew that meant she was just trying to distract herself from the mounting anxiety over what they were about to do.

“The plan,” Farrier elaborated patiently.

Collins snorted directly into Farrier’s ear. “Is that so?” he retorted. “And here I thought Gibson could do no wrong.”

Farrier turned slightly to glare at him, his expression quickly softening at the sight of Collins with his face newly clean-shaven, looking eerily like the ghost he’d once been when he’d inhabited Farrier’s mind throughout the last year they’d been separated.

“What?” he demanded upon seeing Farrier’s face change.

Farrier shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts of unnecessary distraction—with little success. “It’s not Gibson’s plan I have a problem with,” Farrier replied pointedly. “I don’t like being split up like this when it’s something this big.”

Collins sighed. “Well, there’s no help for it now,” he said.

That was what worried Farrier more than anything else. Not being able to help. Not being there at all.

“We’ll get by,” Collins added, after the worried look on Farrier’s face only grew more tense in the seconds that passed. “We always do.”

It was an easy enough statement for Collins to make; the death of Fortis leader (off-script, off-screen, only real in the sight of the wreckage floating listlessly amongst the waves) was the first real blow their flight squadron had been dealt since Collins had joined.

After watching pilot after pilot disappear from the ranks of men they only ever viewed as acquaintances, there in the mess one day and gone the next, it was easy enough to become jaded. It
was even easier to believe that Fortis Team was being divinely spared, that they were special somehow after so many successes and so few losses.

But Farrier knew better than that.

Farrier remembered being a boy during the Great War, how he’d perversely anticipated turning eighteen so he could join up with the RAF and fly. He’d been sixteen when it ended, but had joined the RAF anyway because there wasn’t anything else he wanted to do with his life.

He supposed it was almost fitting how, after so long, he’d ended up knee-deep in war just like he’d fantasised about when he was young.

But war hadn’t been the grand adventure he’d imagined when he was a boy. It was fear, and death, and pain, in an endless cycle. Flying was blinding sun and sweat or frigid snow and rain, and he never, ever, stepped into the cockpit of a Spitfire knowing that it might be for the last time.

By the time Collins had joined the RAF, just a few years prior to the official declaration of war, Farrier was already a decade and a half into his own military career, and he’d watched more friends die than any one man could expect in a single lifetime. He’d become something of a recluse at Hawkinge, rather infamously, and then Collins had changed things. Had changed everything.

All Farrier knew now is that he couldn’t stand to lose him too.

And now there were even more people to worry about losing: Gibson, Simone—even Tommy and Alex. It was more worry than Farrier thought his heart could handle. There was no way for him too look out for them all. He’d never been good at letting anyone he cared about fend for themselves.

“Yeah,” Farrier said finally, deciding to placate Collins by agreeing rather than starting another fruitless argument. “I suppose you’re right.”

The truck slowed as they pulled up behind the queue of other automobiles all bogging down the dual checkpoints, one of which had been repurposed to accommodate for the inflow of traffic coming into Dunkirk rather than out.

Farrier’s breath quickened as he slunk back down into the backseat. He grabbed the hat and jacket they used when acting as drivers for the supply trucks that rolled into town every so often. “Here,” he said, handing them to Simone to put on as the truck slowly rolled to a stop behind a shiny black car of German make. Farrier followed suit and quickly rearranged the back to look like the miscellaneous items in the back were simply supplies taken from the train.

He wouldn’t have been worried if it weren’t for Collins, who stuck out like a sore thumb in his Luftwaffe uniform, no matter how convincing the outward appearance.

“This seems unusual,” Collins said quietly.

“It is,” Simone replied. Farrier glanced back at her to find her hands clamped down so tightly around the steering wheel that he began to worry she might snap it clean off.

“D’you think they’ll let us through?” he fretted, turning slightly to speak into Simone’s ear.

She didn’t answer, singly focused on the man just ahead, slowly waving the vehicles ahead of them through.

The queue was moving rather quickly for the amount of traffic congesting the checkpoint, and considering the fact that they hadn’t seen an automobile be turned away yet, Farrier felt oddly
hopeful about their chances of passing by without more than a cursory inspection.

The lorry inched forward, leaving them next in line, and then a different soldier was suddenly walking up to them, and Farrier’s breath caught in the back of his throat.

The man stopped in front of Simone’s window and said something Farrier couldn’t understand except for the word ‘karte’, which he knew with a sinking feeling meant that the man was inquiring about some kind of identification or pass they needed to get through.

They exchanged a few terse words, voices raising in slight increments until finally the soldier they’d seen at the front of the queue before turned at the sound of the altercation and began to walk toward them. He looked irritated by the interruption and Farrier was fairly certain that the second the man opened his mouth it would be to give the order to shoot all three of them on sight.

Instead he barked something uncharacteristically brief at the soldier who had been arguing with Collins and the man immediately stormed off toward the front of the checkpoint looking like a sullen child after a solid whack from his mother’s ladle.

Farrier had to suppress the sudden urge to laugh out loud at the way the man stomped through the street, the absurdly comical sight only heightened by the tense nature of the situation they were in.

The remaining German turned to Collins and cocked his head inquisitively, rattling off a question in a much more amicable tone than the first. But it was Simone who answered, much to the surprise of both Farrier and Collins, who had to quickly school his expression into something more neutral.

“Hanover,” she replied gruffly, adopting a masculine rasp that might have even fooled Farrier into thinking she was a young man from a distance.

Collins quickly added something to her reply, perhaps feeding the soldier some bullshit about why a Luftwaffe officer had been invited to a Wehrmacht banquet, or elaborating on the origin story Simone had just invented for him with her reply.

Whatever it was he said, it worked. The German stepped back with something bordering on a smile, gave a few words in reply, and waved them on.

“What the devil was that about?” Farrier muttered, turning around as soon as they’d cleared the checkpoint and had joined the rest of the inflowing traffic crowding the tiny streets of Dunkirk.

“Improvisation,” Simone said as if that cleared up anything.

“Yes, I could tell that much,” Farrier replied patiently.

She glanced back at him for a brief second with an expression teetering between annoyance and incredulity. “Surely even you could tell the first one wasn’t German.”

Farrier sighed. “No,” he said, “I couldn’t.”

She glanced over at Collins, but if she was hoping for support, she didn’t find any. He stared cluelessly between the both of them, uncharacteristically wide-eyed as he shrugged. “Never had much of an ear for accents,” he told her.

Simone shook her head, apparently exasperated that neither Farrier nor Collins apparently possessed her superhuman talent for guessing the nationality of a man she couldn’t even understand and then jerked the wheel violently to the left, making a careening turn without a word of warning. Farrier went sliding across the seat and thudded solidly into the door with a groan.
“Désolée,” she said automatically without even turning to look back at him.

Farrier exchanged a meaningful glance with Collins, the kind they shared often back at Hawkinge when Fortis Leader had his back turned. He scooted back over to place his head between Simone and Collins once more, hoping Simone wouldn’t repeat the same manoeuvre until they’d finished the conversation at least.

“So he wasn’t German,” he prompted her.

“Slavic, I think,” she replied. “I expect it was a power trip for him, having some sort of perceived authority over a member of the Luftwaffe.” Simone looked over at Collins. “What exactly did he ask you? I couldn’t understand most of it.”

“Just kept asking for a pass and shite,” Collins said with another shrug. “I told him you’d packed it in with my luggage—”

“How nice of you to throw me under the bus,” Farrier replied. “What about the other soldier?”

“German,” Simone said. “Actually German,” she clarified. “It’s not really surprising that they’re using the conscripted soldiers to man the skeleton crew while the ‘Volksdeutsch’ attend the banquet, but I suppose they need a few commanding officers to keep the rest in line. His accent sounded more northern to me, and ‘where are you from’ is an easy enough phrase to understand, so I told him Collins was from Hanover when he asked.”

“And that was good enough for him to just let us through on good faith?”

Simone wasn’t the type to gloat, but the smugness radiating off of her was almost tangible when she sniffed and said simply: “You’re welcome.”

Their pace slowed to a crawl again once they were within a block of the hotel. Farrier was surprised when Collins suddenly perked up in his seat and leaned forward to gesture toward a line of canvas covered lorries diverting from the main flow of traffic into an alley a few buildings back from their intended destination.

“Turn here,” he directed.

“Are you sure?” Simone asked, braking slightly, but with clear hesitation in her voice.

“Aye, there was a sign just—” He jabbed more fiercely into the air as the lorry crept toward the point of no return. “Turn here,” he insisted. “Hurry!”

Simone did the unexpected and obeyed without demanding further explanation first. They slotted smoothly into the queue. Farrier hoped they wouldn’t attract any undue attention as they followed the unassuming white delivery vehicles that ill-matched the egregiously military aesthetic of their own lorry.

“What did the sign say?” Farrier asked after a few seconds had passed. He was more curious than doubtful of Collins’s hasty instructions.

“Deliveries this way, valet service that way,” he replied casually, eyes fixed on the back of the lorry ahead. Farrier snorted quietly, drawing the other man’s attention back to him for a moment. “What?” Collins asked.

Farrier stared at Collins evaluatively. “I can’t believe you learned German,” he said with a hint of resignation that he hadn’t intended to let slip through. He didn’t begrudge Collins for evolving
beyond the greenie pilot from his memories, but it was more and more difficult, the more time they spent together, to reconcile that man with the one sitting before him now, despite how little he’d changed appearance-wise, even wearing Luftwaffe blue.

“Too Scottish for it?” Collins challenged.

“Too lazy for it,” Farrier shot back. “Did they make you do flashcards? Revision? Were there exams?”

Collins rolled his eyes. “Aye, laugh it up, but at least I don’t have to dress like a fucking waiter.”

Farrier sobered up slightly at the reminder and wondered what exactly they were going to do about that aspect of Gibson’s proposed plan. It wasn’t something they necessarily had to stick to, just a suggestion, but Farrier would be damned if he let Collins into a nest of vipers without any backup at all.

But before Farrier had a chance to even consider a course of action, they were pulling around the corner of a building and emerging into a wider area where some of the delivery vehicles were already pulled up to open loading docks milling with workers.

Simone crept off to the side to avoid the centre of the chaos, but before she had even hit the brakes, Collins was leaping out of the passenger side of the lorry. He took off at a brisk walk, yelling loudly in German as he marched toward the workers, who all meekly scurried out of his way as he approached.

“What is he doing?” Simone hissed as she and Farrier got out behind.

“Creating a distraction,” Farrier murmured in realisation. “Come on,” he tugged gently at her elbow to usher her forward, using the temporary obstruction Collins had created to blend in with the crowd of French workers who suddenly looked at a loss for what they were meant to be doing.

There weren’t any wait staff outside on the dock as far as Farrier could tell, but inside the people walking up and down the back corridors were impeccably dressed in servers’ livery. Farrier and Simone stuck out like two pigs in a field of sheep in their workman’s cargos.

“Over here,” Simone said quietly, ducking behind a row of pallets and giving Farrier just enough time to join her before a line of waiters pushing shiny silver trolleys passed by them. They crept along the line of pallets stacked near the wall, knowing that if they were caught now, there wasn’t any credible excuse they could give for being there. Farrier could still hear the faint sound of Collins’s voice from outside and found some small comfort in it, despite the harsh incomprehensible tone.

As they reached the end of the pallets, the ambient sounds of the workers on the other side began to fade. Simone stuttered to a halt just before emerging and then pointed a finger through the gap, gesturing a rack of black jackets and trousers left unattended at the end of the corridor.

Simone clicked her tongue meaningfully before legging it over to the rack with Farrier close behind. The two ducked down to use the sparse livery still on the hooks as temporary cover while yet another group of wait staff strolled past, and then Simone started to rifle through the clothing, digging around for only a few brief seconds before tugging a set off the rack and unceremoniously stuffing it into Farrier’s arms.

“Not here,” she hissed when Farrier immediately began to unbutton his grease-stained shirt in the middle of the corridor. Simone gestured for him to follow her as she crept out from behind the rack.
and darted down the hallway, trying a few doors before finally chancing upon one that wasn’t locked.

And just in time too: Farrier was just slipping into the room behind her when he caught a glimpse of an older man wearing a neater version of his own stolen livery rounding the corner, a hefty journal cradled in the crook of one arm as he marched straight toward them.

“What are you planning to do, then?” Farrier asked as Simone helped pull his clothes off, the question muffled when his undershirt got caught on his chin halfway through. It hadn’t escaped his notice that all of the wait staff were male when they’d snuck in, and though Simone could affect a masculine tone if the need arose, it wasn’t exactly a disguise that would pass muster in a close intimate setting such as this.

Simone glanced around the store room as Farrier buttoned up the starched white shirt, almost blindingly sterile in comparison to the threadbare cotton shirts he’d grown accustomed to during his time in Dunkirk. She glanced between the sacks of flour and spuds littered around the shelves like one of them would suddenly reveal to her the answer to their dilemma.

“I’ll think of something,” she said finally. There was a note of uncertainty in her voice that she had failed to conceal despite her steely expression, but Farrier decided to take her at her word and trust that she would, in fact, think of something.

Farrier had just secured the bowtie at his throat when he heard the doorknob behind them jiggle and squeak. He reacted automatically, pulling Simone in close and shielding her with his body as he leaned in to kiss her deeply, leaving them confusingly intertwined amongst the dimly lit shelves as the door creaked open.

Farrier turned in feigned surprise to face the man he’d glimpsed rounding the corner when he and Simone had first entered the room, still with the ledger tucked under his arm.

The old man jumped a little at the sight of them, which was good news: it was a coincidence he’d stumbled upon them at all. “Ah,” he said, face reddening as he took in the scene before him. “Excusez-moi,” he added, quickly backing out of the room with a face brighter than the singular lamp illuminating the storeroom.

Farrier slumped over with a chuckle, leaning further into Simone. She shoved him off with a grunt of displeasure and glared up at him in undisguised irritation.

“What?” he asked breathily.

She didn’t answer. “You better get out there,” she said instead, giving him another push, this one considerably more gentle, though her expression didn’t soften much. “Try not to get us killed.”

Coming from Simone, that was practically encouraging. Farrier gave himself a onceover, checking to make sure everything was in order—aside from the too-long trousers he’d had to roll up and the mismatched shoes, he was confident he’d pass muster.

“Wish me luck,” Farrier said, placing one hand on the doorknob as he stepped back.

“Merde,” Simone said seriously, her face unchanging.

Farrier supposed that would have to do.

The crowded corridors had grown empty while Farrier and Simone were shut up inside the storeroom. Farrier slipped out cautiously, but the only people about were two young men dressed
identical to himself having a smoke on either side of the open ballroom doors, neither of whom paid
Farrier any attention as he walked past them to get inside.

Farrier had to quell an overwhelming fight-or-flight response that flared underneath his skin as he
tread carefully through the teeming masses of men in Nazi uniforms and their preening wives, all
practically identical except for the colour of their hair.

Farrier was suddenly grateful Collins had dressed in a Luftwaffe uniform; he would have been lost in
the sea of endless grey-green wool that permeated the room if he’d been disguised as Heer instead.
But there was every possibility it would work to their disadvantage to have him so easily
distinguishable from the crowd—in the event of their planned getaway, for example. Perhaps they
could arrange another costume change beforehand, just to be safe.

Collins was standing at the centre of a group of older women, all of whom had apparently detached
themselves from their husbands so they could fawn over him instead. He looked embarrassed by the
attention. Under other circumstances, Farrier might have laughed at the sight of him, pink-cheeked
with a sheepish smile, unable to extricate himself from the mob of admirers he seemed to attract in
spite of himself.

Farrier finally caught Collins’s eye and waved discreetly from across the room and then waited for
him to make his way over.

“Find Gottschald yet?” Farrier asked in a low tone as Collins approached.

Collins shook loose a strand of blonde hair in dissent and then quickly tucked it back behind his ear.
“Doesn’t seem like he’s shown up yet,” he said in kind. “People are still showing up.”

Farrier looked around and realised immediately that he was right. Despite the size of the crowd
already present, there were still soldiers and their guests flooding into the ballroom on all sides,
taking up almost every square inch of available space.

“We should split up then,” Farrier said, taking care to keep his voice down for fear they’d be
overheard speaking English and their cover would be blown before they even found their target,
“keep an eye out.”

“Aye.”

“Sticking together might seem suspicious.”

“Aye.”

Neither moved.

Farrier was the first to break away, spinning drunkenly on one heel before stumbling over toward the
doors, different to the one he’d come in through, where some of the other servers were emerging with
trays of champagne and hors d’oeuvres. He followed the others through to the kitchen and grabbed
his own silver platter upon which balanced several full glasses of champagne. It wobbled
precariously in his hands as he picked it up and Farrier cursed inwardly. The last thing he needed
was to spill drinks on some self-important Nazi official in the middle of a clandestine operation.

When Farrier re-entered the ballroom, drinks in hand, Collins was nowhere to be seen. Despite
decades spent in the RAF training his baser human instincts to respond rationally in the face of life-
or-death threats, Farrier found himself suddenly overcome with panic and adrenaline—so much so
that he abruptly stopped in the middle of the room without realising, almost causing some woman to
crash right into him.
He muttered a hasty apology as she glared at him in affront, remembering just as he was opening his mouth to speak to use French instead of English. Farrier felt himself blush as the woman stormed off, suddenly grateful that Collins wasn’t around to watch him make such a fool of himself.

Farrier forced himself to put Collins out of his mind altogether and focused on locating Sevard amongst the throngs of chattering guests, or anyone who looked important enough to be General Gottschald, as Sevard would likely not be too far behind.

But attempt at self-discipline aside, it was Collins that Farrier spotted first, his eyes then alighting on the throng of people standing around him, one of whom was an imposing man nearly half a foot taller, dressed in an ostentatious uniform with crimson accents and golden tassels. The general, Farrier assumed, starting to make his way over without really considering what he was planning to do when he finally reached them.

He had only taken a few steps when Gottschald suddenly moved back to reveal a tall brunette with icy blue eyes standing at his side, striking enough in her skin-tight ivory and black dress that Farrier stopped in his tracks once again.

“Put your tongue back in your mouth,” said a familiar voice behind him.

Farrier ripped his eyes away from Sevard to find Simone standing there and felt his jaw drop once again.

She was dressed in a pale green Grecian evening gown, leaving her shoulders and back bare. It was cinched tight at the waist but flowing around her feet as if to give the impression that she was wading through seafoam as she stepped toward him. She looked both beautiful and wholly alien with her hair pinned up and her bright red lips, and Farrier couldn’t tell if he was in awe of her or terrified at the sight.

“You look—I mean—wow, yeah,” Farrier blurted out, tongue tripping over every word.

The corner of Simone’s lips curled in the way Farrier recognised as her particular brand of embarrassment, carefully curated to look like a sneer if one was unfamiliar with the way Simone moderated her expressions so as not to give anything away.

“Sevard?” she inquired; a clear deflection.

Farrier cocked his head to the side to indicate the group of banquet-goers Collins had ingratiated himself with. Simone’s face hardened slightly, but she merely nodded in confirmation. Farrier moved aside to let her take the lead, not trusting himself to keep a level head anymore now that Collins was all tangled up in this mess with him.

It wasn’t inaccurate to say that Simone stood out as she strode through the sea of pale faces that filled the room, but any concern that she might be tossed out of the ballroom was alleviated when Farrier noticed how every pair of eyes followed her, each of their faces wearing the same awestruck expression Farrier had just been in possession of himself.

And she wasn’t unique amongst the crowd as a whole. There were French officials present with their wives, some of whom were darker-complexioned than Simone, whose father had been white, as well as members of the French-Algerian forces who had fought on the side of the allies before being conscripted by the Wehrmacht.

Still, Farrier was afraid of some potential outburst, some vitriol like what she’d received after the German patrol had raided the Chateau.
Farrier held his breath as they walked by General Gottschald and Madame Sevard, and ever so gently brushed up against the sleeve of Collins’s uniform as they kept on. Simone gave no indication that she had heard it as well, but continued walking to the far end of the ballroom before exiting out the main doors with Farrier still in tow.

He allowed the distance between them to extend slightly when they entered the corridor. no longer forced together by the crowd in such a way that their proximity hadn’t looked unnatural. When she turned suddenly and entered a ladies’ washroom without warning, Farrier paused in his tracks with a short sigh. Then he glanced around to make sure no one was looking and followed her in.

“Really?” he said in a hushed voice after walking in to find her standing at the mirror, carefully fixing the loose strands in her hair. The washroom was thankfully empty aside from themselves, but Farrier didn’t want to be in there any longer than he had to.

The door opened and Farrier tensed, poised to leap into the nearest toilet if he had to, but the squeak against the tile was a tell-tale sign that the entrant wasn’t a woman either, so he wasn’t surprised when Collins’s face emerged from around the corner, looking equally hesitant about their meeting place of choice.

Simone whirled on him instantly with fire in her eyes. “Surely you aren’t stupid enough to think engaging Sevard directly is the best tactic when she’s seen your face before?”

Collins glared. “She approached me,” he retorted. “It’s not as if I walked straight up to her, trying to pull.”

Simone’s face twisted into a deeper scowl and Farrier knew that once she got started, the argument would never end. The two of them were simply too stubborn to live.

“I don’t think it’s really that dire,” Farrier said, cutting in just as Simone opened her mouth to hurl out an inevitably combative reply. “Without the facial hair, he looks just like any other German army recruit straight out of a stint with Hitler Youth. You really think Sevard cares enough to tell the difference?”

Collins had the gall to look mildly offended by Farrier’s statement. “Thanks for the support,” he said with a touch of sarcasm that Farrier chose to ignore for the sake of keeping the peace.

There was noise at the door again and this time Farrier jumped into action without thinking, pulling Collins along with him into the closest cabinet and squishing in tightly against the toilet as the sound of heels clicking against the floor drew nearer.

Farrier and Collins stood there, almost cheek to cheek but for the height difference, as the faucet turned on, muffling the sound of an unfamiliar female voice softly conversing with Simone while the smell of smoke permeated the loo.

They waited there thirty seconds, a minute, then two. Finally, the faucet shut off again and the sound of clicking footsteps faded, followed by the squeak of the door.

There was a soft rap against the stall door and Farrier nudged it open with his foot to find Simone standing there on the other side with her arms crossed in apparent annoyance, as if he and Collins had been the spanner in the works instead of the woman who had apparently forced Simone into her least favourite activity: small talk.

“Don’t you look cosy,” Simone remarked in a simpering tone as they extricated themselves from the
cramped space around the toilet.

“Aye, well you’d know,” Collins shot back.

The sharpness of his tone made the hair on the back of Farrier’s neck stand straight up. He had to remind himself that Collins’s penchant for snark, for negativity in general, was a sure sign he was trying to repress his anxiety the only way he knew how.

“I could leave you to it, if you prefer,” Simone said coolly.

She had a lit fag between her fingers, and instead of responding to the jibe, Collins reached forward to pluck it from her hand, quickly lifting it to his mouth to take a drag.

He inhaled deeply, his eyes locked on Farrier’s as he leaned forward and placed one hand on the back of Farrier’s neck, pulling their faces together. Farrier let his mouth open under the coaxing movement of Collins’s lips and drew in the smoke like a sigh, coughing gently when they separated again.

It was a practiced movement, but never with an audience. With Simone’s eyes still lingering on the two of them, the action felt like Collins staking a claim. It was petty. And pettiness wasn’t something Farrier had any tolerance for.

“Don’t be such a child,” he grumbled as he turned away from Collins, not wanting to see his reaction to the words. “We should head back in. Simone?”

He heard her sigh and then she pushed past him to go to the door. “It’s clear,” she said after a few seconds, standing back to allow Farrier and Collins to exit the washroom one after the other, though Farrier still scoped out the corridor warily as he emerged.

“You think you can get Gottschald and Sevard alone?” Farrier asked in a low voice as the trio made their way back to the ballroom, slowly, with Simone ahead out front. He looked askance at Collins, whose mouth—set in an irritated line across his face—slightly softened before emitting a reply.

“With a little more drink and conversation, aye, I can get them away,” Collins replied. “Keep an eye out, though, eh?”

*Always,* Farrier thought to himself as he paused to allow Collins to join Simone at the doors to the ballroom. It wasn’t something that even needed to be said.

The logistics however, were more difficult than anticipated. It was tough going trying to keep his eyes on both Collins and Simone as the two worked the room before finally migrating back to the throng of people that had only grown in size around Gottschald and Sevard, while also simultaneously having to actually serve people in his efforts to maintain his disguise.

Farrier was relieved when finally, after several minutes of conversation between Collins and Simone and their targets, the latter suddenly broke away from the crowd surrounding them, followed by Collins giving a discreet wave as he lifted his glass to drink.

Farrier traded his empties for another full tray of champagne, snatching it from a fellow waiter without so much as a by-your-leave before rushing across the ballroom to catch up with Simone and Collins. They had trailed off after Sevard after signalling Farrier over and almost made it out of the ballroom entirely before he managed to reach them, feeling slightly out of breath and entirely in over his head as he followed the little group into the outer corridor once more.

Simone turned to take a glass of champagne as they walked down the corridor and up the stairs to the
first floor, on which the actual hotel guest rooms were located. She sipped lightly from her drink as
the others conversed around her. Neither Gottschald nor Sevard seemed to notice or care that Farrier
had joined them. In his tuxedo jacket, hidden behind a dozen or so champagne flutes, Farrier was as
good as invisible.

When they reached their destination, it was Sevard who unlocked the door, but Collins who held it
open for the whole troupe to enter. Farrier could feel Collins’s eyes boring into the back of his head
as he walked inside and then quickly stationed himself near the sofas. He offered Gottschald and
Sevard both drinks as they sprawled out on either side, leaving Collins and Simone to split
themselves between the two as well, Simone with Gottschald and Collins next to Sevard.

Farrier didn’t like the way Gottschald was looking at Simone as they sat together, drinking their
champagne, and he liked it even less when the general opened his mouth to ask something in
German that had both Simone and Collins tensing.

Gottschald trailed a finger pensively along the curve of Simone’s neck and shoulder as he spoke.
Farrier had never wanted to punch a man more than he did in that very instant, but somehow he
overrode the impulse, kept himself in check for the sake of the greater good. Fortis Leader would
have been proud.

“Andere länder, andere sitten,” Collins replied after only a brief pause. He managed to sound
perfectly nonchalant despite the circumstances. He leaned forward slightly, bracing himself with a
hand against the edge of the cushion in the space between himself and Sevard.

Farrier watched as Sevard’s eyes drifted down to Collins’s hand before moving back up to his face.
Something in her expression filled Farrier’s gut with dread, but there was nothing he could do or say
to warn Collins that wouldn’t give them away immediately.

After surveying Collins for a moment that felt uncomfortably too long to Farrier, she carefully laid
her hand just over the tips of his fingers and smiled at Farrier, beckoning him forward.

Farrier moved automatically, catching Collins’s eye as he stepped into their space to approach
Sevard.

“More champagne?” he offered, stuttering a little as he spoke. He hoped his incompetence would be
mistaken for nerves instead.

“No, actually I was thinking something a bit stronger?” she asked in French, the sickly-sweet smile
still glued to her face.

“What would you like?” Farrier asked, not sure what to make of the request.

“Whatever’s suitable,” she replied whimsically.

The lack of proper direction made Farrier even more nervous as he slowly backed away, eyes darting
around the room for a liquor cabinet of some kind. When his gaze alit on Sevard once again, her
eyebrows had gone up, her expression expectant, and she gave him a dismissive little wave that
made Farrier blush crimson up to his hairline.

He caught Collins’s eyes again on his way out the door, clocked the panic in them, and then there
was a wall between them and nothing Farrier could do about it.

He hurried back to the kitchens as fast as he could manage without breaking into a full-on sprint and
attracting unwanted attention in the process. Once there, however, Farrier found himself amidst a sea
of chaos, as servers bustled about while chefs barked orders at each other, futilely trying to prepare
food for an entire army in the limited time they’d been allotted with food that had arrived just hours before. As Farrier waded through the mess, he thought they could have fed the entire town of Dunkirk for at least a month with just what was being prepared for the night’s banquet.

Finally he spotted a few bottles of vodka lying about, but just as soon as he reached out to take one, a hand shot out and seized his wrist and a red-faced man suddenly entered Farrier’s vision.

“What are you doing?” he demanded angrily.

Farrier opened and closed his mouth a few times like a fish, trying to come up with a reasonable answer. “Madame Sevard asked me to fetch drinks for her and the general,” he finally managed to eke out, hoping it would strike a chord with the man holding a ladle to his throat like a threat.

The man slowly lowered the ladle as his face paled. “Madame Sevard, you said?” he asked, looking like a naughty schoolboy threatened with the prospect of facing a particularly cruel headmistress.

Farrier nodded, and that was enough to gain his freedom. He ran this time with the bottle tucked under his arm, caring not a whit for the curious gazes he garnered as he blew past, up the stairs, and back down the corridor to Gottschald’s suite.

He stood outside panting for a few seconds to try and catch his breath, and then knocked. There was no answer. Despite his better sense, Farrier tried the doorknob instead of knocking again, only to find it locked. That’s when the panic began to set in.

He remained in front of the locked door for a few seconds, evaluating his options. There weren’t many. The suite was located on the first floor, which meant that there was no way to get in from the outside, and no other entry points that he knew of other than the front door itself.

Midway through this thought process, Farrier realised that he still had a bottle of vodka in hand. And then he became acutely aware of the weight of the lighter in his pocket, transferred from one pair of trousers to another, held onto not for luck or sentimentalism, but because he knew better than most that it might come in handy at an unexpected time.

“God, this is such a bad idea,” he muttered to himself as he reached into his pocket to extract the lighter before moving down the corridor to a set of wall hangings adorned with swastikas that seemed to mar every vertical surface these days. He quickly doused the ends in alcohol, not wanting to be caught out in the middle of his task, and then touched the lighter to the damp fabric, stepping away quickly as it caught with a burst of blue and orange flame.

The fire spread immediately to the next banner, jumping along the corridor faster than Farrier had anticipated.

“Shit,” he muttered as he turned tail and ran.

He darted back to the suite and tried the door again with no luck. Short of breaking it down, Farrier was faced with little recourse but to find someone who actually had a key. At least now he had a reason to ask.

It didn’t take him long to find a member of the hotel staff, but even so he was already out of breath when he started to explain that there was a fire upstairs and people locked in one of the suites. The explanation got a response, just not the one he wanted. Farrier stood by helplessly as the other wait staff—the real wait staff—fluttered around setting off the evacuation alarms and ushering people out of the ballroom and kitchens and outside in a less than orderly fashion.

“There’s still people upstairs,” Farrier insisted again after physically pulling aside the young man
he’d first informed about his grand mistake.

“I don’t have a key,” the man replied, sounding just as breathless as Farrier, though Farrier could see in his face all the exuberance and exhilaration that came with the adrenaline rush in a crisis. He recognised it because he’d felt it himself, when he was young, though it had long faded into something more stoic. Collins hadn’t quite reached that stage himself however, and the young man’s expression was painfully reminiscent of the way Collins looked each time they left on a mission.

Farrier shoved him away abruptly and turned to run back up the stairs, ignoring the yells of protest from behind him.

He was at the top of the stairs when the sound of a gunshot echoed like thunder down the corridor, leaving a ringing in his ears. Farrier stood there dazed for a moment before he remembered himself and forced his limbs to move again, dashing over to the suite the sound had come from, now engulfed in a cloud of smoke.

Farrier covered his mouth, coughing, as he braced himself to kick down the door, wishing he had Gibson at his side again to help. But before he could so much as lift his foot to break the wood at the doorjamb, the door itself suddenly flew open and two tall figures came tumbling out into the corridor.

It took Farrier a few seconds to realise that the hazy silhouettes belonged to Gottschald and Sevard, both of whom doubled over choking on the smoke filling the corridor as soon as they exited the suite.

Farrier went for Gottschald without any further hesitation, only realising the mistake he’d made when Sevard darted away as the two men tumbled down onto the floor. Collins and Simone emerged from the suite as Farrier dodged a punch from Gottschald. There was no time for relief to see the two of them alive and in one piece.

“She went that way!” Farrier called out, struggling to keep Gottschald’s larger frame pinned underneath his own. “Go after her!” he urged when neither moved to give chase. The last syllable was cut short by Gottschald’s fist finally connecting with the left side of his jaw.

Farrier could taste blood in his mouth as he coughed and sputtered, desperately trying to draw in a breath amidst the thick smoke filling the corridor. When he glanced up again, Collins was gone but Simone had stayed, looking like she didn’t know whether to follow Collins or try to help Farrier, who was still writhing around on the floor with Gottschald.

“Go!” Farrier yelled again as he finally managed to get his hands around the general’s throat. He didn’t have to look up to know that she would listen.

Farrier’s hands squeezed tighter around Gottschald’s neck, but it was slow work. He was fighting not only the German’s desperate struggles but also the black spots threatening to swarm his vision as he throttled the man underneath him, the effort it would take to kill Gottschald potentially sapping Farrier of the energy and the strength he would need to make it out of the hotel alive.

As their dance gradually came to its inevitable end, Gottschald placed his hands over Farrier’s and gasped out a few words, using just enough of what little breath he still had left to get them out.

“Verräter,” he gasped. “Vertraue ihr nicht.”

Farrier didn’t understand a word of it, and he didn’t have a chance to ask for its meaning. Gottschald went limp beneath him with a rather graceless sprawl, his neck mottled and face spotted and burst. It wasn’t the prettiest way to die. It didn’t even make the list.
Farrier left the corpse lying there on the floor and moved over to the wall, trying to prop himself up so he could at least make an attempt to walk out of the place on his own two feet. He moved mostly by feel, the cold metal railings, the thick layers of paint on the walls, the ornate brass decorations on every door—with his vision blacking out every few seconds, coming back faded and blurry, it was the only method of navigation he had. And he had to get out. He had to make sure that Collins and Simone were safe, that they’d made it out, that they’d got Sevard.

So this could all be over.

Farrier made it to the top of the stairs and collapsed, choking and gasping, feeling an electric swarm fill his head as his vision went completely dark once more.
III. Tommy

Chapter Notes

If I don't make good on my promise to keep the updates weekly from now on, you can all hit me with pillowcases full of soap bars. *crosses fingers*

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Tommy hit the water expecting it to feel like ice, but he was surprised to find himself floating in tepid bathwater instead. It was a few seconds before he remembered himself. He squashed down the wild thoughts swirling around and around in his brain until they were nothing more than a compact weight at the back of his mind—anxieties he could dwell on when his main concerns were no longer life and death.

The pack hanging from his shoulders was strangely buoyant underwater and didn’t seem to want to cooperate when he propelled himself forward with a few kicks of his feet.

Alex had already vanished far ahead of Tommy, but he could feel a disturbance behind as he swam forward: Gibson, presumably. That knowledge made his heart race, made him kick even harder, suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to put as much distance between himself and Gibson as possible.

There were metal rungs on one side of the canal, spaced out every dozen or so yards between, perhaps used for maintenance access when the water level was lowered. For Tommy, they were markers showing him where to secure the deadly cargo still in his pack. His fingers were clumsier in the water than out, and the nerves only exacerbated his inability to twine the plastic cases to the rungs.

Tommy counted silently and tried to ignore the burning in his lungs as he struggled to attach the last charge in its designated place. Then he swam, kicking and flailing as hard as he possibly could to make it to the floodlights at the very end. He surfaced with a gasping breath of air, managing to suck in a little bit of water in the process. He coughed loudly and suddenly a hand was over his mouth, muffling the sound.

“Shh,” hissed a familiar voice before Tommy could fully register his own panicked response to the action. “You’re gonna bring the whole bloody army down on us. Or what’s left of them, at any rate.”

Alex let go of Tommy and Tommy swivelled around slowly to face him, the two of them gently treading water as they stared at each other. Tommy felt sick to his stomach.

The last thing he’d expected that morning when Leclair had woken him up was for everything good Tommy thought he had to come crashing down round his ears, but that’s what had happened.

The day had started off rather well, ironically enough. Tommy hadn’t understood why Leclair was bothering to ask him of all people to go along on another recon mission, but he was far too intimidated by the other man to protest or demand a reason.
They’d left the caves together, Leclair seemingly oblivious to the eyes of Simone and Farrier on them as they walked out, Tommy just pretending not to notice. He’d had to suppress a yawn several times on the hike to the lorry, but once he was in the passenger seat next to Leclair, he felt a bolt of adrenaline coursing through him, waking him up despite the early hour.

He managed to work up the nerve to ask Leclair the question that had been burning on the tip of his tongue once they reached the dunes on the outskirts of the beach.

Leclair glanced over at him for a brief second, expression unchanging. “Why wouldn’t I pick you?” he replied without hesitation.

His lack of reticence gave Tommy pause. “I just don’t feel like I’m contributing anything, really,” Tommy admitted. “I never have.”

“You volunteered to join the BEF, no?”

“Yeah, so what?” The BEF had meant nothing but empty promises. Pain and death and misery wrapped up in a pretty bow. ‘Do it for your country,’ they’d said. Tommy had done it for himself. And look what it had got him.

“So that’s what counts,” Leclair said, oblivious to the turmoil inside Tommy’s head. “Your heart’s always been in the right place. And I’d take that over a thousand experienced soldiers any day.”

Tommy stayed silent, caught up in his own thoughts again as they drove. He wished Leclair was right, that his heart really had been in the right place, that he hadn’t let his own survival take precedent over what was right. He knew now after seeing what the guilt had done to Alex, that he’d been wrong when he said he’d live with Gibson’s death hanging over him. Tommy might have forgiven Alex for the moment of weakness, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever forgive himself.

Leclair stopped the lorry behind a rocky outcropping on the eastern side of the Mole. He got out without a word, giving Tommy no indication that he should follow. He did anyway, closing the door behind himself with a loud slam that had him wincing at the noise. Leclair didn’t turn around or reprimand him, merely continuing to climb up the rocks until he reached the low summit. He crouched down behind a larger boulder, peered quickly over the edge, and then signalled for Tommy to approach.

“Take these,” Leclair told him, handing Tommy a pair of binoculars he’d procured from his rucksack. “Tell me what you see.”

“You don’t want to look yourself?” Tommy asked, hands fumbling with the binoculars for a moment before finally lifting them up to his face.

“I can’t,” Leclair replied. It was odd how Tommy could suddenly make out subtle tonalities he never noticed before now that Leclair’s stony expression wasn’t distracting him. He sounded…wistful almost. “My eyes started to go a few years back,” he admitted after a moment’s hesitation. “It’s funny, really; I used to be a sniper in the Great War and now I’m going blind. God has a sense of humour, I suppose.”

Tommy wasn’t sure whether it was more appropriate to laugh or offer condolences, so he said nothing. He adjusted the binoculars, first the wrong way, before finally managing to bring the small crowd on the beach into focus. There was no tank in sight, nothing but a group of hazy silhouettes out on the shoreline, perfectly still, like a painting.

“I don’t see it,” Tommy said with a frown, squinting into the binoculars as if it would help. “They’re
all just stood around on the beach but....” He paused; there was movement out in the water, something he couldn’t quite make out. He let out a soft inquisitive noise without realising and felt Leclair tense up next to him.

“What is it?” Leclair asked, voice strained by impatience or anticipation, Tommy wasn’t really sure which.

“I can’t really....” Tommy trailed off as the object in the water drew closer to shore, the waves parting around the massive black shape until he could make out the metal hull, the distinctive treads rolling over the sand. “It’s amphibious,” he said with an audible note of wonderment.

“You’re sure?”

Tommy nodded without taking the binoculars from his eyes. “It came right out of the water,” he said as he continued watching the tank make its way up the beach. It was massive, bigger than any the British or French had commanded. It made the smattering of lorries on the beach look like bread crumbs; the individual figures of the soldiers standing nearby no more than ants. “It’s enormous,” he told Leclair, “but I could barely see it at all under the water. I don’t—”

The rest of Tommy’s sentence was swallowed up by the tremendous explosion that rocketed out of the tank’s main turret and into the sand, kicking it up hundreds of feet into the air and sending a shockwave all the way down the beach to where Leclair and Tommy were camped out.

Tommy dropped the binoculars from his eyes, fumbling to catch them as they tumbled down the rocks and onto the sand below. Tommy watched them fall into the sand helpless to stop it and then glanced up at Leclair sheepishly.

“Leave it,” Leclair said, as if reading his thoughts.

“But I can—”

“Leave it. We’ve seen enough.” Leclair carefully extricated himself from the rocks and climbed back down into the sand where they’d left the lorry. He stopped short just outside the driver-side door, however, and turned to look at Tommy. “Can you drive?” he asked. “I’d like to note my observations for Mr. Dawson while they’re still fresh in my mind.”

Tommy nodded, though he wasn’t the most confident in his abilities. He was passable though, and his ability to keep the wheels inside the designated paths on the motorway didn’t matter so much when they were taking dirt roads through the countryside.

Collins had taught him shortly after he’d come to the Cottage, had said it was a necessary skill, which Tommy now supposed he’d been right about. Alex had garnered no small share of laughs at Tommy’s expense during that time, but Tommy hadn’t minded. It was nice to see Alex laugh no matter the reason, especially when it was such a rare sight to begin with.

“Mr. Dawson?” Tommy inquired as he methodically checked to make sure everything was in working order before slowly spinning the truck around to head back the way they’d come. “You mean Peter?”

“Yes,” Leclair replied. His nose was already buried his notebook, the tip practically touching the page as he wrote in quick sharp strokes. “I suppose it would be odd for you to address him so formally. He’s only a few years older than you, yes?”

“Yeah. He took over from his dad. He’s really smart.”
“You’re close friends?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said hesitantly, and then more assuredly, “Yeah, we’re friends.” It still felt odd to consider himself close friends with anyone after spending his childhood cooped up in his own home with only his books for company, but he and Peter had taken a liking to each other almost immediately. Perhaps it was just due to their closeness in age, or the fact that Alex and Collins would rather spend their time going out than cooped up in Mr. Dawson’s study with a bunch of dusty old tomes, but whatever the reason, Tommy was grateful. It was nice to have at least one uncomplicated relationship.

And Peter was always a good listener. Tommy wished Peter was there with them, just so he could confide in someone about Gibson who wasn’t too close to the situation to have any real perspective on it.

Realising after a moment that he’d been caught up in his own thoughts without paying attention to the road ahead, Tommy jerked the wheel sharply to the left to avoid a boulder that had suddenly appeared in their path.

“Sorry, sorry!” he said in between strained breaths. He had to force himself to calm down, to get rid of the tightness in his chest. “Sorry,” he said again, glancing over quickly to gauge Leclair’s reaction.

He hadn’t even looked up. Leclair appeared to have hardly noticed the incident at all, except for one long streak of ink across the notebook over his writing. “It’s quite all right,” he said after a short pause, and then he resumed writing.

“Right,” Tommy said uncertainly. “Well…sorry about the binoculars, as well.”

Leclair set his pen down with a sigh and looked over at Tommy with an expression of politely-restrained exasperation.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” he said quietly, his gentle tone taking Tommy by surprise. “All you young boys think war is about victory, about glory. It’s not. Not really. That’s just a lie the old men sitting at a chess table squabbling sell you to keep a steady supply of pawns on the board. They promise songs and stories and medals. None of that means anything once it’s over.” He looked down again, staring at what he’d written for a long moment before continuing. “But you know that just as well as I do now, don’t you?”

“Then what is it about?” Tommy asked.

“This. What you and I and your friends are doing. Saving lives where we can.”

“By killing other people,” Tommy pointed out, thinking of the men that would undoubtedly die as a result of the explosions they planned to set off in the canal. It was far enough away from the civilian housing that there was little chance of unexpected casualty, but still, Tommy wasn’t quite sure that after tonight he could safely say that he had never killed a man.

“Sometimes violence is necessary,” Leclair replied.

Tommy wondered if Leclair realised how much he sounded like the old men he’d just derided in his earlier speech. Maybe Leclair was right, but after what Tommy had seen, all violence seemed the same to him. Even done in the service of some higher cause, it felt inherently selfish, choosing to sacrifice one man for another. It could be both moral and selfish, Tommy supposed. Maybe the one didn’t exclude the other.

Leclair didn’t draw attention to Tommy’s silence, nor did he break it himself until they’d nearly
reached the clearing up on the hillside from which they’d retrieved the lorry that morning.

“For what it’s worth...” he said suddenly. “I think you’d make a fine leader someday.”

“Me? Why?” Tommy braked too hard as they came to the end of the path, surrounded on nearly all sides by trees that cast dappled shadows onto the planes of Leclair’s face as Tommy examined it for the meaning behind his words.

Leclair flashed a wry smile as he stepped out of the vehicle. “Because you seem to be one of the very few men I’ve ever met who doesn’t fancy himself either a martyr or a hero.”

Alex was awake when they returned to the caves, huddled next to the fire with a blanket around his shoulders. He was sitting next to Collins, who was still out cold on one of the bedrolls, limbs sprawled awkwardly around himself like he’d been caught midway through making a snow angel. Farrier was dozing lightly next to him, curled inward toward the other man with his knees tucked up into his stomach. Simone sat a few feet behind with watchful eyes, looking over them both like a sentinel.

The rest of their party were likewise sacked out around the fire with one notable exception.

“Where’s Gibson?” Tommy asked quietly as he crouched down to sit next to Alex.

“Asleep,” Alex replied without turning to look at him. “He looked like he could use it.”

Tommy couldn’t argue with that. He warmed his hands, sneaking glances over at Alex every so often, noting that the other boy seemed oddly withdrawn.

“What’s wrong with you?” Tommy asked indelicately, pre-emptively annoyed by the assumption that Alex was bitter Leclair hadn’t asked him along instead of Tommy.

There was a lengthy silence before Alex finally answered. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to hate me?”

Tommy creased his face into a frown, wishing Alex would look at him, that he could find some answer in his face. “I couldn’t hate you if I tried,” Tommy told him, and he meant it.

When Alex turned to face Tommy, the only word for the expression on his face was ‘tortured’, and he dropped his voice down into a whisper as he spoke, quiet enough that there was no chance of one of the others overhearing. “Gibson and I, we....” His mouth moved without any noise, as if he was struggling to find the right words. “We fooled around, I suppose, while you were gone with Simone.”

“You suppose?” Tommy replied, voice pitching a little higher than he’d meant it to.

Alex gazed at him in pleading silence until Tommy couldn’t bear it anymore and had to look away.

“You’re not very angry with me, are you?”

“No, I’m not angry.”

“Then—”

“I don’t know what to think, Alex, just give me some space, all right?”

But space didn’t fix anything. Tommy didn’t feel better after sitting next to Alex with a yawning abyss between them. He didn’t feel better when Gibson finally woke and gave Tommy that gentle
Perhaps Tommy had taken it for granted that either of them could have possibly wanted him, as little sense as that made within the greater context of his life. Tommy had always been the scrawny little boy with crooked teeth and a nose ill-suited for his pointed face; unwanted, unloved.

And now his worst fears had been realised, and more. They’d decided they didn’t need him, that they were more suited to each other—and wasn’t that a laugh? Tommy had been so worried about them ripping out each other’s throats that he hadn’t really considered the alternative.

Tommy felt cold despite the fire and as the afternoon wore on, that chill settled into his bones like a sickness, spreading into his chest, his lungs, when Gibson suddenly opened his mouth to say, “There’s something I have to tell you,” while they were both stood on the edge of the canal waiting to jump in. “I—I need you to know that I—”

“It’s okay,” Tommy told him, swallowing down the bile in the back of his throat, forcing an expression of serene calm onto his face to mask the turmoil just under the surface. “I already know.”

“You know,” Gibson said and there was a strange note to it, almost expectant.

Tommy stared back at him quizzically. “Why are you telling me this now?” he asked once he’d collected himself enough to speak. Had Alex and he planned this? Why wouldn’t they just tell him togetherness then? Get the humiliation out of the way in one fell swoop?

“What do you mean, why? If we die in there, I don’t exactly want to go with this still hanging over my head.”

Tommy was taken aback by the venom in his voice. Did Gibson really expect Tommy to just absolve him of his guilt? Just like that?

“Wait, what—?” Tommy started to ask, feeling like something had even more than the obvious had gone terribly awry, but Gibson didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“Go!” Gibson pushed him forward, closer to the water. “We only have a few minutes!”

Gibson was right, Tommy realised. He dropped into the water feetfirst, knowing that if he let himself think even a moment longer, he’d never convince himself to make the jump.

“Did Gibson jump in right after you?” Alex asked, jolting Tommy’s mind away from the thoughts he’d let drift through his head unchecked as they floated in the submarine channel, waiting on Gibson to join them.

“Yeah,” he replied dazedly. “I mean, more or less.”

Alex didn’t respond right away, but instead turned and pulled himself up onto the little jetty alongside the inner wall of the U-boat docking station. He reached for Tommy to help him up and Tommy begrudgingly accepted the hand.

Alex pulled out his watch when they were both stood together on the platform and frowned. “I’ve got two and a half minutes,” he said.

Tommy’s heart sank. That meant they had two and a half minutes before the first charge went off, and Gibson hadn’t even surfaced yet. What if he didn’t make it out? What if none of them did?

“We need to get the dinghy ready,” Alex said, apparently oblivious to the panic threatening to
suffocate Tommy right then and there. He grabbed for Tommy’s arm as he made to step out toward
the little boat that looked as if it would barely hold the two of them (let alone Gibson’s additional
weight) but Tommy flinched away from the touch reflexively. Alex stared at him with a hollow look
in his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean—”

“We don’t have time,” Tommy replied, cutting him off before he could finish an apology Tommy
knew he couldn’t stand to listen to without either bursting into tears or throwing a punch. Or perhaps
both. He couldn’t take it. Not now, not when he felt like he could still hear the ticking of Alex’s
pocket watch drumming a rhythm against his eardrums in time with the pounding of his heartbeat.

Tommy had never been the praying type, had never thought twice about God or heaven or hell or
any of it, but he felt like praying now as he grasped the rope in his fingers to pull the dinghy toward
them, as he waited, listening for any sign that Gibson had emerged from the mouth of the canal—
praying that they wouldn’t have to leave him behind again.

They sat in the boat together while another thirty seconds ticked by, neither looking up at the other,
the mooring rope still gripped loosely in Tommy’s fingers while they waited.

A loud pop split the air. Tommy and Alex both recognised it for what it was immediately and ducked
down into the bottom of the dinghy without a second thought.

“Fucking hell,” Alex hissed.

Both their eyes were drawn like magnets toward the bullet hole in the side of the boat, high enough
above the water so as not to pose any immediate danger, but a threat nonetheless. Tommy’s breath
quickened as he remembered the last time he and Alex had been in this situation, trapped on the
water, target practice for some unseen enemy. But this time Gibson wasn’t with them.

Tommy squashed those thoughts down into some dark corner of his mind and pushed himself up
onto his elbows and knees, peering over the side of the boat up at the jetty, eyes drifting over to a
dark shape shrouded by one of the pillar supports. The second bullet missed his ear by an inch.

Tommy dropped flat again, clutching the rope between his hands so tightly it felt like his skin would
rub right off. There was another shot, then another, then the wail of a siren echoing loudly from
above.

“Start the engine,” Tommy yelled, squeezing his eyes shut and flinching hard when another bullet
connected with the little dinghy, sending it rocking violently to one side and then back again.

“But Gibson—”

“But Gibson—” he yelled, knowing that if they didn’t leave now, none of them would make it out
alive.

Alex yanked the ripcord and sent the boat jolting forward just as the last shot rang out. There was a
hollow thud as the bullet struck home once again.

Tommy shuddered and quaked as he clung to the rope in his hands like a lifeline, feeling it grow taut
as the boat surged through the water. For a moment, he feared Alex hadn’t properly unmoored them,
that they would be yanked back like an unruly dog at the end of its leash; then summarily put down
by the unseen shooter.

But the boat skipped across the water at a steady pace, despite the stubborn weight at the end of the
rope Tommy couldn’t seem to make himself let go of.
The engine finally sputtered out a few hundred yards from the docks. Alex and Tommy both sat up in unison, just in time to watch as a burst of orange flame erupted from beneath the pier. Tommy’s heart dropped into the pit of his stomach as he watched the plumes of orange smoke billowing across the water toward them.

The blast had been completely silent, muffled by the water, but the damage to the docks was devastating. The wooden platforms crumbled and fell like a child’s sandcastle, all of Sevard’s hard work plummeting into the depths of the ocean, lost.

Along with Gibson.

A loud splash cut through the sombre silence, followed by a gasp and a cough.

Tommy stared in quiet shock as a dark shape heaved itself up and over the side of the dinghy, landing in the bottom of the boat between Alex and Tommy with a meaty thud. “Merde,” Gibson gasped, the other end of the rope loosely wrapped around his knuckles, “I thought you weren’t going to ever stop.”

Tommy stared at him in shock and then flung himself forward, throwing his arms around Gibson with enough force that the boat wobbled precariously underneath them. Tommy pulled back to look into Gibson’s eyes, hardly daring to believe that he was really standing there in front of him.

“I take it you’re through being cross with us, then,” Alex said snidely.

Tommy turned to look at Alex, but instead of scolding him—as the hesitant expression on his face seemed to indicate he expected—Tommy instead reached forward to pull him into the embrace, smashing all three of them together, cheek to cheek.

“I don’t care,” Tommy said fervently, shutting his eyes in relief. “I don’t give a damn about any of it.” And he didn’t. Whatever had happened between Gibson and Alex, whatever the reason, they could sort through it all later. Gibson was alive, that was all that mattered. All three of them, they’d survived what they’d come there to do.

Suddenly Tommy became aware of the fact that his socks were soaked through and he looked down to find their little boat filling with seawater, already rising up past their ankles. He let out a startled yelp and released Alex and Gibson, who seemed to become aware of the situation once Tommy had let them go.

“You’ve got to be fucking joking,” Alex said as he gazed down at two bullet holes in the bottom of the dinghy, through which the water was steadily spurting in.

“Why is it that every damn boat you set foot on seems to sink?” Tommy asked exasperatedly, moving away to the edge of the boat to look out at the shore. They were still a good distance away, and Tommy wasn’t confident about their chance of swimming it in the dark.

“Maybe I’m just a bad luck charm,” Alex remarked in far better humour than the situation called for.

Tommy could only spare him an irritated look. He leaned over to start the engine again but nothing happened when he pulled the cord.

“It’s probably flooded,” Gibson pointed out as Tommy stared down in dismay. “We can probably make it if we row, but someone’s got to—”

“I’ll get off,” Alex interrupted hastily. Both Tommy and Gibson turned to stare at him in open disbelief. “What?” he asked.
In the end it was decided that Tommy would float along behind while Gibson and Alex paddled using the oars, but even with the loss of his weight, the battered dinghy didn’t quite make it to shore. The three of them swam the remaining distance and collapsed like dominoes onto the sand once they reached the shore.

They lay there motionless, trying to catch their breath, soggy and salty and covered in sand, and then Tommy heard the sound of footsteps crunching across the beach toward them. He looked up to find the barrel of a rifle pointed directly at his face.

“Stand up,” said a male voice in crisp, clear German. “Up!”

Tommy slowly rose to his feet, aware of Alex and Gibson in his peripheral vision doing the same, until he came face to face with a man in Wehrmacht uniform with soot on his face and clothes, his companion standing a few feet away, one side of his face covered in angry red burns.

“Should we shoot them?” the first man asked.

Tommy felt his blood turn to ice.

“No,” the second man replied, but there was nothing about his reply that instilled a sense of relief. “If they’re spies, they’ll be more valuable alive.”

Tommy stared helplessly at Alex and Gibson as the first man tied their hands while the second kept his rifle trained on them, wondering how in hell they were going to make it out of this one alive.
Here she is! 2/3 of the way through this fic now. Hope you enjoy some more whiny pilot POV.

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Time seemed to slow to a standstill once Collins stepped foot in the ballroom once again, his eyes scanning every face for any trace of Maxine Sevard’s icy blue eyes. He felt his breaths coming in short little gasps as he wandered the opulent space, taking care to never let his eyes stray for too long on any one personage for fear of perceived offence.

He was panicked after his confrontation with Simone in the WC, his nerves frayed after the ensuing encounter with Farrier, and knowing that right now (or maybe it had already happened), his lads were laying explosives in the canals under the dockside factory. Time was running out. Collins wasn’t so much worried about the effects of the blast; if everything went the way it was supposed to, the outer portion of the docks would collapse in on themselves with nary a rumble in the civilian sector to alert the majority portion of the Wehrmacht that anything was amiss. But that didn’t mean that someone wouldn’t come running to warn them once the dust cleared.

“Luftwaffe, yes?” a female voice inquired, interrupting Collins’s thoughts with a delicate hand on the sleeve of his uniform. He turned to find a slight pale woman with watery blue eyes staring up at him in polite fascination. Not the woman he was looking for, but he smiled nonetheless.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m afraid they invited me as a mere formality.”

The woman tittered quietly and waved a waiter over with a beckoning extension of her arm, the silver rings and bangles glittering under the bright lights of the chandeliers hanging overhead. “Have you had the champagne yet?” she asked, offering a glass to Collins before taking one for herself. “It’s to die for, really. I never imagined when my husband got his engineering contract with the Wehrmacht that the French cuisine would so thoroughly spoil me, but now I almost don’t want to leave, don’t you agree?”

Collins muttered a quiet ‘merci’ to the waiter as he moved off and kept the polite smile plastered onto his face, wishing there was an easy way to escape this inane small talk he’d been ambushed by. “I can’t say, really,” he replied. “I haven’t been in the country long.”

“Shame, it’s rather lovely, all this occupation mess aside. Say, have you met my husband, Herr Aigner? He has a fascination with aeroplanes, I’m sure he’d love to chat with you.”

Collins stared blankly as his mind scrambled for an answer. He was caught off guard by the realisation that this woman was almost certainly trying to get him to join her and her husband for the evening—not exactly the sterile conversation he’d been accustomed to at military dinners back in Britain.

Collins had never been more grateful for Simone’s presence than he was in that next second, when
she appeared suddenly under Collins’s arm, fitting herself into the planes of his body as she practically wound herself around him.

“Ah, te voilà,” she said with feigned warmth. “I believe the General is looking for you?” she added in heavily accented English as she glanced meaningfully to her right, where Collins could see the hulking form of the man towering above the rest of the crowd once more.

“Erm, right,” he said to the pale woman, ignoring the look of clear disappointment on her face as he pulled away, “well, if you’ll excuse us.”

“Enjoying yourself?” Simone murmured with a smile as they moved away.

“Oh, not half,” Collins replied sarcastically. “If you hadn’t interrupted, I wager I could have spent the night with both Herr and Frau Aigner.”

Simone emitted a little huff of amusement. “Well, at least you’d know what to do,” she said as she released his arm, leaving Collins on his own, trying to quell the rising flush in his cheeks as he approached the crowd surrounding Gottschald and Sevard once more.

It seemed, this time, that attempting to avoid drawing undue attention was out of the question, as Madame Sevard’s chill gaze alit on Collins’s face as soon as he stepped forward to re-join the group. She said nothing to him, said nothing at all despite the merriment taking place around her, but merely stared, expressionless and unflinching while Collins tried vainly to ignore her.

His reticence did nothing to discourage her. Collins found himself growing flustered as he continued to chat casually with the others. He suddenly became aware of his hand running through his hair, unconsciously, like a schoolboy under the unexpected scrutiny of his first fleeting love, and he forced his fingers to still and return to his side.

She’s a war criminal, Collins reminded himself. Stop acting like you’re trying to impress some bird at the pub. This inner monologue came rather unsettlingly in the voice of Fortis Leader and Collins had to resist the urge to shake his head to rid himself of the unwelcome thoughts.

But that thought, unwelcome as it might have been, spawned an idea in his mind. A way to get Sevard alone, albeit an unsavoury one. A risky one, he thought, with a glance in Simone’s direction to measure the unceasing disapproval in her gaze.

Made even riskier due to the overt closeness with which Sevard was standing near Gottschald, just this side of appropriate for a public forum. The RAF recruiter he’d first encountered in Edinburgh would have said he had guts. Farrier would have called him a fool.

They were both right, he decided, stepping closer to Sevard with an inviting smile.

“Markus Klein,” he said, turning his innate charm up as far as it would go. “Luftwaffe, obviously. We didn’t have a chance to make introductions earlier.”

“Klein?” she replied softly with an arched eyebrow. “Seems you’re anything but.”

Collins was slow to process the joke but reddened once the realisation pinged off inside his head. “I’ll have to let my parents know they made a dire mistake,” he threw back once he’d recovered himself enough to muster a reply. “I wouldn’t want to set any unrealistic expectations.”

“Oh I don’t know,” she said with a slight smile, “it doesn’t seem terribly unfair as long as the reality exceeds the expectations you’ve set. I haven’t been disappointed so far.”
Collins got the immediate sense that this was a woman who enjoyed bare admiration; knowing that she was wanted, desired. It was a game he had no trouble playing.

Collins slipped in a few brief glances at Gottschald while he spoke with Sevard, trying to gauge the man’s reaction to his presence. Collins had drawn his attention, certainly, but judging from the glances Gottschald was giving him in return, it didn’t seem entirely unwelcome—rather the opposite, much to Collins’s surprise.

It wasn’t long before Sevard, lowering her glass of champagne from her lips, cocked her head with an evaluating smile, stopping Collins mid-sentence as he rambled on about the psychological benefits of the Jericho Trumpets versus the effects of the drag during level flights.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Herr Klein?” she asked in a low tone. “In front of all the guests?”

“We could always converse somewhere more private,” he suggested. He wasn’t all confident the line would work, even less so when Sevard paused pensively before responding.

“All right,” she said finally, “but I’d better extricate the General from his current company first.”

“The General?”

“He’s not the keenest on aeroplanes, from what I’ve heard, but I’m sure he’d make an exception for you, charming as you are.”

Collins was beginning to wonder if there was something in the water in France that seemingly everyone he encountered was trying to proposition him to join a threesome, but at the very least he could level the playing field in this situation.

“I hope you won’t mind if my lovely companion joins us as well,” he said, indicating Simone with a minute gesture. He watched as Sevard’s eyes alit on the other woman, examining her for a moment with a neutral expression before she looked back at him with a nod of approval.

“Your companion doesn’t seem too pleased at the lack of attention,” Sevard remarked evaluatively.

“On the contrary, she’s just making me do all the work.”

Sevard hummed. “French, is she?”

“A local,” Collins replied, uncomfortable at having to discuss Simone so abstractly when she was standing right there. “She’s been very accommodating. I trust the General won’t…disapprove?”

“He can be quite…accommodating, as well,” Sevard said by way of answer, “when he wants to be. Would you get us some more champagne?”

Collins nodded tightly as he turned away to beckon Simone closer. She lifted her eyebrows in question as he approached, and Collins was aware of Sevard behind him speaking quietly to Gottschald as he in turn explained the situation to Simone in as few words as possible.

“Okay,” was her response. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Relieved that his plan had worked in some capacity—though they had Gottschald’s presence to deal with still—Collins looked around quickly for Farrier, and upon spotting him, lifted his glass to give a small summoning gesture, hoping he’d take the hint.

There wasn’t time to wait around for him if he hadn’t, so Collins turned immediately to collect
Simone and then hurried after Sevard and Gottschald, who were thankfully still working the room as they made their way out to the main doors into the corridor.

“Ah, votre robe est belle,” Sevard said as Collins and Simone drew nearer, darting over to admire Simone’s dress with all the enthusiasm of an overexcited child with a new toy.

Gottschald looked somewhat put out by the dithering, and continued to slide glances toward Collins that Collins valiantly attempted to ignore as they stood a few paces apart from each other in the middle of the corridor, waiting.

Simone managed to stutter out a surprised ‘merci’ in reply, and shot a pleading look in Collins’s direction, as if there was a damn thing he could do to help her.

It was Farrier’s arrival in the end that managed to save her. She took a fresh glass of champagne from him, taking a grateful sip as Sevard turned again to Gottschald, clinging to him instead as the entire group continued down the corridor into reception.

Collins kept his head down, steadfastly avoiding meeting Farrier’s gaze or so much as even looking at him as they marched up the stairs and down another corridor, this one lined with doors to each of the guest suites, before finally coming upon one near the end at which Sevard stopped to retrieve a key from Gottschald’s pocket before unlocking the door.

Collins moved forward quickly to take the door from her, holding it open for the others to go through. He stared openly at Farrier as he passed, and then glanced down at the floor again just as quickly once everyone was inside. After he shut the door behind himself, he turned around to find Gottschald and Sevard seated apart from each other on either of the two adjacent sofas, leaving just enough room for Simone and himself to pick a side.

Simone looked uncharacteristically nervous about the situation, but Collins had already caught Sevard’s eye. He made the decision for them, sliding down next to the woman Leclair had been so intent on extracting, wondering just what it was about her that was so worth risking their lives over.

A former lover maybe? Leclair didn’t really seem the type to lose his head over a pretty girl but everyone had their skeletons. Hell, for all Collins knew, the man was telling the truth, and he really was convinced that the Allies or the French Resistance could make use of her. Staring into her shrewd blue eyes now—Collins wasn’t convinced. She didn’t seem like the type to ever let herself be used by anyone unless she felt like she had the upper hand somehow.

Farrier made the rounds with his tray of champagne, offering them all a fresh glass before hovering awkwardly to one side and trying to look unobtrusive, not something he was particularly successful at from what Collins could surmise hidden in the glances Sevard levelled at him between sips of her champagne.

Gottschald, however, was otherwise occupied, his eyes now glued to Simone instead of Collins. He didn’t seem fazed by her inattention as she stared off behind the sofa Collins had been so intent on extracting, wondering just what it was about her that was so worth risking their lives over.

“Where did you find such an exquisite creature?” Gottschald asked after the silence had settled like the bubbles at the bottoms of their glasses. He traced his hand along Simone’s neck and exposed shoulder, tugging down the sleeve of her dress and inch or so as he moved his fingers lower. She jolted, but made no move to stop him.
Collins felt the muscles in his neck and jaw contracting of their own accord in response to the question. He could feel Sevard’s eyes on him and struggled to think of an answer that would satisfy them both.

“Other countries, other customs,” he said finally, using his grip on the cushion to brace himself as he spoke. “I assume you’re familiar with the philosophy, General.”

The man’s eyes flickered from Simone, to Collins, to Farrier in the corner, and if Collins wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of worry there that hadn’t been present before. His hand on Simone’s arm stilled. Collins could have kicked himself for throwing out the jab, calling the General on his predatory glances, the assumption that all this would lead to something more between the four of them. It wasn’t the most German attitude, from what Collins understood.

Suddenly Sevard’s hand overlaid his on the sofa. Collins started at the abrupt touch, her skin a few degrees cooler than what he would expect. When he turned his eyes to her, she wasn’t looking at him but smiling warmly over his shoulder at Farrier instead, curling the fingers of her other hand invitingly.

“More champagne?” he asked as he moved forward, stumbling over the words as his eyes met Collins’s for the briefest of seconds.

“No,” Sevard replied, “actually I was thinking something a bit stronger?”

When Collins looked over again at Gottschald, the worry in his face was gone, replaced by a sort of…tense anticipation.

“What would you like?” Farrier asked uncertainly.

Collins breathed in deep through his nose, trying to keep his hands from clawing into the fabric underneath his fingers. Every word Farrier uttered only ratcheted his heart-rate even higher.

“Whatever’s suitable,” was Sevard’s answer, given as though it were a test, and Farrier would be evaluated on the quality of whatever he managed to retrieve.

Farrier backed away from them, his eyes darting helplessly around the room for a moment before he suddenly seemed to realise that Sevard expected him to leave. She waved curtly at him—rudely—and Collins flushed a little sympathetically as Farrier went red in response.

Their gazes connected once more as Farrier opened the door, and then he was gone.

Collins wasn’t sure initially whether he should feel panicked or relieved that Farrier had left the room. The pendulum swung wildly between the two emotions, finally settling in the realm of dread when General Gottschald unexpectedly stood up and locked the door without saying a word.

Collins went ice cold, fearing they’d been caught out in their lie, but Gottschald simply retreated back to the sofa and settled in next to Simone as if nothing had occurred. Perhaps sensing Collins’s gaze, he suddenly glanced up and explained himself.

“I don’t trust the French—no offence intended,” he said with an apologetic nod in Sevard’s direction. “I’m married, you see,” he continued, lifting his hand to display the ring as he shrugged off his outer coat and unbuttoned the top of his uniform, displaying the edges of knotted scar tissue at his neck and shoulder. “And servants are terrible gossips, you know, nationality aside. I’d rather not risk it.”

“No discretion, eh?” Collins replied, feigning camaraderie in spite of the rabbit-fast thumping of his heart against his ribcage. He was half-afraid Sevard could hear it from where she was sitting.
“Rumour’s part of the trade,” Gottschald replied with a quiet groan. He grinned at Collins with a sideways glance, all teeth, like a shark. “Or so I hear.” He rotated his arm at the shoulder with a pained grunt and gave Sevard a pleading glance, once she ignored, her eyes boring into Collins’s with an uncomfortable intensity.

Collins was surprised when Simone suddenly leapt up of her own volition, moving around to the back of the sofa to put her hands on Gottschald’s shoulders without so much as a friendly introduction first.

“Oh, thank you,” he said, his French slow and halting. “I get a little tense sometimes, after standing for so long.”

“War wound?” Collins asked conversationally, forcing himself to relax as he exchanged a glance with Simone, whose hands were starting to drift lower, over Gottschald’s chest as she continued her ministrations. He made a show of loosening his own uniform to emulate the General as he sprawled out on the sofa, moving closer to Sevard as a consequence of allowing his limbs to fall naturally into a state of disarray.

Gottschald nodded, and his eyes slowly closed, head lolling forward as he spoke. “From my service as a young man. You look old enough to remember the War, yes? You’re not like the greener pilots I’ve met. They’re always so eager at the beginning.”

“I remember some things,” Collins admitted honestly. “But I was still a young child when the war ended.” He looked over at Sevard, who had finally turned away from him to reach down for her handbag.

She crossed her legs elegantly and procured a small tin case from the bag, extracting a thin cigarillo with polished nails and putting it between her lips. Gottschald seemed to become suddenly aware of what she was doing just as she lifted her lighter to her lips, stopping her mid-movement with a disapproving frown.

“Not in the suite, darling,” he chided, like a parent speaking to a fussy child. “You know I can’t stand the smell.”

Sevard stood up with a resigned sigh, catching Collins’s eye as she did so. She extended her fingers out toward him in wordless invitation and he took her hand as he rose, allowing her to lead him out to the balcony. He gave Simone an apologetic glance as he passed by, knowing that she had drawn the shorter straw in all this.

“Have you ever smoked belladonna?” Sevard asked, already lighting the end of her cigarillo as they stepped out into the unusually cool summer air.

Collins shook his head and accepted the proffered cigarillo dubiously. He gave it a cursory sniff before placing it in his mouth, wincing a little at the acid taste and then choking on the unexpectedly sharp sting in his nose and throat. He coughed out puffs of thick sour smoke, all-too-aware of Sevard’s eyes still surveying his reactions.

“Another?” she teased.

He passed the cigarillo back to her. “I think once was enough,” he gasped. “I don’t know how you can even tolerate that, much less enjoy it.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” she replied, watching as Collins fumbled with his jacket for his own carton of fags to clear the taste of the belladonna from his tongue. “I hope you don’t consider it crass that I
prefer not to use a cigarette-holder,” Sevard added between inhalations. “Gottschald thinks it terribly ill-mannered that I don’t conform to modern fashions.”

Collins was surprised by her invitation of his opinion on the matter. He wouldn’t have guessed that she’d care a whit about what anyone thought of her quirks or habits, much less a complete stranger. “I wouldn’t dare to consider my opinion on a woman’s sense of fashion worth more than that of the woman in question,” he said.

Sevard chuckled lightly. “Does that sort of line actually work?”

Collins scratched at the back of his neck sheepishly. “Most of the time, yeah,” he admitted.

“You can do better,” she told him playfully before turning her full attention to her cigarillo again, closing her eyes and savouring the smoke for seconds at a time before breathing it out.

Collins watched her for a moment before then taking the opportunity to glance back into the suite to check on Simone. She was gone, leaving Gottschald sitting alone on the sofa in the same position he’d been in when Collins and Sevard had gotten up. There was only a few seconds of opportunity for Collins to panic when suddenly the dulcet tones of a violin cut through the swarm of thoughts in his head.

Beethoven, he realised as Simone walked back into view, her feet bare under the long hem of her dress. Romance No. 2, a favourite of Fortis Leader, who had been only too keen to share his collection of orchestral pieces to anyone who would spare a moment to listen. Collins, young and attention-starved, had spent hours listening to records with the man when he’d first joined the squadron, much to the chagrin of Farrier, who shared no such passion for music.

“It’s a shame,” Sevard said suddenly.

Collins whipped his head back around to find the woman with her elbows propped up against the railing, looking out over the countryside with a ruminative stare.

“What is?” he asked.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eyes and took another drag before replying. “You can’t see the ocean from here. I like to look out at it from my own suite, watch the reflection on the water at sunset.”

“I’m surprised you can see it past that hulking monstrosity the Heer have built out on the docks,” Collins replied tentatively, knowing it was a risk to reveal just how much knowledge he could possibly have about it as a member of the Luftwaffe, one who was ostensibly attending the banquet on an ambassadorial basis.

Sevard laughed, and Collins felt a quick surge of relief. “Yes, impressive, isn’t it?”

“Well, sure,” he replied, “but I’d be a little more impressed if they were producing experimental planes instead of tanks.”

Sevard’s smile was pursed, bordering on a smirk, as she turned to lean with her back against the railing, her eyes locked on Collins for a prolonged moment as the plaintive strains of the violin sounded quietly in the background. Her lips parted again to ask, coyly, “Where exactly are you from?” Collins paused, unsure of her question, and she took the opportunity to add, “I’ve spent a fair amount of time in Germany myself, but I can’t place your accent.”

“I was born in Zurich,” he said, scrambling to think of enough details on the fly to give a convincing
cover. “But I moved to Stuttgart in my adolescence to join the Hitler Youth League,” he continued, thinking of the comment Farrier had made earlier, “and then I enlisted with the Luftwaffe once I was of age.”

“By choice?”

It was a fair query, one that Collins could answer truthfully. “I wanted my life to mean something,” he said, leaning back against the railing to match his posture to Sevard’s. “I didn’t want to waste it being ordinary.”

He gazed into the suite as he spoke, his eyes drifting from Simone and Gottschald on the sofa to the door, where he could suddenly see thin tendrils of smoke curling into the room. Collins started and then forced himself to remain calm, not wanting to tip off Sevard to what he’d seen.

“Perhaps we should step back inside,” he said evenly, extending a hand out to Sevard as he straightened up. She took it without question and Collins led her back into the suite, his eyes connecting with Simone’s as they entered.

They communicated silently, with the familiarity of those who had known each other far longer, their minds meeting in pursuit of a greater goal. She was leant down over Gottschald when their eyes met, her chin tucked into the crook of his neck as she draped herself over him.

Collins drew in a short breath, counting up to five in his head before taking action.

He’d only made it to three by the time Gottschald opened his mouth.

“Why are we still bothering with this farce, Maxine? We’re running out of time.”

Collins hesitated, giving Sevard the opening she needed to snatch her hand out of his grip before he could pull her in. For a millisecond, it felt like everything was collapsing in around him, the adrenaline filling Collins head up like a swarm of hornets. His hands moved of their own accord as if attached to strings, one reaching into his jacket while the other stretched out toward Sevard as she fled and seized her arm, pulling her back into Collins’s chest.

Her breathing was rough and ragged as she trembled in his arms. If it weren’t for the gun pressed against her temple, Collins could have believed this evening had gone the way of many others, a pretty girl pressed up against him, shaking; his own heartbeat drowning out the orchestra playing from the gramophone in the corner.

Gottschald was frozen, caught off-guard by Collins’s quick reaction to Sevard’s attempted escape. Simone acted quickly to rectify the situation, extracting her own gun from the jewel-encrusted handbag she’d stolen and pointing it at Gottschald’s head in turn.

He laughed.

“Raise your hands,” Collins warned, but neither Gottschald nor Sevard moved. “Raise your hands!”

“You won’t shoot us in cold blood,” Gottschald replied with a knowing smile that chilled Collins to his very core.

Gottschald was right, whether he knew it or not. They needed Maxine alive, and unfortunately, while Gottschald himself was disposable, the gun currently pointed at his head was also the one that didn’t properly work. Simone had taken it for show, not really intending to have to use it, but now that she had, Gottschald was calling their bluff.
Collins hesitated as Simone looked to him for assistance. Sevard took the pause as her cue to act. There was a sharp pain in Collins’s side, where Simone had stitched him up the night before, and he doubled over gasping. The gun slipped from his fingers, and when he’d collected himself to straighten up again, Sevard was facing him with the pistol held in her shaking hands.

“Who do you work for?” Sevard demanded, her voice quaking just as much as the weapon in her hands. “Who sent you?”

Collins didn’t answer. Sevard pulled the hammer back and pulled the trigger. There was a muzzle flash, and a loud pop in Collins’s right ear. He stared at Sevard in disbelief and then slowly turned to admire the bullet hole in the wall behind him, less than inch from where his head had been.

“How do you propose we do that?” Gottschald inquired calmly.

“Like this,” Sevard said, reaching forward to grab Collins by the collar of his Luftwaffe uniform and pressing the barrel of the gun into the juncture of his chin and throat. “Let’s go,” she said with a forbidding glare directed at Simone, who obediently lowered her pistol in response.

Collins was grateful that, for whatever reason, Simone’s loyalty to Leclair didn’t outweigh the value of his own life in her eyes. He had no doubts at all that her willingness to cooperate was the only reason he was still breathing. Gottschald may have been sceptical about Collins’s ability to kill Sevard outright, but Collins had no such reservations about Sevard herself.

Collins allowed himself to be dragged along almost to the doors before Sevard finally released him. She kept the gun trained on him with one hand, the other arm covering her mouth and nose as the smoke around them took on a tangible form. Gottschald wrenched the door open and pulled Sevard along with him through the doorway, releasing a billowing cloud of smoke into the room that rolled over Collins and Simone like a poisonous thundercloud.

“We need to follow them,” Collins called out to Simone as he reached for her blindly, grasping at air twice before finally finding her hand. He didn’t have any plan beyond that, but they couldn’t just let Sevard get away.

They emerged from the suite to find the corridor outside looking like what Collins had always imagined Hell would be, when he was a child having nightmares because of the stories the nuns would tell in Sunday school. One end was engulfed in flames: impassable. The other carrying the
sounds of panicked voices from down below as the frantic crowds rushed to evacuate the hotel. And between them, Farrier, locked in a battle with Gottschald in front of the suite doors, Sevard nowhere in sight.

Collins watched from the doorway as Farrier and Gottschald surged to the floor in a tangle of limbs. “She went that way!” Farrier yelled, indicating the only way there was to go. “Go after her!” he added, and Collins stayed only long enough to watch as Gottschald’s fist struck home against Farrier’s face before he turned and ran.

He spotted Sevard again a few doors down, where the smoke wasn’t yet thick enough to shield the glittering ivory fabric of her evening gown as she made her great escape. But Collins was faster. Perhaps she sensed his presence, or maybe she could hear him behind her, but something made her turn suddenly just as they were coming upon the staircase, where Collins knew he would be able to successfully cut her off before she could complete her descent.

She didn’t give him the opportunity. Collins skidded to a halt at the end of the corridor when Sevard suddenly darted left into one of the rooms. He spun around on one foot, trying to channel his momentum into the unexpected change of direction, but he was too late. The door slammed shut in his face.

Collins jiggled the handle uselessly and let out a yell of frustration, kicking at the door with his foot. The smoke was filling the corridor at a steady rate, simultaneously filling Collins with a sense of hopeless desperation as he threw himself bodily against the door until it finally splintered under his weight.

He burst into the room just in time to watch as Sevard slipped out onto the balcony, climbing up and over the railing before disappearing. “Fuck,” Collins hissed. He tried to step forward to follow her, but he couldn’t make his legs move. His vision swimming, Collins quickly crumpled, falling to the ground in a heap. He could see a figure in the doorway, shrouded in smoke, and when it finally coalesced into something solid, he realised it was Simone, leaning down to help him up.

“If I let you die, Farrier would never forgive me,” she told him, straightforward as could be. Together they stumbled down the stairs and out of the hotel like a plodding four-legged beast with limbs both too short and too long for its body. Collins was almost a foot taller than Simone, and he could only imagine the comical sight the two of them must have looked with her supporting his weight as they fled the burning building alongside the guests and staff trying to make similar escapes amidst the chaos.

Once outside, there was the matter of getting to the truck they’d left out near the loading dock, which was now awash in spectators all gathered around as the hotel quickly transformed into a blossoming inferno before their eyes.

They stumbled into the side of the vehicle once they finally reached it, Simone struggling to get the door open with one hand while Collins leaned heavily into her left side. She quickly extricated herself once it was open and then dumped him into the passenger seat, leaving him to his own devices as she walked around to get in on the other side.
“Farrier—” Collins said after the door had shut behind her, starting to panic as he realised that the other man was possibly still trapped inside.

Simone reached over and grabbed him by the chin, pulling his face around to hers until their gazes connected. “Just breathe,” she said, and staring into her big dark eyes had a strange sort of calming influence that slowed Collins’s heart-rate more the longer he looked. “He’ll be all right,” she added, finally letting go of him once she’d finished speaking.

Collins sank back into the passenger seat of the truck, unsure now that he was no longer entranced by Simone’s strangely hypnotic brown eyes.

The dock was nearly empty now, the hotel nothing but rubble and flame, and when he glanced back up at Simone, her face was turned away, a soft keening sound just barely audible coming from her lips.

Collins looked down again. He couldn’t stop muttering senseless curses under his breath as they waited, his fingers tapping out a nervous rhythm against his thigh. “Shite, fucking cunt, fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.” A pleading glance from Simone, her eyelashes damp and shadowed with the aftermath of tears, finally quieted him.

He turned away from her and stared into the blinding flames engulfing the building before them. He refused to blink despite his eyes stinging and watering; he refused to look away. And then finally, looking almost like a mirage, there was a black silhouette filling one of the doorways, and a shadowy figure came stumbling out of the fire with a stiff bow-legged gait before collapsing onto its knees only a few yards from the exit.

Collins and Simone raced to open their respective doors before rushing over to Farrier’s huddled figure on the ground, only to be waved away when they tried to help him.

“I’m fine, I’m all right,” Farrier growled between coughing breaths as he struggled to get to his feet without their aid.

“You’re not fine,” Collins informed him before seizing one of Farrier’s arms despite his protests. Simone did the same.

Farrier gritted bloody teeth as Collins and Simone slowly helped him up to a standing position, but there was no time to ask what had happened to him in there with Gottschald as they hobbled back to the truck. They needed to regroup with the others, with Leclair.

“Back to the Mole, then?” Collins asked after they’d gotten Farrier safely into the truck, and Simone had returned to the wheel.

She pivoted the vehicle slowly to get around the debris that had been left scattered throughout the lot in the chaos of the evacuation. “That’s the plan,” she said coolly, all traces of the emotion that had seeped through the cracks in her shell earlier that night now gone, as if Farrier’s return had given her enough steel to seal them all back up again.

“Well, the plan’s kind of gone to hell now, hasn’t it?” Collins pointed out indelicately. “What are we going to tell Leclair?” He stared at the remains of the hotel as they entered the street, watching as the flames slowly faded away into the darkness.

“I guess we’ll just have to play it by ear,” Simone finally answered. There was an uncharacteristic note of uncertainty in her voice.

Collins glanced back over the back of his seat to check on Farrier, who was still breathing, but
shallowly, his eyes scrunched closed as if the tiniest movements pained him. “Does that sort of thing usually work with Leclair?” Collins asked, turning toward Simone again.

She stared straight ahead without blinking and accelerated. “No,” she replied bluntly.

“Fantastic,” Collins muttered, settling back into his seat and watching the twin plumes of scarlet smoke rising up into the air like answering beacons against the night sky.
By the time the German soldiers had marched the trio up the beach into an abandoned square near the sand, Alex had learned that the two men holding them prisoner were named Katz and Visser, and that he wanted them dead for no other reason than because of how damn annoying they were.

“I still think we should kill them,” Katz said, leaning his chin against his rifle-barrel, the butt of the gun pivoting on the ground between his legs as he rocked lazily back and forth.

“No,” Visser replied exasperatedly, “you don’t think that—because you don’t think at all!” He huffed loudly with a pointed look toward Alex and the others, as if expecting their verbal support in the argument.

Alex just wished they’d both shoot each other—or him—and get it over with.

“What are they saying?” Gibson asked quietly. He craned his neck almost onto Alex’s shoulder, as if being able to see their captors better would somehow help him understand their conversation.

“Quiet!” Katz and Visser both snapped in unison before going back to their squabbling.

Alex sighed and closed his eyes, wishing futilely that he could drown out the sounds of their slapstick argument with his own thoughts. But those were no longer the distraction they had once been, for better or for worse. Tommy knew about what he and Gibson had done now, and the air was cleared, and despite that Alex still felt a simmering unease curling up from the base of his spine that he couldn’t quite shake.

His mind was split between listening to the conversation between their captors and the awareness of his shoulders brushing against both Gibson and Tommy’s as the trio sat with their hands bound behind their backs, surrounded on all sides by dozens of little outdoor café tables. The plaza around them resembled a modern ghost town, reminding Alex with its eerie stillness of the way the entire town had felt when it was still an active combat zone during the evacuation.

Leaning further back against the other two, Alex could feel movement: Tommy’s naturally cool fingers brushing against Gibson’s much hotter hands. Trying to untie his wrists, Alex realised after extending his own fingers in casual investigation.

Alex stared straight ahead at Katz and Visser without hearing a word coming out of either of their mouths, intent only on the careful movements of Tommy’s fingers as he picked at the ties binding Gibson’s hands together. He counted in his head, taking care to keep his breathing slow and measured, not wanting a trace of emotion to belie their attempt at escape before they could make good on it.
Feeling a strip of fabric fall into his fingers, Alex pulled, elated when he felt the slack increase. *Almost there,* he repeated to himself as his breathing grew quicker. He swiped his thumb encouragingly across the back of Tommy’s hand, hoping the other boy would interpret the gesture as intended.

He focused in again on the conversation between the two soldiers as Katz finally stood up, catching only the last bit of his sentence: “do it myself.”

Alex felt his heart rate skyrocket, his instincts informing his body on how to react before his brain had a chance to figure it out why. He started to move almost before Katz had begun to reach for his rifle. Every fraction of a second felt stretched, strained, as Alex bunched up the muscles in his legs and abdomen to propel himself upward without the full use of his hands.

Katz had already retrieved his gun by the time Alex got to his feet. Visser was too far away to stop him.

Alex lunged forward without pausing to think as Katz tucked the butt of his rifle against his shoulder and lined up the shot. Alex rammed the other man headfirst and both went tumbling to the ground as a gunshot rang out.

There was no opportunity for Alex to consider the possibility that Katz had managed to hit either Tommy or Gibson, no time to think about the fact that Visser was still only a few yards away with his own gun. There was only the spitting snarling man underneath him, trapped temporarily by Alex’s larger frame pinning him down but fighting furiously to free himself, and the fact that Alex had no hands and no weapons with which to fight back.

Some leftover primal instinct from an ancient time took over then, and Alex recoiled before striking, seizing Katz’s nose in his teeth and biting down until he felt the crunch of cartilage, bone grinding against bone, spurts of blood filling his mouth and streaming down his chin.

Katz was screaming when Alex finally pulled away, spitting out chunks of flesh and gobs of blood onto the stone pavement. He looked up to find Visser staring down at him in abject horror, his hands frozen in the act of reaching for his own gun, paralyzed now by the sight of Alex’s savagery.

Alex lay curled up on the ground, breathing hard. He didn’t have the energy or the willpower to go after Visser, but before the other man could come to his senses, Gibson suddenly darted into Alex’s vision. His hands were free, and he seized Visser’s gun out from under him, backing away slowly with the rifle trained between the man’s eyes, the left still swollen shut from the severity of the burns that covered him in angry red patches.

With both soldiers out of commission, Gibson made short work of untying Tommy, who then moved over to Alex to do the same while Gibson took care of securing their former captors. Alex was aware of the way Tommy’s eyes drifted erratically over his face before settling somewhere else entirely as his expression morphed into one that resembled Visser’s just moments ago.

Alex realised Katz’s blood was still smeared all over his mouth and jaw and hastily swiped at the mess once his hands were usable again only to find that it had dried, leaving him, he assumed, looking like some sort of macabre ghoul. He gobbled onto the ground again, wishing he had some water to wash the taste of copper out of his mouth.

“Fuck’s sake,” he muttered to himself before turning round to face Gibson. “All good over there?” he called out.

Gibson frowned as he examined Katz’s mangled face. “It’s not pretty but he’ll live,” he said, while
the other man continued to emit low moans of pain.

“I was asking about you,” Alex said with a wry smile, feeling the dried blood around his lips crack unpleasantly as his face contorted into a new shape.

“Fine,” Gibson said, the curtness of his answer belied by his barefaced surprise at the question. “Should we just leave them here?”

“Find out what they know first?” Tommy suggested. He walked up between them rubbing his wrists and stopped just out of reach of the two soldiers in the event that they managed to free themselves like their would-be captives had. Tommy crouched down until he was eye-level with Visser, like an adult would when speaking to a child about something they’d done wrong. “What happened at the docks?” he asked gently. “How did you get hurt?”

Alex expected Visser to spit in Tommy’s face. It’s what he would have done, if he’d been in Visser’s position. But Visser only stared up at Tommy balefully and said: “We were on the perimeter. I tried to run in to help when we noticed the collapse. It was a mistake.”

Alex was jarred by the abrupt realisation that their actions had resulted in a very real body count that previously he had failed to account for, too focused on the abstract goal of victory without any thought for the cost.

He turned away from Tommy and Visser, not wanting to hear the rest of their conversation. Gibson appeared suddenly at his side and placed a tentative hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Are you okay?” he asked quietly, an echo of Alex’s previous sentiment with twice the sincerity.

“I’m all right,” Alex replied, consciously curbing the impulse to flinch away from the touch. If Gibson, who had every reason and more to resent Alex, could set aside those feelings, then Alex needed to do better too. “We should probably get out of here before someone comes poking around.”

Gibson nodded in silent agreement and together they moved back over to where Tommy was standing, still questioning Visser. Alex reached out and delicately brushed his knuckles against the nape of Tommy’s neck.

“Got everything?” he asked as Tommy straightened up and turned around to face him.

Tommy nodded, his face pale with exhaustion. “It worked,” Tommy told them. “We did it.” There was no joy in his statement, only finality, tinged with a note of relief that mirrored Alex’s own feelings on the matter.

“Great,” Alex replied, doing his best to not make it sound sarcastic, as was his natural tendency. “Let’s go then. We still have to regroup at the Mole.”

“We’re really just going to leave them like that?” Tommy asked hesitantly, jerking a thumb toward Katz and Visser, who looked more pathetic than ever sitting on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs and their ankles tied to each other’s, preventing them from using the same method of escape as Tommy and Gibson.

“What, you’d rather kill them?” Alex proposed, regretting the statement when Tommy curled his lip in revulsion. “They’ll be fine,” he amended. “Enjoy the company you shitheads,” Alex said in German to the two men on the ground. He contemplated spitting near them as a parting gesture, but Tommy and Gibson were standing nearby waiting for him, and he didn’t want to chance being on the receiving end of twin disapproving stares.

Alex followed Gibson over to the motorbikes they’d seen parked when the soldiers had led them off
the beach and into the plaza. Tommy stayed just a step behind, nervously looking around as they crossed the open space despite there being no threat in sight.

Alex, feeling a surge of something he couldn’t quite identify and reached back to pull Tommy forward, pressing the shorter boy into his side with an arm slung around his shoulder. “Relax, will you?” he said quietly, nosing into Tommy’s hair a little as he spoke just because he could. The relief of knowing they’d done what they’d set out to do had finally sunken in, making him feel floaty and detached from the adrenaline comedown, instilling an insatiable urge to touch, to ground himself in something sensory and tactile.

There were two bikes parked at the edge of the plaza, one helmet between them, hanging off the handlebars of the one on the right.

“How should we do this?” Gibson asked uncertainly as the three of them stood over the vehicles.

Alex answered by way of handing Tommy the helmet.

He took it nervously and glanced up at Alex with a frown. “Erm, I think I’d rather ride with one of you, actually,” he said.

“You are,” Alex replied, watching as Tommy struggled to fasten the helmet under his chin for a moment before stepping forward to help. “That’s why you get the headgear. Don’t want you falling off and cracking your head open right before we go home.”

“Home,” Tommy echoed plaintively, like he hadn’t stopped to consider the possibility until that moment.

Alex allowed a ghost of a smile to cross his face as he finished with the strap on Tommy’s helmet. He didn’t step away quite yet, wanting to savour the moment of peace with the three of them just standing there together as the gentle sea breeze whipped through their hair, for once with no danger nipping at their heels.

“When we get home,” he said slowly, as if to will the words into existence, “the three of us are going to have a nice hot meal at the Cottage, and we’re going to go out to the cinema, and we’re going to pretend none of this ever happened.”

Tommy smiled warmly back at him and Alex felt something so deeply overwhelming that he was forced to turn away. He got onto one of the motorbikes, checking to make sure everything was properly in order before starting the engine, and then he moved over to do the same with its counterpart.

“You know how to ride?” he asked Gibson, raising his voice to be heard above the noise.

Gibson just nodded.

Alex turned to address Tommy. “You should ride with Gibson,” he said, eliminating the need for Tommy to choose between them himself. “You’re the same height, so it’ll be better for the weight distribution.”

“Okay.”

Alex watched from behind as Gibson got onto the bike and waited for Tommy to get on behind him, the two of them crammed onto a seat meant for only one. The bike wobbled dangerously for a moment after Gibson flipped up the kickstand, but then steadied again when they began to roll forward.
He tailed Gibson and Tommy down the beach, wishing there was a way for the ride to never end. Alex’s mind was never clearer than in those moments where he could just drive without thinking about anything at all. There was the sea to his left, the twinkling city lights to his right, and behind him a scarlet sky clouded by thick grey smoke, like the cover of a lurid pulp magazine.

Alex could feel the energy seeping out of him bit by bit as the remains of the Mole came into view, one lone figure standing in the middle of the wooden carcass.

There was no friendly greeting or tearful reunion when they met Leclair on the middle of the broken pier, their motorbikes left abandoned at the edge of the sand. He didn’t look up as they approached, only continuing to stare down into the dark water below.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice like an icy blade cutting through the still quiet.

“It’s done,” Alex said before either of the others had a chance to answer. “Went off without a hitch.” It wasn’t the truest statement, but there was nothing that had gone wrong that Alex thought Leclair would care to hear about after the fact.

“And the fire?”

“Fire?” Alex wasn’t sure what Leclair had expected from a series of explosions if not fire, but he followed the line of Leclair’s finger, pointing out into the night, past the burning wreckage of the docks (what bits hadn’t sunken into the ocean, at least) and further inland, where a matching column of smoke could be seen rising up above the city.

“The hotel?” Gibson asked, piecing it together faster than Alex could.

“One would assume,” Leclair replied cryptically. He turned to face Gibson for the first time since they’d arrived at the rendezvous point, and there was something in his eyes that Alex couldn’t identify—but it scared him. “I need you to go to the railyard. Make sure Sevard doesn’t get on that train.”

“That wasn’t part of the plan—” Alex interjected reflexively, but a single glance from Leclair stopped him before the argument could proceed any further.

“You think something went wrong?” Gibson asked.

Leclair looked at him like he was a moron for even asking.

“The others haven’t made it back,” Tommy said hesitantly, before Gibson could either acquiesce or refuse to obey Leclair’s directions. “Shouldn’t we wait for them?”

“There’s no time for that!” Leclair snapped with an almost animalistic urgency. Alex watched as Leclair dug his fingers into the splintering wood of the handrail, and then as if he’d just become conscious of the action himself, he suddenly snatched them away and tucked them into the pockets of his coat.

Alex was surprised when Gibson suddenly placed a hand on Leclair’s shoulder, with all the courage of a wild animal handler, but Leclair didn’t react as he had to Tommy’s innocent—and sensible—query about waiting to meet with the others before gallivanting off on another adventure.

“I’ll make sure she’s safe,” Gibson said.

Alex cocked his head slightly, taken aback by the statement. He could understand why they wanted Sevard alive, sure, but there was a note of protectiveness in Gibson’s voice that he couldn’t
understand. Not for the first time, Alex got the sense that there was something Gibson was hiding, but no longer did Alex possess the bitterly mistrustful enthusiasm to sniff out the truth.

Then Gibson hugged Leclair, and Leclair responded with an equally surprising gesture in return: he hugged Gibson back.

Alex felt a pang somewhere in the centre of his chest and glanced down quickly, not wanting to dwell on it. There was a hazy memory rising to the surface, brought to life by the image of Gibson and Leclair embracing as if father and son, but Alex wouldn’t allow it. He glanced up again to find Tommy staring at him with evident concern, but ignored the look.

“You’re going, then?” Alex asked when Gibson and Leclair finally broke apart.

“Will you go with me?” Gibson asked, challenging Alex with his eyes. He looked like he thought Alex would refuse, like he was afraid of the possibility.

Alex nodded his assent and the three of them traipsed back down the Mole to retrieve the motorbikes they’d left at the shore, a new goal in mind.

This time the ride carried with it no sense of freedom, only a lingering dread that grew in intensity as Alex followed Gibson out past the beach and into the countryside, where they had to slow down considerably to navigate the winding dirt paths that led through the trees.

Alex took care to keep close behind Gibson, not wanting to get lost on the way to the railyard that only Gibson knew the location of, but it was tough-going in the dark, and more than once Alex lost sight of the other bike, only to catch a glimpse of it again after rounding the next bend in the path.

After another minute, Gibson abruptly slowed, forcing Alex to hit the brakes to keep from hitting him. After quashing the momentary flash of irritation, Alex realised that he could hear the sound of machinery and distant shouting underneath the rumble of the engine below him.

They continued forward at a slow crawl for a few more minutes before Gibson stopped, raising a hand to signal for Alex to do the same. Tommy turned his head to peer at Alex as he walked the bike up alongside them. He began to struggle with the chinstrap, but Alex waved for him to stop.

“Leave it,” he told Tommy, leaning over to make sure he was heard. “We might need to make a quick exit.”

They climbed off their bikes in unexpected synchronization, Gibson lagging just behind, and then crept forward to the edge of the treeline to scope out the clearing in which the railyard lay.

It was chaos, a disordered mass of people scattered about the train platform and swarming one of the carriages, there being seemingly no one around with any authority to make sense of it all.

“What should we do?” Gibson asked, glancing from Tommy to Alex and then back again.

Alex chewed pensively at his bottom lip as he scanned the area. “I’ll go ahead, take a look around,” he volunteered. He looked over at Tommy for approval.

Tommy frowned, a deep crease forming between his brows. He stared at Alex for a long moment before finally replying. “Be careful,” he said.

Alex forced a grin. “You know me: if there’s anything I’m decent at, it’s staying alive.”

Without waiting for a response, Alex started to creep ahead into the clearing itself, using the natural
cover provided by the darkness to remain unseen as he moved through the graveyard of abandoned automobiles that surrounded the train.

The group of women huddled around the carriage doors would have resembled war refugees were it not for the jewels on their wrists and fingers and the silks and furs drawn up around their shoulders. There were virtually no men among them, only a few scattered German soldiers, certainly no one with enough rank or status—like the Panzertruppe General Sevard had been scheduled to return to Vichy with.

The train whistled as Alex continued to watch the queue of military wives scrambling to board the train, signalling its impending departure. He debated going back for the others and trying to find some way to get on board without attracting attention, whilst simultaneously weighing the consequences of returning to Leclair empty-handed.

Before he could settle on a course of action, fate intervened and chose for him. A shiny black sedan roared past his hiding spot, scattering the crowd of women surrounding the train carriage. Alex craned his neck to get a better look and was rewarded when the door opened to reveal two more German soldiers in the company of a familiar brunette, her ivory dress stained grey with soot. The two men pushed past the group of waiting wives and escorted Sevard up onto the platform, helping her into the carriage. The doors closed behind her and the remaining women found themselves being shepherded away as the train whistle sounded again.

Sevard was now on the train and its departure was imminent, leaving Alex with a worse pair of options than before. There was no time to retrieve Gibson and Tommy, and if he didn’t get on the train somehow before it left, their chance of capturing Sevard would disappear along with it.

Alex couldn’t force himself to move in either direction, and then the train was moving, away from him, and he was forced to act. Alex sprinted for the rear train-car as it started to roll away down the track, managing to climb up onto the back and tuck himself against the side of the car facing the trees just before the train passed by the delegation of the Heer officials’ wives in their entirety.

Alex watched the branches whipping by as the train moved down the track and glanced back at the station quickly fading into the distance. He hoped to God he hadn’t just made the wrong decision. Swallowing back the bile in the back of his throat, Alex slowly edged around to the rear of the car again, looking for a way in.

He groped blindly in the dark, searching for a door as he struggled to maintain his precarious position on the back of the train, but a light in the distance stopped him short. Alex glanced up as the light grew brighter, accompanied by a whining rumble he recognised because he had heard it only moments prior.

Alex wasn’t surprised when Gibson and Tommy came into view on the tracks astride a motorbike, Tommy still safe as could be in his too-big helmet.

Alex laughed, the sound carried away by the wind and the roar of machinery, and reached out a hand as Gibson steadily approached the back of the train. There was no way for the three to effectively communicate, and no second chances. If they didn’t get the timing right, there was every possibility that one of them would be left behind, or worse.

Alex steadied himself and stretched out as far as he dared, grabbing for Tommy’s hand as Gibson darted in close. He yanked Tommy toward himself as hard as he could, feeling the muscles in his arms and back straining against the other boy’s weight. Tommy’s feet landed firmly on the platform and Alex breathed out a mixed sigh of relief and exhaustion.
But there was still Gibson, alone now on the back of the motorbike, still chugging along behind them, and it was going to be a bit more complicated to pull him up without the bike getting in the way.

“Ready?” Alex mouthed to Tommy, who nodded.

Both grabbed hold of the rails lining the back of the car and extended their free arms toward Gibson. He grabbed Tommy’s first with his left hand, keeping the right in the centre of the handlebars to hold the bike steady. Then he looked up at Alex as if to steel himself, and leapt, reaching for Alex’s hand as he made the jump.

Alex managed to grab the ends of Gibson’s fingers as his feet caught the edge of the train car. The bike flew sideways without Gibson’s weight keeping it steady and Alex watched as it went skittering down the track in a hail of sparks before finally vanishing into the darkness.

Alex felt Gibson’s weight shift unexpectedly and his eyes shot back to the other boy’s face, finding him wide-eyed with terror as one of his feet slipped. Alex let go of the handrail to grab Gibson’s arm, managing to stay on only with the help of the thigh-high metal guard keeping him upright as he leaned forward to prevent Gibson’s hand from slipping out of his own.

Alex could hear Tommy grunting from the effort as they slowly pulled Gibson back up, and once he was safely onboard, Tommy collapsed into a small exhausted heap at their feet.

Alex’s heart was pounding like he’d been the one who had almost fallen off the back of the train as he looked at Gibson, still doe-eyed and trembling. He reached out to tousle Gibson’s hair reassuringly, and then leaned down to offer Tommy a hand.

“Come on,” he said loudly, straining to be heard over the sound of the train rumbling through the countryside. “We still have to find a way inside.”
Nell woke around ten in the morning, earlier than she had in the last few days and felt a sharp twinge of guilt when she noticed that Henry’s cot was already empty. It was far from unusual for Maggie to come in and take the boy while Nell was sleeping—as she tended to sleep even through the loudest of fits—but each time it happened, Nell felt even worse about it.

She dressed, brushed her hair into some semblance of neatness, and descended the stairs to find Maggie in the kitchen with Henry on her hip chewing on one of his toys while she warmed a pot of broth. Nell stood silently in the doorway for a few moments before Maggie finally noticed her and turned around, ladle still in hand.

“Oh, good,” Maggie said brightly. “I was just about to come and wake you up. Peter wants to go visit his mother this afternoon. Just for a few hours,” she added hastily, as if expecting Nell to protest.

“All right,” Nell replied quietly. She made a weak motion with her hands toward Henry. “Do you want me to take him?”

“No, it’s all right. I’ve got him,” Maggie reassured her, but it only made Nell feel worse. “I’ll call you when this is finished.”

It was the same casually dismissive tone Maggie had used more and more lately, ever since returning with Peter from the failed rendezvous. Nell didn’t blame either of them for whatever had gone wrong in France, so she couldn’t understand why Maggie was so hellbent on avoiding her. Nell hadn’t broached the subject however, preferring the loneliness over the possibility of conflict with perhaps the one person she could count on not to hate her.

Nell stared at Maggie for a minute longer before making her way to the parlour, where Peter was sat
with a stack of letters and newspapers laid out on the table. He glanced up at her over his reading glasses, gave her a cursory nod, and then went back to his reading. Nell grabbed her novel, a memoir from the campaign against the Ottomans in the Great War, and curled up in the armchair, opening to the page she’d dog-eared when she’d finished reading yesterday.

The book, nearly six-hundred pages, had become something of a challenge for Nell, who had never been fond of reading in school and rarely indulged in it for fun. But with Asher gone, and the Cottage virtually empty most of the day, Nell had needed something else to distract herself from… everything. Slogging through an endless account of a war she couldn’t remember in a place she’d never seen had felt like the perfect way to pass the time.

She’d been disappointed at first at her own slow pace, only able to get through half of it before Asher and the others had been due home. But then they hadn’t come home, and there was some part of Nell now that felt like she couldn’t finish the book before they returned, that it would jinx them somehow—and simultaneously, that something bad would happen if she stopped reading it as well. She knew it was stupid, but she picked up the book every day, reading less and less each time, and now there was only a hundred pages left and no word yet on when the boys would finally come back.

Waiting was a woman’s burden, Nell supposed, an agonizing helplessness that men would never know. And motherhood too, had come with its own share of troubles—worries that Nell hadn’t anticipated. All of her old friends from school and all of the RAF wives she’d had the misfortune to meet after marrying Farrier, they’d all taken to maternity like they’d been meant for it.

Nell had justified her miserable pregnancy with Farrier’s disappearance, but she’d always thought that once Henry was born, that would change. She’d have a purpose again, someone else to live for other than herself. But things had only gotten worse. Sometimes even looking at Henry made her feel sick to her stomach, or worse, angry, and that only reignited the cycle of guilt and anxiety that so endlessly plagued her no matter what she did. On more than one occasion she’d fantasized about sinking into the bath and never coming back up. Often she wished she had the courage even to go through with it. Henry would be better off without her, better off with Maggie and Peter raising him instead.

“Soup’s ready,” Maggie called out some time later, after Nell had read the same line three times over without registering a single word of it.

Nell slinked out of the armchair and forced herself to make the short trip to the kitchen, already wanting nothing more than to give up and just crawl back in bed for the day. There were three bowls set out around the table when she walked in, and Nell took her customary place across from Maggie and Peter, who sat down shortly thereafter.

“Well,” Maggie said unenthusiastically as she bounced Henry on one knee, “tuck in.”

The soup was thin and unfulfilling through no fault of Maggie’s own, but it was something Nell feared she’d never grow accustomed to. She had to force herself to choke down every spoonful. She knew it would hurt Maggie’s feelings if she didn’t eat every last bit of it, so she scarfed the whole thing down as quick as possible and then sat back in her chair, staring out the window as Maggie and Peter finished their own meals.

“Looks like it might rain,” Nell said conversationally, noting the thunderclouds rolling in outside the kitchen window.

Maggie set her spoon down with a pronounced sigh. “Just our luck, I suppose,” she said. “Do you have all your things together?” she asked Peter. “We should leave soon, try to beat the storm.”
“Yes, dear,” Peter replied, his nose still buried in one of the papers.

Maggie sniffed and stood up, starting to clear away the dishes from the table. “Don’t ‘yes dear’ me,” she chided, flicking his ear as she passed by. “Your work will still be here when we get back.”

Nell watched them squabble while they ate, her son still sitting securely in Maggie’s lap, looking up at the other woman sleepily with his wide green eyes. Tears sprang unexpectedly to Nell’s eyes and she stood up suddenly, nearly knocking her bowl off the table in her haste to get away from the overwhelming atmosphere of domesticity that made it all-too apparent that she didn’t belong.

“All right there?” Peter asked. The concern emanating from his face only made Nell feel sicker.

“Fine,” she replied thickly. “Just need some air.”

She swept into the parlour to grab her book before exiting the cottage entirely, letting the door slowly swing shut on rusted hinges behind her as she sat down on the front steps. Nell sat there for an interminable period of time, staring blankly at letters that her brain could no longer conjure up the effort to decipher. Finally she looked up, staring out instead at the sliver of blue just barely visible beyond the sand, focusing only on the breeze whipping past her face, carrying with it the smell of salt.

It reminded her of holidays long past, when she and Jack had still been children—stolen summers spent at his parents’ beach house in Barbados, all but erased by time. And she was glad for that; no matter how happy the memories might have been, it still hurt to think of her older brother, alive, laughing along with Jack out in the water while Nell sat in the sand with Jack’s mother building castles, unaware that in just a few years’ time both boys would run off to join the RAF, and that only one would come back.

But now they were both gone, and all the years Nell had gotten with Jack didn’t count for anything. And she couldn’t help but dwell on the ever-present fear that Asher was gone too, that she was well and truly alone.

The door creaked open behind Nell and she turned her head to see Peter squeezing through with two luggage cases in his hands. Maggie was right behind him with Henry, and Nell half-expected her to head to the car with the baby still tucked in her arms, but instead she stopped at the first step to hand Henry off to Nell.

“He’s been fed and changed so he should be all right for the next few hours,” Maggie told her. “You can go ahead and put him down for a nap if you want.” She stood there awkwardly while Nell rocked the baby, already starting to fuss a little now that Maggie had let him go, before finally giving Nell a smile and a wave and jogging over to re-join Peter at the car.

Nell watched them drive away with Henry wriggling agitatedly in her arms, waiting until they’d disappeared around the bend before getting up and going back inside. She put Henry down as Maggie had recommended, took a long hot bath, and found herself with an entire afternoon stretching endlessly before her and nothing to fill it with.

She turned the radio on when she returned to the parlour but even that couldn’t keep her occupied for long. Abandoning her book at long last, Nell decided to traipse upstairs to check on Henry. He was still fast asleep in his cot, exactly where she’d left him, and she breathed out a sigh of relief.

With nothing else to occupy her, Nell found her thoughts drifting back to the way Maggie and Peter had been acting ever since they’d come back from France, particularly the way Maggie would almost never look her in the eye. Nell hated to even entertain the idea, but she couldn’t help but feel like the
two were hiding something, and once the idea had taken hold, she found she couldn’t rid herself of it.

Nell put her back against the door to the bedroom she shared with Henry and stared down the corridor at the closed door to Peter’s study, already kicking herself for even contemplating snooping around while he was gone. She knew there were confidential memos amongst his things, probably documents she didn’t even want to see, but she couldn’t help the nagging suspicion that there was something hidden in there that might hold a clue to Asher’s whereabouts.

Only a few minutes later, Nell was already elbow-deep in Peter’s files, carefully sorting through the dated correspondences to find anything that coincided with the night they were meant to retrieve Asher and the others from the beach at Dunkirk. Most of it was indecipherable rubbish, at least to Nell, who hadn’t the slightest inkling how to decode Peter’s shorthand, but tucked in amongst all the faff was a sealed envelope labelled simply: AC 12/06/41

Nell opened the envelope with trembling hands. A sheet of paper slipped out, drifting lazily onto the floor. She knew before she picked it up what it was, able to recognise Collins’s spidery cursive immediately.

Nell wasn’t sure what to expect when she lifted the letter off the floor with trembling hands and began to read. It was addressed as private correspondence to be delivered to Peter directly, but the missive itself was prefaced ‘Dear Nell’, and she almost dropped the thing when she saw her name scrawled at the top of the page.

She almost dropped it again when she started reading and saw what Asher had written. Jack was alive. Jack was in France, alive, and Asher was to bring him home. Nell’s vision fogged over but she blinked the tears away and forced herself to keep reading.

There was a postscript at the very bottom of the page, this part intended for Peter. Instructions, that he should deliver the letter to Nell herself if something were to go wrong in France. If Asher didn’t come back.

They hadn’t come back. And yet Peter hadn’t given her the letter. Why hadn’t he given her the letter?

Nell sank into the chair and dropped the letter down onto the mess of documents littering Peter’s desk. She felt a ghostly tug starting at the tips of her fingers before spreading slowly throughout the rest of her body, like she was being detached from herself.

When she finally came back, Nell became aware all of a sudden that she was standing in the corridor with Asher’s letter crumpled up in her hand and that she had been pacing for what must have been hours, because it was dark now inside the cottage and she could hear Henry distantly crying.

The door opened downstairs and Nell felt a spike of panic coursing through her, paralyzing her, only eased when a familiar voice called out, “Nell?”

She still couldn’t move even when the sound of footsteps echoed up the stairs, the baby’s crying now relegated to another quieter corner of her mind as she struggled to find something within her own consciousness to latch onto, to try and pull herself back from whatever dark place she’d fallen into.

“Nell?” Peter was no more than a hazy black shape as he moved toward her, and then suddenly the lights came on and he was standing face to face with her in the middle of the corridor, eyes wide and full of confusion. “Nell, what’s the matter?” He reached out but seemed hesitant to touch her.
Maggie sprinted into the corridor behind him, her face flushed from a mixture of exertion and worry. “What’s wrong—?” she started to ask, but Peter turned and silenced her with a look.

“Check on Henry, please,” he commanded quietly.

Maggie obeyed with a curt nod, slipping quickly into the bedroom where Henry had been sleeping, where Nell had left him unattended all afternoon. Once that thought registered with her, she felt like vomiting, and might have, if her muscles had agreed to obey any of the impulses her brain was sending.

“Nell,” Peter was saying. He placed tentative hands on her shoulders as he spoke. “Are you all right? Did something happen?” He gave a gentle pull, trying to guide her forward. “Maybe we should just go downstairs and have a cuppa, all right?”

They’d just about made it to the kitchen when Nell suddenly came back to her senses, gaining enough control of her body to rip herself out of Peter’s grip with a shriek.

“Nell, man alive!” he shouted, seizing hold of her again while she flailed and writhed, tears flooding down her face now. “Stop! Just tell me what’s wrong!”

“You…” she said in a quavering voice, calming down just enough to form words again. “You lied,” she ground out, swallowing heavily. Once the words were out, Nell didn’t have the energy to fight Peter anymore, and she allowed him to steer her into the armchair in the parlour.

“About what?” Peter asked, sounding utterly exasperated as he knelt down to face Nell at eye-level.

“This!” Nell retorted, the sheaf of crumpled envelopes clenched in her fist shaking with barely suppressed rage. “What the hell is this, Peter?” she shouted. “Why would you keep this from me?”

Henry’s wails, which had gone quiet with Maggie’s attention, suddenly reignited from upstairs at the sound of Nell’s yelling.

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” Peter tried to explain, but Nell was well past being reasoned with.

“It wasn’t your decision to make!” she shot back, her words almost drowned out by the sound of Henry’s crying as Maggie descended the stairs with the boy in her arms. Nell burst into tears again at the sight of them. Peter waved Maggie away discreetly, motioning for her to go into the kitchen.

“Make a pot of tea, will you?” Nell heard him say between her own sobs and Henry’s caterwauling. “Now, now, Nell,” he cajoled, delicately prying her hands away from her eyes so that she was forced to look at him again. “Come off it. I was just waiting for the right time, is all.”

“And what time was that?” she demanded.

“I thought—” Peter paused, wetting his lower lip with the tip of his tongue; there was uncertainty etched in every line in his face.

“What?” Nell pressed, although she already knew what he was about to say.

“I thought we’d have heard from them by now,” Peter admitted quietly.

The anticipation didn’t make the words hurt any less, and this time, when Nell cried, it was silent, her body feeling like it might split in half from sternum to stomach from the force of her dry sobs. She felt Peter’s arms gently envelop her, but it didn’t make her feel any less alone. “They’re dead, aren’t they?” Nell finally managed, breathing the words out against the wool of Peter’s jumper.
Peter squeezed her tighter in response. “Anything could have happened,” he told her in an attempt to reassure. “It’s still too soon to make any judgments. We just have to wait.”

Nell was grateful for his steadfast optimism, even if he didn’t mean it. It was easier to take than the stony response she’d received from her mother just before Farrier’s funeral: “It was to be expected, Eleanor,” she’d said. As if knowing that your husband might leave one day and never come back had made it hurt any less.

Nell clung to Peter tighter, suddenly afraid that she might go to pieces again if she let go. Gradually the heaving sobs that wracked her slender frame began to ease, and she noticed in their absence that Henry, too, had gone quiet.

A shrill ring echoed through the ground floor of the cottage. Nell jumped in Peter’s arms, and she could hear Henry fretting while Maggie walked over from the kitchen to the entryway to get the phone.

“Feeling any better?” Peter asked, distracting Nell from the sight of Maggie standing with her back to them, Henry’s head cradled on her shoulder. He pulled away from her slightly and Nell caught a glimpse of Maggie’s face, bone-white as she turned to face them.

“Peter,” Maggie said, holding the phone just away from her ear.

“Not now,” Peter replied automatically, but Maggie didn’t back down.

“Peter, you really need to take this,” she said, keeping her voice low so as not to disturb Henry again.

Nell gave Peter a nod and shrank back into the armchair. He placed a hand on her knee as he stood with a familiarity Nell hadn’t thought she’d earned from him, particularly not after what she’d put Peter and Maggie both through in the months since she’d arrived at the cottage on Asher’s invitation. But Peter merely gave her a fond pat, as if they were siblings, not strangers forced into close quarters.

He marched over to the phone, stopping Maggie on his way to give her a quick kiss on the cheek, and another placed on the top of Henry’s head. Nell watched as he placed the phone to his ear with a hesitant ‘hello’ before the colour drained out of his face too. He pivoted sharply on one foot and opened the front door, stepping outside with no explanation and taking the phone with him, pulling it as far off the cradle as it would go. His foot stayed planted between the door itself and the post, but it was enough to muffle the sound of his conversation beyond comprehensibility.

Nell glanced over at Maggie instead as she walked over, only to catch her eyes for a brief second before Maggie lowered them to the floor.

“What’s the matter?” Nell asked reluctantly when she reached Peter. The wind was stronger now than it had been during the day and she shivered, clutching the blanket tighter.
“It’s for you,” he replied, his voice betraying nothing.

Her hands trembled as she took the phone from him and lifted the receiver to her ear. “Hello?” she said tentatively in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Nell? It’s me.”

Nell sagged against the door in unabashed relief, not caring that both Peter and Maggie’s eyes were on her still. “I thought you were dead,” she breathed, hardly daring to believe that the voice in her ear was even real.

“Not yet,” Asher replied with an achingly familiar, almost juvenile chuckle. “Are you all right? Is Henry all right?”

“We’re fine,” she said, omitting the crisis of the past few hours from her answer. “I’ve just been worried,” she admitted. “About you, and—what happened?”

He paused. “Did Peter give you the letter I wrote?”

“Yes. Well, no, but yes, I know about Jack. Is he there with you? Can I talk to him?” Nell could see Peter biting at his lip in her peripheral vision and she turned away.

There was a sharp inhale on the end of the line—then silence. “Things are a bit complicated right now,” Collins replied uneasily. “Jack’s alive,” he added, pre-empting the question, “but he’s not here with me.”

“What do you mean? Where is he?”

“The States,” Asher replied. “Or on his way, at least.”

“What?” Nell asked, her voice jumping up an octave. “Why? How long?”

“I can’t say much,” he hedged. “I shouldn’t even be making this call. It’s not the most secure location.”

“Where are you?” Nell asked, the wave of relief she’d felt upon hearing Asher’s voice ebbing now, replaced by an inescapable worry.

“A hospital in Vichy. Jack’s not hurt, he’s fine. Alex—well, it’s not important right now. Point is, there was a bit of a spanner in the works and something needed to be done, and well, Jack volunteered to do it.” Asher sniffed loudly on the other end. “Once a martyr, always a martyr, I suppose,” he remarked in a distinctly joking tone.

“That’s not funny,” Nell protested. “Especially not when I’ve just found out my dead husband has actually been alive for the past year but I can’t see him or speak to him, and he’s apparently halfway across the Atlantic doing god knows what and no one will tell me when he’s coming back!”

“I know,” Collins said quietly, and there was a heavy note in his voice that brought Nell near to tears again just at the sound of it. “Believe me, Nell, I know how you feel.” And she knew he did. She’d spent years hating him for it. “He’s written you a letter,” Collins continued. “He didn’t want the first time you spoke again to be over the phone, so….” He trailed off. “He’s in good hands, Nell,” he told her, and he sounded confident enough that she felt she could maybe let herself believe him in time. “He’ll come back home to us. I promise.”
IV. Collins

Chapter Notes

Here it is! We're winding down this particular story but I don't know if I ever really want it to end....

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“You both all right?” Farrier asked once he’d cleared the smoke from his lungs and throat, while they were en-route to the Mole, in the same nervous hush he’d once used upon regrouping after a successful flight. The familiarity made Collins’s heart ache.


“What happened with Sevard?” Farrier asked, his throat buzzing again toward the end of the question. He let out another thick cough, covering his mouth politely, as if etiquette mattered to either of his companions.

“Escaped,” Simone replied without explaining how or why. She stole another glance at Collins and he shot her a questioning look back. “Your injury,” she clarified, splitting her attention between him and the road. “You’re not in pain?”

No, he wasn’t, despite Sevard’s unexpected brutality, and perhaps that was a cause of concern in of itself.

Farrier let out a sort of muted bark as Collins unbuttoned his jacket and pulled his shirt out of his trousers to get a better look at the state of his re-aggravated injury. It was visibly bruised, the skin around Simone’s stitching angry and inflamed, but there was no blood, and this time the stitches had held.

“It’s fine,” Collins proclaimed. “I’ll live.” He glanced back to find Farrier’s eyes averted in concern and quickly averted his own, putting his uniform back together as best he could in the cramped confines of the vehicle.

The winds from the Channel carried the smoke southwest, leaving the air breathable again once they’d escaped the confines of the town and made it to shore. In the dark, all Collins could make out of the ruins of the factory on the docks were a few smouldering embers shining faintly in the distance.

There was one tiny lantern illuminating the Mole, only visible when they were less than a few hundred feet from the crumbling structure out on the beach. But when they approached, Leclair was nowhere to be seen, the tiny kerosene lamp standing alone on the makeshift pier.

“Reckon he left?” Collins posed to the others as Simone swung the truck around, shining the headlights out into the water. Before either could answer, Collins caught a glimpse of a human figure standing out in the waves, and pointed. “There!”

If Collins hadn’t known to look for Leclair he might have mistaken the silhouette on the shoreline for
a ghost. Even after they exited the truck and began to march down the beach to meet him, Leclair looked more like a spectral apparition than a man. And when he turned, he was neither, his red-rimmed eyes filled with the frantic desperation of a wounded animal.

Collins took a reflexive step back, putting himself closer to Farrier instead. Simone had no such qualms and walked straight up to Leclair, and for a moment, Collins thought she might embrace him, in the same way a mother would her child.

But they didn’t touch, merely standing a few inches apart as they looked at each other. The colour never returned to Leclair’s face, but his expression cooled as the seconds passed and finally, he spoke.

“Was the fire your doing?”

Collins wasn’t sure who he was asking, but Farrier answered. “It became necessary.”

“To what end?”

Collins glanced over at Farrier to find the other man’s expression pinched tight as he searched for a response. “We were about to be discovered,” Collins volunteered. “We needed a distraction to escape.”

“Empty-handed, it seems,” Leclair replied darkly.

Collins flared his nostrils and forced himself to keep a tight lid on the words he wanted to let fly, knowing that it was neither the time nor place to row with Leclair over his antagonistic attitude. “Are the other lads still out there?” Collins wondered aloud as he looked around at the empty sand stretching out on either side of them. There had been no sign of them on the way, and no sign of them still, despite the clear evidence of their success at the docks.

“No,” Leclair replied. “I already sent them on to the rail station.”

“You what?” Collins said, flushing crimson as a flash of anger passed over him before he’d even had time to fully process what Leclair had said.

Leclair arched an eyebrow and stared Collins down unflinchingly, despite the clear signs of tears still present on his stony face. “Clearly I made the right call, seeing as you don’t have her.”

Collins gaped, but when neither Farrier nor Simone spoke up to call Leclair on his shit, he lost it. “What the fuck is wrong with you, eh? You treat the lot of us like we’re completely disposable, but you couldn’t care if the whole town burns to the ground just so long as some Nazi cunt lives? Is that it?”

Leclair took a step closer, his nose practically touching Collins’s as he stared darkly into his eyes. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand, boy,” he said, and Collins felt flecks of spit mottling his cheeks.

Still, he wasn’t about to back down. “Why are you so obsessed with Sevard?” Collins demanded. “You want to fuck her, do you? Maybe you already have—”

“She’s my sister,” Leclair said suddenly.

Collins’s mouth closed with a loud click.

Leclair sniffed and finally took a step backward. “It doesn’t change anything,” he continued. “Our
goals remain the same as ever.”

Collins glanced between Farrier and Simone to find them both staring at the ground, avoiding his eyes and Leclair’s it seemed. He looked back at Leclair himself to find him still staring at Collins with an unwavering look of determination etched into his weathered face. “You’re mad,” Collins told him. “You’re mad, and you’re a fool, and you’re a fucking liar.”

“Be that as it may,” Leclair replied with an infuriating calmness, “you still have a job to do.”

Collins punched him. Farrier’s hand came up too late to stop Collins’s knuckles from connecting with Leclair’s nose, but Collins was aware of the movement as if time itself had slowed, the impact coming in stages: skin connecting with skin, bone against bone, and then the pain. Collins retracted his fist and jerked away before Farrier could touch him.

When he turned around, Simone was at Leclair’s side while he held his nose, but her hands only hovered around him, never touching.

“Were you expecting me to hit you back?” Leclair asked, catching Collins looking.

“No,” Collins replied honestly. He looked again at Farrier to find the other man watching him imploringly, like an overanxious mother who had just caught her child misbehaving in church. Collins stared back expressionlessly. Farrier had another think coming if he thought Collins was going to just lie down and let Leclair fuck them over like this without fighting back.

“Are you all right?” Simone asked, her voice drawing Collins’s attention back to her and Leclair.

“Fine,” Leclair replied, even as he stepped away from her, further into the seawater lapping gently at his boots. “We’re wasting time.” He nodded at Collins and Farrier, sniffling loudly as he wiped a trickle of blood coming from his left nostril with the back of his hand. “You might make the train, but if not, you might be able to head her off in Lille. All the freight from Vichy passes through there; they’ll undoubtedly make a stop even with passengers. After that, you’re on your own. Try to make it to the liberated zone if you can. There are a few Resistance cells around the capital that can help you get to Spain for evacuation.”

“And you?” Farrier asked.

“I have people to take care of,” Leclair replied simply. “I expect when we next meet again, it won’t be in France.” He spoke the words as if they were prophecy, as if their next meeting was inevitable instead of mere chance.

“How will I find you?” Simone asked, in a voice almost too quiet to be heard over the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.

Leclair looked at her, his eyes softening by degrees the longer he stared down at her face. “You won’t help me?”

“Wouldn’t you rather have me help her?” she countered. Collins wondered if that was really the reason, or if she was going with them because she couldn’t bear to let go of Farrier just yet.

Leclair nodded solemnly. “Look for Tortuga in Lyon. I’ll find you there.” He flicked his eyes over to Farrier and Collins, catching their gazes in turn. “She can’t stay in France,” he told them. “Drag her back to England if you have to, but she can’t stay here.”

Collins shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know that Britain would take too kindly to sheltering a war criminal just because she’s your family,” he pointed out.
“America, then,” Leclair responded, expression unchanging. “They seem more practical than you lot, anyway. You should go,” he concluded, and that was that.

They left Leclair behind in the dark, and none of them looked back.

Collins rapped a nervous rhythm with his bruised knuckles against his thigh as Simone drove. He stole glances at Farrier until finally, Farrier noticed with a frown, his brows creasing together inquisitively.

“Did you know?” Collins asked quietly, worrying at his bottom lip.

“Know what?” Farrier’s face was the perfect picture of innocence.

“That she was his sister.”

“No?” Farrier replied surprised. Collins was aware of Simone’s head turning slightly, to better hear them. “Why would you think that?”

“You didn’t react at all when he told us,” Collins argued. And Farrier had always seemed too-trusting of Leclair, even for himself.

“You mean I didn’t punch him in the bloody face,” Farrier said flatly.

Collins felt a frisson of anger pass through him. “I mean you’ve been here for a fucking year and apparently there’s a lot that’s changed.”

“You’re not being fair,” Farrier pointed out in an infuriatingly mature tone. “It’s not like I’ve been on bloody holiday.”

Collins wrinkled his nose and turned back toward the windscreen, staring out intently into the blackness, though all that could be seen was the glimmer of gravel littering the dirt, illuminated faintly by the headlights. He went back to tapping, wishing he had least had a pen in his hand, something he could occupy his hands with.

He’d been guilty of drawing on his own arms mindlessly during training courses, unable to keep himself from scribbling something just to quiet his own mind enough to concentrate on the lectures. It had worked despite the way the teachers had looked at him like he was deficient, compounded perhaps by his Scottishness and his rather derelict past; but even still, he’d gotten top marks in nearly every exam.

But he’d never learned how to shut himself up and had turned to drink for that instead. With nary a drop of liquor in sight, the fidgeting was worse than ever. Collins was surprised when Simone didn’t comment on it once during the drive.

“We’re close,” was all she said, after several more minutes had passed. It started raining then, just a dusting of precipitation, but it was enough that Simone had to slow to maintain visibility, and Collins felt his heart rate ratchet up in response.

It felt like a stopwatch lodged inside his ribcage, ticking ever faster the more he focused on what little time they had left. Collins tapped his fingers faster, and then stopped all at once, as Simone navigated the truck in between its counterparts surrounding the haphazard supply station, which no train cars were visible, despite the throng of people surrounding the platform.

“So you think it’s left?” Collins asked, throwing the question to the air in hopes that either might have an answer for him.
“No way to tell,” Farrier replied.

But that wasn’t strictly true, Collins realised as he looked down at his Luftwaffe uniform, sooty but still a familiar shade of blue. He reached for the door handle and stopped at the sound of Farrier’s voice, full of concern.

“What if someone recognises you?”

“You’ve a better idea?” Farrier was silent. Collins tore himself out of Farrier’s grasp and flung the door open. He marched with purpose out into the middle of the crowd, pushing past the endless sea of disgruntled rich women, whose irritation morphed into noises of surprise or admiration once they caught sight of his uniform.

Collins walked confidently up to one of the Heer soldiers standing at the foot of the platform, taking note of the rifle already in hand as he ventured forward.

“Have any trains already departed?” he asked, trying to sound as authoritative as possible.

The soldier didn’t seem impressed by either Collins’s tone or rank. “Just the one,” he replied curtly.

“Do you know who was on it?”

The soldier gave Collins an irritated look. “Do I look like I’d know who was on it? We’re just here for crowd control while they ship the important people back to Lille for safekeeping. All I know is that some French bitch pulled strings and jumped the queue while the rest of us are sitting out here in the rain waiting on the next freight to arrive.”

That was confirmation enough for Collins, who was beginning to wilt under the rain himself. He sprinted back to the truck to give Simone and Farrier the news.

“What should we do?” he asked, having no suggestions in mind. They could head to Lille on their own, he supposed, and hope they could get there in time to intercept Sevard before she could slip away. But they still didn’t know if the boys had made it onto the train despite their head start, and that gave Collins pause.

Simone had no such qualms. Farrier was just opening his mouth to answer when she suddenly jerked the truck into drive and hit the gas, shooting them forward into the crowd with enough force that Collins’s face slammed into the headrest with a dull smack.

There was no opportunity for Collins to reprimand her on the action as she continued barrelling toward the platform at half-speed, with little care for the people leaping out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. At the very last second she jerked the wheel to the left, pulling them out of the way of a collision with the raised platform, and putting the right tyre up onto the tracks going south.

Collins braced himself between the seat and the door as the truck careened wildly along the rail, one tyre still rolling through the dirt while the other juddered over each plank in the track, and shot Simone a disgruntled look—one she ignored.

“Are you planning on keeping this up all the way to Lille?” Collins asked, gritting his teeth against the rattling of the truck all around them.

“Don’t be rude,” Farrier chided, even as Simone pulled the truck off more to the side as if in response to Collins’s complaint, though it was apparent she had only done so because the area around the tracks had opened up enough for them to fit comfortably alongside without the danger of hitting a tree. “If the train departed just before we got there, we might still catch up to it.”
“How far is it to Lille?” Collins questioned.

“Eighty kilometres or so,” Farrier replied casually. Collins gave him a sceptical look. “About fifty miles,” Farrier amended, blushing slightly. Apparently the French had rubbed off on him more than he’d realised.

The rain started to come down in thick sheets as they followed alongside the tracks, all but obscuring the way ahead. Collins’s side started to twinge a little with the jittery motion of the truck and he crossed his arm back to grab the seat over his left shoulder, hoping to relieve the ache a bit.

Collins felt a hand gently cover his fingers and looked back to find Farrier staring at him in concern. He’d almost forgotten in all the melodrama with Leclair that Farrier had very nearly died—that he himself had run the risk as well.

Collins had missed this, this simple nonverbal intimacy they’d once been accustomed to. It was something he hadn’t quite mastered with anyone else, Farrier’s presence able to quiet his brain in a way that almost nothing else could, except perhaps sketching—but that was a focused mindlessness. With Farrier he was simply present, relaxed, open. It was a quality that would have made Farrier a good commanding officer, if things had been different. Collins would have followed him to the ends of the earth if he’d asked. And there was still time for that yet.

America, Leclair had suggested. Would they really have to go that far just to secure Sevard as an asset?

Collins’s eyes had just begun to drift closed when Farrier’s unexpectedly widened in alarm. His hand tightened around Collins’s fingers. “Stop!” he called out to Simone, leaning forward between the seats. “Stop, there’s someone out there!”

There were two someones, Collins realised when he spun around to try and make out what Farrier had seen. Two fuzzy figures just visible in the downpour, walking so closely together they almost resembled a single entity lumbering inefficiently on three limbs.

The truck skidded a few hundred yards before finally coming to a stop, flecks of mud spattering the window as the vehicle spun ninety degrees to face east, leaving Farrier and Collins’s doors facing the silhouettes in the distance.

Farrier leapt out just as soon as the truck was no longer in motion, running over to the two figures without any regard for sensible precautions. Collins cursed under his breath, jumping out of his own seat to go rummaging around in the back of the truck. He glanced up intermittently to check on Farrier as he searched, until finally his fingers connected with smooth metal.

Collins’s boots sunk deeply into the mud as he trudged alongside the train tracks, holding the pistol loosely in the fingers of his right hand. He was vaguely aware of Simone at his back, but she said nothing as the two of them approached the others, and he wasn’t sure he would have heard her over the rain even if she had.

They were drenched by the time they reached Farrier, who was standing far too close for comfort next to two women, huddled together, a single coat draped over their heads in a futile effort to shield them from the rain. Collins could see that the one on his left was standing at an odd angle to keep the weight off her left foot, and that they were well-dressed and bejewelled despite their soaked countenances.

“Was ist geschehen?” Collins demanded, shouting to be heard over the storm.
The woman to his right, dark-haired and wearing emerald green, narrowed her eyes as she looked back at him, and Collins wondered if he’d tipped his hand. Perhaps it was more appropriate to have used ‘passiert’ instead. But then the other woman, the blonde, looked to her companion as if searching for…permission to speak, maybe, and Collins’s danger senses pinged at just that one look.

He lifted the gun, cocked it, and pointed it straight at the blonde’s forehead.

“What happened to you?” Collins asked again. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

The dark-haired woman pulled the coat off in a flash, and suddenly there was a knife at Farrier’s neck as the scrap of fabric fell unceremoniously into the mud. Collins became aware suddenly that his hand was shaking, and hoped the woman wouldn’t notice.

“Cooler heads prevail,” Farrier said evenly, his throat scraping against the blade of the small knife against his adam’s apple with every syllable. Collins had never been known for keeping a cool head.

“I could blow her brains out right now,” Collins said to the darker haired one, keeping the gun pointed at her blonde companion. It wasn’t an empty threat, and somehow he knew that it would hurt her, deeply, perhaps just as much as it would hurt him to lose Farrier.

The woman arched an eyebrow, and drop of rain trailed down her cheek like a single tear. “Would you like to find out which of us has the quicker hand?”

The other woman spoke up then, quickly uttering something to the first in a language that Collins only recognized as Russian, or a variant, after ruminating on it for a moment.

“You’re not German,” he said in English. He looked at Simone, for confirmation, but she was staring intently at Farrier, and her eyes didn’t stray for a moment.

The dark-haired woman cocked her head in interest. “Neither are you,” she countered. Without further discussion, she lifted her hand away from Farrier’s neck and took a step back, lifting the knife in surrender.

Reluctantly, Collins lowered his gun.

“What are your names?” Farrier asked, ever the mediator.

“Lidiya Vikhrova,” the dark-haired woman answered, pointing to herself. “My companion is Nikolett.” She didn’t offer a surname, nor did the watery-eyed blonde give one.

Collins surveyed Nikolett suspiciously, noting that the sleeve of her gown was darkened with what looked like blood. “Are you hurt?” he asked, not out of worry for her condition but rather to confirm the instinct that screamed at him that it wasn’t her blood.

“It’s just my ankle,” she replied stiffly, and alarm bells went off again in Collins’s head.

Farrier however, wasn’t on the same page, and was still questioning Lidiya about how the two of them had come to end up along the freight route in the middle of the rain, dressed for an entirely different occasion altogether.

“The Soviets caught wind of the Panzer prototypes a few months ago,” she told him. “We intercepted some of the French communication coming out of the country and it became a matter of importance for us, as you can imagine.”

Collins could imagine, considering the resilience of the Russian tanks was a large part of the reason...
the Germans hadn’t managed to make up any ground in the East. Sevard’s new models would have
decimated their defences, potentially turning the tide of the war on both fronts.

“You’re spies?” Simone questioned.

“As much as any of you,” Lidiya shot back. “We were supposed to find a woman, Maxine Sevard,
and kill her. We made an attempt at the banquet earlier this evening but things didn’t exactly go as
planned. I assumed that was your doing, then?”

Collins gave a minute nod, unwilling to offer any more than that despite Lidiya’s surprisingly
forthcoming attitude.

“How’d you get out here?” Farrier pressed.

“Jumped from the train,” Lidiya replied casually.

Collins clenched and unclenched his fist rhythmically. He didn’t like standing out here in the rain like
this, having a chat when they needed to find the train, to make sure Alex, and Tommy, and Gibson
were safe—to capture Leclair’s evil hag of a sister so she couldn’t bring the apocalypse down on
their heads.

“Is that how you were injured?” Farrier asked Nikolett.

She nodded. “We had an…incident,” she said.

“Involving Sevard?” Simone asked.

“As well as some unexpected guests,” Lidiya replied, “not unlike yourselves.”

It took only a moment for Collins to catch on to what she meant. “There are Brits on that train?” he
asked, shoving the barrel of his pistol into the centre of Lidiya’s collarbone and shoving her back a
step.

“Would you kill me if I said yes?”

“Collins,” Farrier warned, but Collins wasn’t listening.

“If those are your friends on the train, you should worry less about us and more about what’s waiting
for them in Lille,” Nikolett said, speaking up unexpectedly. Her voice was even but Collins could
see her fingers twitching as she stared impassively at the gun in Collins’s hand, at where it was
pressed up against Lidiya’s chest.

“What does that mean?” Collins asked, glancing suspiciously between the two of them. “Well?” he
added, giving Lidiya another jab for good measure.

“It means—”

“Niki,” Lidiya interjected, but Nikolett kept speaking as if she hadn’t heard.

“There’s a group of SS waiting in Lille to arrest Sevard when she arrives.”

“Why?” Collins wondered.

“Fuck you, that’s why,” Lidiya replied.

“Lida,” Nikolett said in the same warning tone Lidiya had used before, and then finishing with a short
burst of Russian.

“What did she say?” Collins demanded.

Lidiya stared up at him placidly, more serene than anyone had the right to be while held at gunpoint. “She said not to get myself killed,” Lidiya replied.

“Collins,” Farrier said shortly. “We need to go. Simone?”

She was already on her way back to the truck before Farrier had finished saying her name. Collins frowned at him, but didn’t release Lidiya. “What do we do with them?” he asked.

Farrier pursed his lips and sighed. “We’ll figure it out when we get to Lille. For now, I suppose we bring them with us. You’ll cooperate?” he asked, directing the question toward Lidiya, who seemed to be running the show as far as they could tell.

“Well, we wouldn’t get very far without you,” she pointed out.

“Are you sure?” Collins asked.

Farrier shrugged. “We’re still each other’s allies, aren’t we? We share the same goal even if our methods don’t exactly align.”

Headlights dances across his face, causing his eyes to flash like a cat’s might when glimpsed in the darkness. Simone pulled the truck up close to them and Farrier moved over to the back door to open it for the two Soviet women, but Collins beat him to it.

“We’ll trade,” Collins said, making it clear he wasn’t looking for an argument, and that he wouldn’t tolerate one. Farrier backed off and got in beside Simone, leaving him to it.

Collins watched as Lidiya and Nikolett moved with agonising slowness over to the vehicle, but made no move to help them. Nikolett had trouble trying to keep her leg straight as she squeezed past Collins to get into the back, but eventually she made it in with Lidiya’s help.

Collins’s arm shot out to grab Lidiya’s as she stepped past him to climb into the back of the truck. “If anything happens to them,” Collins said darkly, “I’ll kill you myself.”

She just smirked, infuriatingly, and situated herself next to Nikolett, staring at Collins without blinking as he climbed in after her. He stared back for a while, not wanting to be the first to look away, but eventually her gaze drifted back to Nikolett, as if she’d lost interest in the game only halfway through.

Collins watched them with each other as they drove, watched how careful Lidiya was with Nikolett, handling her like she was something precious. Finally he looked away, choosing instead to watch nothing, because it was easier. He knew then that his gut instincts about Lidiya hadn’t been wrong, and he wondered if she’d sensed the same about him. He wondered if he was that transparent or if there was just something she could see because she knew what to look for, when others didn’t.

But it was useless to wonder and in any case, it didn’t matter anymore. Collins could well retire after all this for what it was worth. Get Farrier a medal for his service and then they could disappear into the countryside, maybe somewhere in Wales, buy a sheep farm and fade into obscurity.

Or they could’ve if it weren’t for Nell, and Henry, and now Tommy and Alex and Peter and Maggie, this whole family Collins had unwittingly built around himself without realising. It was almost funny, considering he’d never had much of a family to speak of before.
There was an aborted sound from Farrier behind him and Collins turned to see what had caused it just in time to catch the full brunt of Simone slamming her foot down on the accelerator again and almost being thrown out of his seat.

Once recovered from the near-fall, Collins could see what had inspired Farrier’s alarm: the train was visible out in the distance ahead of them.

“I see it,” Simone said to no one in particularly.

Collins had thought her abrupt change in speed had made that apparent. But as they drew closer, Collins caught sight of something on the other side of the tracks, and called out for Simone to slow down.

“We’re going to lose the train again,” Simone pointed out.

“For Christ’s sake just forget about the fucking train,” Collins bit out. Simone slowed but not fast enough; Collins jumped out before she’d come to a stop and hit the grass in a crouch, using the momentum to spring back up and sprint across the tracks to the other side where a thin human shape was curled up in the dirt.

He could see before he reached him that it was Tommy lying there.

“Still with me?” Collins said, quickly helping the boy up into a sitting position. It wasn’t the best thing to do if there was anything seriously wrong, but if that were the case, there wasn’t much Collins or any of them could do for him regardless.

Tommy nodded, seeming a little dazed but otherwise no worse for wear. His face was scratched up and Collins was sure he’d have no shortage of scrapes and bruises under his clothes, but he didn’t do much more than flinch a little as Collins squeezed at his arms and legs to assess that nothing was broken.

“All right, up with you,” Collins urged, practically hauling Tommy up himself with little assistance from the boy. They jogged across the tracks in sync, slowing when they finally reached the truck on the other side. Collins pushed Tommy forward, toward the still-open door at the back, but he froze mid-entry. “What’s—?” he started to say and then caught sight of Lidiya and Nikolett on the other bench. “Ah, right.”

“They were on the train with us,” Tommy protested, his voice peaking at the end of the sentence with all the frantic shrillness of a child.

“I know,” Collins said placatingly with a reassuring hand on the back of the boy’s neck, guiding him into the seat across from the trouble in question. “I’m not exactly a pig in shit over it either but certain parties felt it was the best course of action for the circumstances.” If Farrier heard him, he gave no sign of it. Collins sighed and settled into his seat again, hoping the next time they came to a stop it would be the last. “We’ll get it all sorted once we get Alex and Gibson back,” he said confidently.

“And Sevard,” Simone pointed out.

“Aye, her too, then,” Collins replied with an eye-roll no one but the shrewd-eyed Soviets sitting across from him could see.
IV. Gibson

Chapter Notes

You guys know the drill.

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It began to rain as they scrambled along the outside of the train cars to get to the passenger cars further toward the front of the train, the water slicking their hands and making it difficult to cling to the makeshift handholds they needed in order to safely traverse the distance between.

Gibson was still riding the high of his near-death experience. He felt as if every cell in his body was vibrating with suppressed energy as he scooted forward, sandwiched between Alex and Tommy with the wind and rain whipping past his face.

“How do we get inside?” Gibson asked Alex, shouting to be heard over the sound of the engine and the rain.

“Baggage car,” Alex replied, gesturing vaguely ahead. “It seems like this route is used to divert soldiers and supplies to Dunkirk from Lille, which means there should be luggage to account for. We’ll go in from above; we can get inside the passenger vestibule that way without being noticed.”

It was smart. Gibson supposed Alex must have spent enough time being carted around with the rest of the BEF to know his way around a supply line.

Gibson glanced back to make sure Tommy was still behind him and, finding the boy slightly further back than he would have liked, paused to allow him time to catch up. Alex was just barely within sight when Gibson turned around again, and he and Tommy had to scramble to keep up.

Finally Alex stopped, still clinging on to the handrails as he stared up at the metal rungs of the ladder going up the side of the car. “You two go first,” he told them. “I’ll follow you up.”

They pushed Tommy up the ladder together, holding onto him for stability, and then Gibson went next.

“Careful,” Alex warned, giving Gibson a boost as he reached the top of the car and hauled himself up and over to join Tommy. The wind was worse up there, stinging Gibson’s wet cheeks as he looked down at Alex.

Alex’s face was strained with the effort of the climb, his knuckles white on his left hand as he reached up to grab the edge of the roof. Gibson extended a hand toward him. Alex reached for him, and in that same moment, Gibson watched as Alex’s other hand slipped off the lip of the train car.

Gibson grabbed him before he could fall, and now that their positions were reversed, Gibson wasn’t sure in which moment he’d truly been more afraid.

“Thanks,” Alex breathed as Gibson and Tommy both reached down to grab him by the shirt to hoist him up. He lay there flat on his back for a moment in the rain, and Gibson was reminded of the first
time they’d met, underneath the Mole, after Tommy had pulled him out of the path of a sinking battleship. Like history repeating itself, he mused.

Gibson could have replied that he was only repaying the favour, but instead he simply said, “You’re welcome,” before helping Alex up.

Alex took the lead again as if nothing had happened. The three of them used their combined efforts to open the hatch on the roof of the train car and then they gazed down into the darkness below.

“I’ll go first,” Gibson volunteered. He lowered himself into the narrow opening with help from Tommy and Alex, feeling around with his feet for any obstacles before dropping down. He landed lightly on his feet and blinked a few times, trying to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. “It’s safe,” he called back up after determining that he was alone.

Tommy and Alex dropped down after, Tommy on all fours like a cat, Alex somehow managing to land directly on Tommy’s foot despite him having already stepped out of the way. Tommy stared at Alex balefully, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“See any guns?” Alex asked, head on a swivel.

Gibson shook his head before realising that Alex probably couldn’t even see him yet, much less their surroundings. “No, there’s not much in here. They must have unloaded any cargo before they left.” Not that it would do them much good now that Sevard’s factory had been blown to hell.

Gibson looked around at the empty space surrounding them, feeling suffocated by it still. He had never been fond of trains. He felt as if he were Jonah, deep inside the belly of the whale, but it wasn’t Gibson’s crimes that needed to be forgiven. Still, he couldn’t help but feel responsible for Sevard’s sins, if only by association, and maybe that was the reason Leclair was so desperate to save her, beyond kinship, beyond love—he needed her redemption.

Alex had started to rifle about in what little remained inside the train car despite Gibson’s proclamation. Gibson turned to Tommy instead, finding him staring down in turn at Alex with a frown.

“What now?” Gibson asked, prompting Tommy to look back up at him.

Tommy looked surprised by the question, but Gibson trusted his ability to remain objective about Sevard more than his own. “We should split up,” Tommy suggested. “We’ll attract less attention.”

Gibson glanced down at his mud-stained damp clothes and thought that there wasn’t much chance of that regardless.

“I found something,” Alex called out. He turned to face them again with his arms full of bulky fabric and extended them out for Tommy and Gibson to take. They were German-issue military jackets, which Gibson thought would come in handy more than a gun at present. Gibson didn’t doubt that they wouldn’t have made it one step onto the other train cars without some sort of disguise.

“Now we split up,” Gibson said as he pulled on the jacket. He ran his fingers through his hair, wincing as they got caught in the saltwater-encrusted tangles. He would love nothing more than to take a long hot bath and forget this night had ever happened. But unfortunately, it wasn’t over yet.

Tommy took point this time as they crept toward the joining door between baggage car and passenger compartments, weapon-less, in subpar disguises that Gibson still had little faith in. Alex, at least, could attempt to pass as a bedraggled German soldier if pressed. Gibson didn’t have that option.
The door opened of its own accord before Tommy had even reached it, revealing a young man silhouetted in the doorway. He froze, and Gibson lunged forward before the other man had a chance to react, putting him in a chokehold without even thinking about it. He placed his hands on either side of the man’s head as he struggled, singly focused on eliminating the threat, but Tommy’s voice suddenly cut through the veil in his mind.

“Don’t!”

“Well, what do you suggest we do with him, then?” Alex asked.

Gibson looked between them and then down at the man feebly gasping for air in his arms. He let him go. Tommy crouched down as the man fell to the ground and secured his arms behind his back quickly enough that Gibson could tell he’d been trained to do it.

He hadn’t noticed that before, or hadn’t paid attention, rather, to the fact that Tommy was entirely more capable than he’d been the first time they’d met. He could hold his own now, and people’s natural inclination to underestimate the weedy youth would likely be very bad for them in the future.

“You want to just leave him here?” Gibson asked as Alex helped Tommy move the man away from the door, propping him up against one of the crates full of uniform jackets.

“For now,” Tommy replied, challenging Gibson with his eyes. “Don’t you think we’ve done enough killing for today?”

Gibson gestured for him to proceed in gentle acquiescence.

“Let me check the compartments,” Alex said to Gibson and Tommy as they approached the door again. “You two, just try not to make too big a fuss, all right? If you find her, just stay back, keep her in sight. We don’t want a fight here.”

It was the obvious warning, but Gibson appreciated the clarity all the same. Knowing they were all on the same page gave him a measure of confidence he hadn’t had before.

The trio crossed into the next train car with the utmost caution, waiting until a woman in the corridor had slipped into one of the compartments before entering together. And after that, it was time to disperse, Gibson giving the others one last lingering look as they moved away from him—Alex into the nearest compartment, Tommy dashing down the corridor to the next train car while there was still an opportunity to pass by unseen.

Gibson’s procession behind Tommy was more gradual. He didn’t move into the next car until Tommy had disappeared out of sight, and even after, once he had counted to ten. He opened the door to find a more bustling atmosphere, a few of the evacuees lingering in the corridor to chat instead of isolating themselves inside the compartments. Tommy was nowhere to be seen.

Gibson drew a few stares as he walked purposefully up the centre of the car, but none of them lingering enough to worry him. When he reached the end, he parked himself in the corner by the empty trolley near the door, and watched, waiting for any sign of Sevard, or Alex or Tommy, if they managed to find her first.

His position afforded him an excellent vantage point of the entire car, as well as the door he had just come through. It left him with one blind spot: the door to his left. When it opened, Gibson abruptly jerked his head in the direction of the noise before reminding himself he was supposed to be keeping a low profile. He looked down as a shadow passed by him, and then glanced up again when it was gone only to have his eyes connect with those belonging to a man his age dressed in Heer-grey.
It took less than a second for Gibson to determine he’d been caught out. He spun around and threw open the door in one fluid motion, shutting it in the soldier’s face as he called out something Gibson couldn’t understand in German. The corridor in the next car was empty and Gibson found himself faced with a decision: to run or hide.

He chose the latter.

Gibson tried two compartment doors, both locked, before settling on the third. He flung it open and darted inside without bothering to check to see if it was unoccupied first, his mind screaming at him to get out of the way of the danger no matter the cost. He shut the compartment door with a quick sigh of relief and pressed his forehead against the wood panelling, waiting for his heartbeat to slow.

Gibson became acutely aware in the second that followed the closing of the compartment door that there was a gun pressed up against the small of his back. He knew without having to turn around that it was Sevard standing behind him.

“I wouldn’t move unless you’d prefer a hole in your spine,” she said in a languid voice, smooth as an oil slick.

“Do you really think firing a gun inside a crowded train car is really a good idea?” Gibson asked. He endeavoured to keep his breathing steady as Sevard pressed the pistol harder into his back.

“Oh, little rabbit,” she said with a breathy laugh, “I am all out of good ideas.” There was a raw hysterical note to her voice, a grain of truth she couldn’t suppress.

“If you kill me,” he told her, “you won’t step foot off this train.”

“Is that a threat?” she asked lightly, apparently not even bothering to consider the possibility that he might be serious.

“Yes,” Gibson replied flatly. He angled his head around to face her as much as he could without turning his body, connecting his eyes with Sevard’s so that she could see just how serious he was. And Gibson was certain, deadly certain, that if he died, Tommy and Alex would make sure that she did too, Leclair’s wishes be damned.

Sevard’s eyes narrowed as she continued to stare at Gibson. Finally, she backed off, giving him a few centimetres of breathing room. “Have a seat,” she commanded, sprawling out luxuriously in one corner of the compartment, gazing up at Gibson from under long dark eyelashes as he cautiously seated himself across from her.

There was something about Maxine Sevard that reminded Gibson of Simone despite their dissimilar looks; a cast-iron façade concealing something secreted deep within. Even knowing, albeit vaguely, about her shared family history with Leclair wasn’t enough to help Gibson decode her motives. Neither could he read the answers in her eyes as she continued to stare at him unblinking, still loosely aiming her pistol at him from her lap.

“I assume you must have come here to kill me,” Sevard said tonelessly. “I believe that puts us at an impasse.”

“We didn’t come here to kill you,” Gibson told her. “We came here to help you.”

“‘We’,” she repeated. “How many?”

“Three, including myself.” Gibson instinctively knew that if he tried to lie, she would know. They were long past the time for deception. “The others are looking for you right now.”
“And what did you plan on doing with me once you found me?”

Truthfully, Gibson hadn’t really thought that far ahead. He hadn’t really expected to be the one to find her, as silly as that had been. “I suppose, we would have tried to have a conversation like you and I are having now,” he said. “And if that didn’t work, then we would have attempted to subdue you.”

“Does the name Klein mean anything to you?” Sevard asked, cocking her head ever so slightly to the right.

Klein had been the cover Collins was to use at the banquet. So he must have spoken to her then, at the very least. Gibson desperately hoped he and Farrier and Simone were still alive, but he couldn’t make himself ask the question.

“That’s not his real name,” Gibson replied, forcing himself to remain calm as he spoke. He suddenly felt as if he were trapped in the compartment with a wild animal, frightened and fuelled by primal drives. Whatever had happened at the hotel had left its mark on Sevard. One misstep, and Gibson had no doubt that she would act to save herself without thinking of the consequences first. His threat held little power against the sway of her own survival instincts. “But yes, I know the man you’re referring to.”

“He tried to kill me,” Sevard said.

“Did he?” The sound of the rain against the windows grew louder, rapping a sharp staccato tempo against the glass. But neither Gibson nor Sevard tore their eyes away.

Sevard remained silent in the wake of Gibson’s question. Another beat passed. “There was a woman with him. She said they were working for a man named Leclair. Do you know him?”

“Yes.”

“So you work for him as well?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s the one who sent you after me?”

Gibson nodded. To her credit, Sevard showed no visible reaction upon receiving this news. Whatever her emotional reaction to the knowledge that her brother was alive and searching for her—if she even knew that Leclair was her brother—she revealed nothing of it.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“More or less.”

“He told you?” Her voice quirked up a half-step in surprise.

“Enough,” Gibson admitted.

“Typical,” Sevard replied with a short huff of amused exasperation—or perhaps exasperated amusement; it was hard to tell which emotion ruled the other.

That was perhaps the most obvious similarity between Sevard (or rather, Maxine, as Gibson suspected Sevard wasn’t her real name, just as Leclair wasn’t his) and her brother, the ability to suppress almost every trace of emotion. There was very little else about them that they appeared to
share, particularly in appearance. They didn’t even have the same colour eyes.

“You’re half-siblings?” Gibson guessed. He wondered what Tommy and Alex were doing while he sat here having this conversation with Maxine. He wondered how long it would take them to find him, and whether she was banking on that outcome, planning to shoot all three of them in one fell swoop.

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

“You’re a Jew,” Gibson replied quickly, drawing in a short breath between sentences. “Leclair isn’t.”

Maxine stared at him, thumbing the trigger of her pistol. “That’s a bold accusation,” she said with a smile, but Gibson could see the tension in the lines around her mouth.

“It’s not an accusation,” he replied, reaching into his shirt to reveal the pendant he wore around his neck. “I’m the one who decoded your notes for Leclair,” Gibson told her, watching as her eyes honed in on the glint of gold between his fingers.

“I see,” she said.

“That’s it?”

“Well, what did you expect?”

Gibson wasn’t sure of the answer to that. There hadn’t been much of a community for him or his sister back in Belfort, even less so when he was with his father, who had abandoned faith and family in one fell swoop. Perhaps that wasn’t the right way to look at it, but at the time, as a child, that’s all Gibson had seen. His sister crying, his father…oblivious, and Gibson stuck in the middle. He was always stuck in the middle of things, it seemed, destined to be an intermediary, a human bridge. He was doing it even now, bringing Leclair back to his sister, when Gibson couldn’t even send a letter to his own.

“I thought I’d understand,” Gibson answered finally.

Maxine let out another sigh of amusement and set the gun aside on the bench next to her. She reached into her purse with her hands free and pulled out a silver tin of cigarettes and a lighter. She placed a cigarette in her mouth with an inquisitive arch of her eyebrows as she stared at Gibson.

“I’d offer you one as well,” she said, “but your companion, the blond, he didn’t seem to enjoy them. So why bother with the waste?”

Gibson didn’t respond.

Maxine breathed in deeply and exhaled, blowing out rings of smoke from her red-stained lips. “So what is it exactly you plan to save me from?”

“Yourself,” Gibson replied, unable to restrain himself from the instinctive answer.

“So I look like I need saving to you? I think I’m doing quite all right,” she said mockingly, “for a Jew. I assume you’ve been living in squalor for who knows how long, waging a futile war against a regime that considers you no more threat than a mosquito on the back of an elephant.”

Gibson thought about pointing out that mosquitoes decimated populations, killed thousands in the tropics with disease, but then thought better of it. “You will need our help. You just don’t know it
“I admire your confidence,” she said after taking another long drag. “You have so much spirit still. Have you ever killed someone before?” The tone she used was one that a distant relative might adopt when trying to make conversation after a long period of absence.

“Only when I had to,” Gibson replied. He forced his hands to unclench from around the edge of the bench where he was seated. “To survive.”

“And you don’t think that’s what I’m doing?” Maxine retorted. “Ensuring my own survival?”

“You’d sacrifice thousands—” Gibson began, feeling his blood start to boil.

Maxine didn’t allow him a chance to finish the thought. “Thousands that would die regardless in a war that the Soviets and Churchill have no chance of winning. I’m merely hastening its end.”

Gibson was speechless. Nothing Leclair had told him had prepared him for this. Despite all knowledge to the contrary, Gibson had fully expected to lay out his story and have Maxine jump on board without hesitation. But his trump card, Leclair’s identity, had already been played to ill-use. He didn’t know where to go from here. All he could do was kill time and hope that Alex and Tommy found him.

“How old are you?” Maxine asked. When Gibson didn’t answer, she flashed her eyes and moved her hand toward the pistol at her hip.

“Twenty-four,” he said.

She hummed. “Old enough to know better.”

“Better than what?”

“Than to think that just because we come from the same place that we should die in the same place too.” Her eyes were cold.

Jew or not, they didn’t come from the same place, Gibson decided. “I don’t see you trying to stop it,” Gibson replied, referring to the Third Reich’s secondary war that the Allies seemed so determined to ignore.

“That’s because I’m not,” Maxine retorted. “You’re a fool if you think you can.”

“I’m just trying to help you,” Gibson said, finally allowing his frustration to get the better of him. “I’m trying to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand,” she said. “It’s as black and white as it can be. If we don’t help ourselves, then who will? The Soviets? The English? They’ve already abandoned us. It won’t be long until they fall as well.”

“What about the Americans?”

Maxine laughed, a deep throaty thing that belied the darkness behind her eyes. “Locked away in their ivory tower. They care for nothing but themselves. And why should they?”

Gibson thought of Tommy, who had refused to sacrifice someone else for his own sake, even a stranger. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Right and wrong have no place in a war,” Maxine said, speaking to him as if he were a child.
“Wouldn’t you rather be on the winning side?”

She’d given up, Gibson realised. She must have given up the second all this started, too caught up in her fantasy of practicality to see the truth. She was blind to descent into madness that felt inevitable to Gibson now, at least throughout Europe. He felt like standing up and shaking her, forcing her to admit her hypocrisy. If America was an ivory tower, Maxine’s reality was a castle wall, shielding her from the brutal reality outside. Gibson wished he could make her see.

The compartment door opened between them. Gibson glanced up to find Alex standing there and for just a moment felt a burst of elation, followed by dismay when behind him were two women who looked even more deadly than Maxine had with a gun in her hand.

The blonde had a knife to Alex’s throat, while the brunette looked between Gibson and Maxine for a brief moment before leaping forward to seize the pistol lying on the opposite bench.

“Don’t move,” the blonde warned in heavily accented French. Slavic, he thought, or maybe something else.

Gibson watched helplessly as the two brunettes wrestled across from him for control of the weapon, and prayed that one of them wouldn’t get a shot off in such close quarters. Finally, the strange woman emerged triumphant and drew back from Maxine with a breathy chuckle as Maxine stared up at her in open contempt, her hair dishevelled and falling into her face.

Gibson glanced between them and the blonde still holding Alex at knifepoint. “You all right?” he asked, hoping the question wouldn’t upset the two unknown variables that had just entered the situation. They reminded him of the Valkyries he’d read about in a book of mythology as a child, one dark, one light, with their weapons of war at hand to take any unfortunate soldiers with them into the afterlife.

“Oh, yeah, mate,” Alex replied sarcastically, the blade at his throat cutting shallowly into his skin as he spoke, leaving a thin string of beaded blood in its wake. “Never better.”
Alex was terrified.

He hadn’t had a drink in so many hours, could feel the rush of blood just under his skin in a way that felt so disturbingly present he almost wanted to claw at it, and his heart felt like it was pounding inside of his skull rather than his chest. There was a faint sheen of sweat glistening on the back of his hand when he lifted it to open the compartment door, then—a quick breath, and a resulting surge of simultaneous disappointment and relief when it opened to reveal the interior, empty.

Alex steeled himself and moved on to the next. There was a woman inside crying. Her hands were blackened with soot and blistered underneath. He mumbled a quick apology and quickly shut the door, not wanting to look at her any longer than he had to.

Things had been easier before the SOE, when it had still felt like it wasn’t his actions that had consequences, but those of a greater force, pulling the strings. Death had weighed less heavily on his conscience in those days, just a fleeting moment of guilt here, a chip at the core of him there, until finally the evacuation had damaged him in such a way that he could no longer ignore it anymore.

It had taken him so much time to take the few steps back from the precipice of his humanity he’d found himself stood upon in those moments when he’d been ready to sacrifice Gibson—and Tommy, even—for his own survival.

Being back in Dunkirk had brought it all back, had made Alex realise just how tired of it he was. He nodded his head against the space between two of the compartments and sucked in a deep breath, struggling to stabilise himself. He couldn’t afford to crack like this, not now. Not when there was so much still depending on him.

Alex steadied himself again and opened the next compartment to find two women inside, entangled in an unmistakable embrace. He went red and stumbled back, fumbling with the latch to close the door again, but he wasn’t fast enough.

The woman closer to him, blonde, slightly waifish, put up a hand to stop him. She didn’t appear fazed by the interruption, though her companion seemed a tad ruffled. “Is there something wrong?” she asked slowly.

Alex didn’t like the way that she was looking at him, didn’t like the tension he could see in the other woman’s neck and jaw, her muscles coiled up like a predator readying itself to strike.

He tried to tell himself it was just his frayed nerves making him paranoid and forced a polite smile. “Nothing’s wrong. Just looking for—”

“Krov’,” said the brunette woman suddenly in a language Alex didn’t recognise, cutting him off
before he could ramble through a horseshit explanation for why he’d burst in unannounced on their intimate moment.

The blonde reached out and seized Alex by the jaw with a surprisingly strong grip, her fingers digging painfully into the bone as she jerked his chin up. “Whose blood is this?” she demanded in German, and Alex remembered biting into Katz’s face. Apparently he hadn’t cleaned up as well as he’d thought.

He opted for silence. It was the wrong choice.

“Whose blood?” the brunette demanded, stepping forward to punch Alex solidly in the kidney. He would have doubled over from the pain if the blonde hadn’t been single-handedly keeping him afloat.

Still Alex didn’t answer, his mind moving too fast to conjure up a response. He’d seen the amount of women on the train relative to the few uniformed soldiers on board and had assumed their job would be easier for it. He hadn’t accounted for the women themselves being a threat. To his misfortune.

Women were often overlooked, underestimated. That’s what made them such effective spies.

Alex flung himself backwards, bashing his head into the door to the compartment and earning a long thin scrape along the underside of his jaw for the trouble. He was vaguely aware of the footsteps behind him as he ran down the corridor, a soft dull clump of bare feet against the thin carpet pounding out a rhythm in counter-time to his own frantic pace.

He made it through the door to the next car only to freeze at the sight of Gibson at the other end, slipping away just as a soldier in full uniform turned to follow. Alex had just enough time to curse himself and Gibson both in the forefront of his mind before dashing forward after them.

Alex shoved his way past the scattered bystanders and whooped loudly just as the soldier slipped through the door. It had the desired effect; the man turned to look at Alex instead of Gibson and paused halfway through the door. Alex launched himself into the soldier, sending both of them through the doorway, but when he looked up to survey the next corridor, Gibson was nowhere in sight.

The elbow to the gut was something he should have expected, but Alex had been too focused on Gibson to even think straight. He rolled over onto his back gasping and found the soldier hovering over him the next second, the man’s forearm gradually crushing Alex’s windpipe as he used his own body weight to apply steady pressure.

Alex gurgled weakly, reaching up with feeble hands as he tried desperately to punch the man suffocating him, to claw at his face, his eyes, anything. But the soldier reared back just as soon as Alex lifted his hands, moving his head just out of reach. Alex dug his fingers into the man’s arms instead, hoping the pain would make him let off, but the soldier didn’t so much as flinch.

Alex watched as a shadow descended over his vision and then there was a flash of lavender. Suddenly the pressure against Alex’s throat lessened, and when enough oxygen had returned to his brain that he could see again, he looked up to find the blonde woman from before standing behind the soldier, a blade coming through his throat. She retracted it quickly and cleaned it with the sleeve of her coat, leaving the soldier’s body to flump down unceremoniously on top of Alex.

He rolled it off with a grunt, only to find the blade at his own neck the moment he was free.

“Who are you?” the blonde woman demanded, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. The darker-haired
woman was standing behind her and opened her mouth to say something to the other, drawing her attention away from Alex for a second.

He started to move away, but managed to scoot back only an inch or so before the tip of the knife in the blond woman’s hand was digging threateningly into the hollow of his clavicle.

“Don’t move,” she warned him.

Alex could tell from her tone that he wouldn’t receive a second chance. He watched from his position on the floor while the two resumed their conversation, or argument, whatever it was. The blonde kept shaking her head whilst the brunette pointed down the corridor, in the direction Gibson had gone.

It wasn’t hard to guess that whatever they were discussing, it had something to do with him. When the brunette stepped forward to go past, Alex reached out and grabbed her ankle to stop her.

“He’s not with her,” he pleaded, even as she kicked out of his grasp. “Nous avons la Résistance,” he called out desperately in the wake of her leaving footsteps.

She didn’t turn. The remaining woman hauled Alex up by the collar of his stolen jacket and turned him round to face her. She was tall, almost eye level in bare feet, and as Alex had already learned—deceptively strong.

This time Alex didn’t attempt to run, but instead allowed the woman to pull him into an empty compartment. She didn’t close the door behind them.

“Who are you?” she asked again, looking Alex up and down. “You don’t look like Heer,” she pronounced with no small measure of derision. Alex supposed she was entitled to that judgment of his appearance, considering how bedraggled and dirty he must have looked after everything that had happened that evening.

“What is your friend doing?” he asked in turn, deflecting. It took everything in his power not to linger on the word ‘friend’ after what he’d seen in their compartment when he’d interrupted.

“Answer the question.”

“I already told you,” Alex replied. “I’m with the French Resistance.”

The look the woman gave him made it clear she wasn’t buying it. “Sit down,” she said, waiting until Alex had obeyed before sticking her head out through the compartment doorway to peer back down the corridor.

“What are you looking for?” Alex asked.

“Shut up.”

“Is it Sevard? Because in that case—”

The woman whirled around before he had a chance to finish, fire in her eyes. “What do you know about Sevard?”

“Probably as much as you do, I’d wager,” Alex retorted with a sour smile.

The woman cast one last glance out into the corridor before stepping back inside the compartment and closing the door behind her, leaving it cracked just a sliver. Alex could see the dead man’s boot
through the tiny space and tore his eyes away, focusing instead on the woman standing over him. “I think you’d best tell me what you know,” she said.

So Alex did. He told her everything, from the evacuation to the SOE, ending with why they’d been sent back to Dunkirk in the first place. He didn’t feel like it could much hurt at this point. Whatever these women were here to do, it was clear they weren’t working for the Germans, and Alex was scared—more than he cared to admit—that they would find and kill Gibson if he didn’t manage to convince them that they were all on the same side.

“So you’re here to kill her, as well.”

Alex hesitated. “Well, no. Not exactly.”

The blonde gave him a sharply expectant look, but before he could explain further, the door to the compartment slid open to reveal her brunette companion, pink-cheeked and a bit breathless. “I think I found her,” she told the blonde, who glanced between the brunette and Alex before replying.

“What about him?” she asked.

“Bring him,” the brunette said.

The blonde tugged at Alex’s arm, forcing him to stand up, but once he’d done so, he dug his heels in, refusing to move any farther. “What about my friend?”

“The Frenchman?”

Alex held his breath and nodded, bracing himself for the worst.

The brunette looked briefly at the blonde before answering. “It sounds like he’s in there with Sevard.” She followed the statement with something that sounded like a question, directed toward the blonde, who answered in brief. Neither looked at Alex while they conversed but he could guess that they were discussing the validity of his story, now brought into question by Gibson’s perceived familiarity with their target.

“Let’s go,” the brunette said finally, in German again.

Alex wondered if either spoke English or if it would be safe to try and warn Gibson that way if it came down to it. But then again, they seemed like the type to take any attempt at obfuscation as a threat, and Alex assumed they would treat it as much. He decided to continue to play along, hoping a better course of action would find him, at the very least, before Tommy had a chance to get pulled in.

Alex’s cooperation wasn’t enough for the blonde, however, as the moment he stepped out into the corridor ahead of her, he found himself with a blade at his throat once again.

“Is this really necessary?” he asked as he was marched between them he was being taken to meet the firing squad. And for all he knew, that’s exactly what was about to happen. Nothing had given Alex any indication that either of the women should be trusted, regardless of their similar goals, and as much as he wanted to let them kill Sevard as they clearly intended to do.

They walked up the still-empty corridor to a door near the end. The brunette woman opened it without ceremony to reveal Sevard and Gibson sitting inside, as if having a casual conversation. Gibson’s eyes connected with his for a brief second before his face fell.

There was a pistol lying to the side of where Sevard was sat. Her fingers twitched toward it just barely before the brunette with Alex surged forward to snatch the gun out of Sevard’s reach.
“Don’t move,” said the blonde from behind him. Her French wasn’t nearly as good as her German, Alex noted.

The brunette wrestled with Sevard for a moment for control of the gun, the former eventually coming out of it triumphant, a sneer pulling at her mouth as she stepped away from Sevard.

“You all right?” Gibson asked suddenly, drawing Alex’s attention back to him instead.

The blonde’s knife was still cutting into Alex’s neck, the blade stinging a bit as he answered. “Oh, yeah, mate. Never better.” He was still weighing the consequences of trying to communicate to Gibson as best he could the situation they were in, that the two women were there specifically to kill Sevard—but hadn’t yet settled on a decision when the brunette cocked the pistol in her hand and pointed it at Sevard.

She vocalized something to her companion, but didn’t fire.

Alex didn’t like that they had slipped into Russian again, and he especially didn’t like the way their eyes surveyed every inch of the compartment as they spoke, cold and calculating.

“Alex, are they—”

“Shut up,” Alex told Gibson, who apparently had just come to the same conclusion he had, that the two women were likely planning to kill Sevard and then Gibson and himself, just to be rid of a mess.

The blonde’s grip on Alex’s arm grew tighter, and that was enough warning that when the brunette turned instead to point the gun at Gibson, Alex was ready. He flung his head back into the blonde’s, ignoring the heat of the knife drawing shallowly across his neck as his skull cracked against the woman’s nose. He lifted his hands to grab the blonde’s wrist, for leverage, and kicked out as hard as he could.

His boot thudded against the brunette’s hand with a dull smack and the pistol went flying into the window. It fell uselessly onto the floor, a spiderweb crack left to mark its impact.

Gibson and Maxine went for it first, but Alex and the brunette were right behind, all four scrambling for the floor to try to wrestle for possession of the weapon. Alex didn’t make it far.

A strangled scream tore out of Alex’s throat.

It wasn’t until he looked down at his wrist to find the blonde woman’s blade sticking out of it—sticking straight through it—that he fully registered just what had happened. He slumped back against the wall, watching as though not fully attached to his own body as Gibson and the brunette woman both turned to look at him, giving Sevard all the chance she needed to rise above the scuffle with the gun in her hand.

Sevard lifted her hand, aiming down at the brunette woman who was still slowly getting to her feet when the shot went off. There was a flash of movement just as she pulled the trigger, Gibson jumping up to stop her.

It wasn’t until the dust had settled, literally, that Alex understood the hole in the ceiling of the compartment had come from the gun in Sevard’s hand, and that Gibson had jerked her hand up away from one of the two women who had just tried to kill him and wrenched the gun away in the aftermath.

Alex used his good hand to push himself up into a standing position, swaying weakly with his right hand tucked into the jacket, out of sight.
“The hell do you think you’re…?” Alex started to ask before recognising the weariness in Gibson’s expression as a reflection of his own. Tommy had had his effect on him, it seemed, and perhaps Tommy was right.

Now weaponless, Sevard fell back against the window, looking like all the life had gone out of her.

There was a beat of silence, and then a commotion on the other side of the closed door to the compartment as footsteps filtered in. The blonde woman turned and latched it without a second’s hesitation before turning to her companion with a quiet word. The brunette nodded and gestured to the window.

“If you don’t mind?” she said.

Alex didn’t understand at first, but then Sevard moved, almost mechanically, out of the way, exposing the cracked glass. The brunette wrapped up her fist in her coat and struck the fault twice as banging started just outside the door.

“Frau Sevard?” a tinned voice shouted in. “We heard a gunshot; you need to open the door.”

Alex watched without blinking as the brunette methodically eliminated any excess glass from around the window frame before gesturing to the blonde to move over to her. “I tell you this as a courtesy,” she said to Gibson, presumably because she now owed him her life, and then some, if you factored in her own attempt at killing him. “There are SS headed to Lille to arrest Sevard as soon as you arrive,” she continued. “Those soldiers outside the door—” She paused, her eyes connecting with Sevard’s for a brief moment. “They are not on her side.”

With that, she helped the blonde slip out the window and followed her, leaving Gibson, Sevard, and Alex sat in the compartment with another enemy at their backs, just on the other side of a thin wooden panel.

“What did she mean?” Gibson asked, scrunching up his eyebrows in confused panic even as the door rattled harder behind Alex.

“They’re lying,” Sevard said levelly. “They wanted to kill me.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Alex reminded him wearily. He could see drops of blood hitting the floor from underneath his coat, but he didn’t think Gibson had noticed yet. He planned to keep it that way.

Gibson looked from the door to Sevard, and then to the open window. “You should go and find Tommy,” he said.

“What about you?”

Gibson stared at him sadly. “One of us has to stay”

Alex shook his head. “Leave her.” Somewhere in a distant corner of his mind, he was aware of the door at his back splintering, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. “Come with me, just…forget about her. We don’t have to do this.”

“I do.”

The rain streaming in through the broken window reminded Alex of holes in a sinking ship, of desperately trying to keep afloat long enough to escape. It reminded him of leaving Gibson behind.
“I lived through you dying once already. And I can’t do it again.”

“Not even for Tommy?”

“You’re more of a fool than you look if you think Tommy and I could ever make it without you.”

Gibson didn’t respond. The noise behind the door was louder now and Alex knew it wouldn’t hold much longer.

“We’re coming back for you,” he promised.

“I know.”

Alex didn’t know how to say goodbye and he didn’t want Gibson to see the knife still embedded in his wrist so he stood there for just a second longer and looked at him, memorising him as best he could before he squeezed himself out the window onto the narrow catwalk that lined the train car. He lingered long enough to watch as the soldiers flooded into the compartment, seizing both Gibson and Sevard, despite her protest that the two mysterious women who had attempted to warn them were lying.

Alex crept forward toward the front of the cars, looking for another way in. He wasn’t expecting to find Tommy already perched outside the foremost passenger carriage, looking just as bedraggled as he’d been when they’d first gone in.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“Got spotted,” Tommy grumbled. “You find her?”

“Gibson did,” Alex replied, sparing him the gruesome details. “He wants us to meet up with Collins and Farrier and then find him in Lille.”

Tommy looked bewildered. “Why would he want that? Dunkirk’s probably twenty miles back now and we don’t even know where they are.”

Alex opened his mouth, intending to come up with a placating lie, but then shut it again almost immediately. “Something happened,” he said quickly, all-too aware of the fact that every second they stayed on the train they were getting closer to Lille and further from Dunkirk. “There were these two Russian spies, these two women….” He was losing the plot, his mind growing fuzzier as he tried to explain. “Gibson got captured, same with Sevard. They think she betrayed them or something.”

“Well, we can’t just leave him!”

“I don’t intend to,” Alex replied.

It took a moment for that to sink in. “No…” Tommy protested. “No, you’re not—”

“Find Collins and Farrier,” Alex instructed, ignoring Tommy’s feeble arguing. “If they have any sense, they should be on their way to us already, but at the very least you can follow the tracks back to Dunkirk. If you can’t find them, or something goes wrong, go to the evacuation and tell Peter what happened.”

“I’m not letting you do this,” Tommy said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Alex stared at him sadly and then looked past him, out into the field where the moonlight was glistening on the wet grass. “I’m sorry,” he said, and then shoved Tommy off.
He watched as the boy’s body hit the ground and bounced, rolling with the inertia of the train for a few seconds before finally coming to a stop. Alex held his breath, waiting until he saw Tommy uncrumple himself, and then as he looked out past the end of the train, he saw lights in the distance.

Another train, he wondered, before realising it was a silly thought. No, headlamps. A car. He climbed up to the top of the carriage, trying to maintain a view of Tommy for as long as possible. It was enough to give him a glimpse of a familiar cargo truck rolling up alongside the tracks before stopping just shy of Tommy. He could make out a slim figure crossing the remaining distance and he prayed that it was who he hoped it was.

And then the train turned back into a copse of trees, erasing the scene from his sight. Alex slowly laid back against the cold metal with his arm tucked up against his chest, not sure anymore if the dampness spreading across his shirt was rainwater or blood. Drops splashed against his cheek, his neck, or maybe they were tears. Maybe it wasn’t raining at all anymore, and Alex simply couldn’t tell.

He wondered, if he died here, what they would tell his father. Would anyone call him a hero? Would his father even be proud? Did it even matter?
Chapter Notes

Only 2 more chapters left! After finishing I will probably take a bit of a break from this particular fic verse for a little while but I will still keep writing and posting on here, so I hope you'll indulge me! In the event I stray outside Dunkirk (which I probably will), I'll try to make sure any longer fics are readable to those not in the fandom as if they were original fiction instead. And once I am finished with this I will try to clean it up a bit with edits and then make a PDF for Patrons, with both a regular & annotated version.

Some notes about this chapter:

A lot of this is probably inaccurate but I did try to research what I could given the time-frame I have afforded myself. Both the plane & helicopter mentioned are real life models that existed at the time. Most of my knowledge of plane physics comes from GTA V (which is quite realistic for a video game) but I also watched/read a couple accounts of WWII pilots who underwent the process described herein, & I have tried to incorporate that knowledge as best I could.

Enjoy!

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @TerranAlleen (writing updates)

“We’re not going to make it.”

“How close are we?”

“Not close enough.”

Farrier closed his eyes against the words being exchanged between Collins and Simone with him in between, wishing he could block them out just so he could find something to focus on for more than a few seconds at a time. Simone was right, they weren’t going to beat the train to Lille, and if the strays they’d picked up were to be believed, there wouldn’t be much of a window of opportunity once they reached the city to intercept Seward before the SS got her.

There were too many variables to come up with any kind of solid plan, too much unpredictability to account for. Farrier opened his eyes and watched as Simone stared at the tracks ahead with unwavering focus before shifting his own attention to Collins and Tommy sitting in the backseat across from the two Russians.

Looking at the four of them packed in like sardines in a tin, Farrier felt uncomfortably as if he’d found himself on a begrudging family road trip—made even more uncomfortable by the thought that he might never have that experience himself with Henry. His eyes drifted over to Collins again and he felt suddenly ill.

They spotted the train again a few minutes later, but Simone was already shaking her head when
Farrier turned to look at her. “We’re too close to the station,” she said. “I could get maybe one of you on, but….”

*But it wouldn’t make a difference.* Gibson and the others had been their best chance at getting Maxine off the train before it reached Lille, but their new additions had seemingly ruined the chances of that. They’d probably have to let the two women loose when they reached Lille. They were deadweight.

Farrier’s breathing quickened as trees gave way to flat fields, sparsely populated by tiny buildings just barely visible in the moonlight.

“There’s a road up ahead that goes around to the station,” Simone said, indicating it with a flick of her fingers. “If we cut left now we might be able to get ahead of disembarking at least.”

Farrier glanced up at the rear of the train, growing larger in his sights, and nodded. “That might be best.” He spoke quietly, as did Simone, not wanting to give anyone who might otherwise protest—namely Collins—a chance to do so until it was already too late.

“What’s happening?” Collins chirped as soon as the lorry began to deviate from its set path, just as Farrier had expected. He twisted round to crane his head between the front seats, trying to get a look at what was beyond the windscreen. “Why’re we changing direction now?”

“We’re coming up on the station,” Farrier told him. “Simone knows another way around.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him, and Collins turned back around, presumably to glare some more at their reluctant allies. Farrier paid them no mind, now singly focused on their proximity to Lille as they approached the road Simone had pointed out, ahead of which he could see the urban bustle steadily growing larger in the distance.

It took them several more minutes to enter the town proper, more still to reach the station, and by the time they did so, the hustle and bustle they’d been expecting was nowhere to be seen.

“Shit,” Farrier muttered to himself as they pulled in as close as they dared before getting out to close the rest of the distance on foot.

It didn’t take more than a glance to realise the train was empty, its passengers long gone.

“Shit,” he said again.

“What do we do now?” Tommy asked helplessly.

“Well, we can’t just go back and tell Leclair we fucked it up,” Collins interjected angrily, as if in the middle of an argument, though no one had suggested anything of the kind.

“Do we have any idea where they’re taking her?” Simone asked, ever the sensible one.

Farrier looked to Tommy, who gave a tiny, almost imperceptible, shake of his head. Collins let out a loud harrumph of frustration and Farrier raised an eyebrow. “We could always ask them,” he pointed out, jerking his head back toward the lorry where they’d left the two Russian spies.

But when they all spun around to look, the back door was hanging wide open, the seats vacant.

“So much for that plan,” Collins remarked with a detectable note of smug superiority.

“I thought you weren’t gonna make it in time.”
They all turned back again to find Alex suddenly standing there on the platform, sopping wet and dripping blood down onto the pavement. Someone behind Farrier let out an audible gasp, and then both Collins and Tommy rushed forward to catch Alex as he came stumbling down toward them.

“What the bleeding hell happened?” Collins exclaimed, his palms slick with blood after lowering Alex onto a barrier, wide enough to sit on, so he could rest.

Farrier moved up cautiously and peeled the corner of Alex’s jacket away to get a look at what was underneath. He hissed at the sight and covered it back up again. “It’s not good,” he said with a sideways glance toward Simone, who frowned and crossed her arms in response.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

Farrier turned back to Alex. “What happened?” he asked instead of answering her. He wanted as much information as he could possibly glean from the boy before making any kind of decision.

“Some bloody Russians on the train,” Alex ground out, his face pinched from pain. “Fucking stabbed me. Gibson made me leave him and Sevard, but I decided to stick around just in case you lot didn’t show.”

“Well, we’re here now,” Farrier pointed out patiently.

“Good thing, too,” Alex continued between laboured breaths. “I overheard some of the SS officers who showed up to arrest Sevard fighting about what to do. Apparently, the trains are delayed ‘cause of the ‘crisis’ that we caused. They wanted to reroute straight to Berlin instead of Vichy. There’s an airfield nearby, I guess. They’re taking her there.”

“And Gibson?” Farrier prodded, half-afraid of the answer.

“Alive,” Alex replied, and Farrier felt a surge of relief. “They think he’s working with her; I expect they’ll try to get information out of him once they reach Berlin.”

“Well, clearly, we can’t let them get that far.”

“And how are we supposed to stop them?” Collins asked.

Farrier shook his head pensively. “Head them off at the airfield? If they’re as unprepared for all this as it sounds—” He gave Alex a pointed look. “—then it should take them some time still to organise transport, especially for that distance.”

“Then how do you suggest we find this airfield?”

“I know where it is,” Simone interjected casually. When the others turned to look at her with surprised expressions, she added, “Well, it’s my business to know these things, isn’t it?” The smugness in her voice was eerily similar to that of Collins when he’d felt he’d outsmarted Farrier in some regard.

“Let’s not waste time, then,” Farrier pronounced. He herded everyone back to the lorry, pulling an odd look from a station attendant lingering near the platform as they passed, but timing was on their side: there was simply no one about at this time of night to hassle them as they piled back into the vehicle.

Collins and Tommy helped Alex over and seated him in the back, taking places next to and across from him as they squeezed in as well. Collins looked mildly surprised when Farrier got in beside Alex as well, but Farrier paid him no mind, taking the boy’s injured wrist in his hands for a closer
inspection as Simone started the engine.

“It doesn’t look like you’re losing too much blood,” Farrier said after his cursory examination. It was an ugly wound, one that wouldn’t heal easily, but at least Alex hadn’t done anything quite so stupid as attempting to pull the stiletto dagger out. “How are you feeling?”

“Like steamed-over shit,” Alex mumbled.

Farrier couldn’t help but chuckle at that, though Collins and Tommy didn’t seem the least bit amused. “All right, hold still for me if you can.” He rummaged quickly through the medical kit they kept on hand, now thoroughly plundered after Collins’s own injury, but still managing to find the most necessary supplies. Namely, a bottle of alcohol, half-filled, and a roll of gauze.

As soon as the alcohol appeared in Farrier’s hand, Tommy snatched up Alex’s good hand in his own, clutching it tightly. Collins leaned over in turn to place steady hands on Alex’s knees. Farrier carefully lifted Alex’s injured wrist and arched an eyebrow. “Ready?”

“No,” Alex replied bluntly.

Farrier doused him anyway, holding onto his wrist like a vice while he thrashed and flailed against the combined strength of the three of them holding him down.

“All right there?” he asked conversationally once it was all over, and Alex was left heaving and sweating against the seat in the aftermath.

“Peachy,” he replied, letting his eyes drift closed.

Farrier smiled slightly and wrapped the gauze around the wound as best he could without removing the source of the trauma, something he knew none of them were even remotely equipped to deal with under the best circumstances. The back of a lorry on a bumpy motor way didn’t exactly qualify. Once it was as secure as he could make it, Farrier had Alex lean forward and used the remainder of the gauze to craft a makeshift sling using Alex’s jacket, effectively rendering his entire arm useless.

“I expect I don’t need to remind you to be careful,” he said, nodding toward the lump now tucked safely within the confines of the coat.

“I’m not staying behind,” Alex said valiantly, and Farrier knew that he wouldn’t be to convince the boy otherwise if he tried.

“I won’t ask you to,” he told him. “But we should figure out what exactly our roles are going to be in all this. We don’t exactly have much to go on, so we’ll have to play most of it by ear.”

“Do we have any weapons left at all?” Collins asked.

“I have a gun,” Alex said hazily.

“How many shots left?”

“Five…?”

Farrier contemplated their options for a moment. “Give it to Tommy, then.”

Tommy looked surprised by the command, but Alex didn’t even blink, simply leaning forward to allow Tommy to take the pistol tucked into his waistband without complaint.

“How much of a head start do they have on us?” Farrier asked Alex. “And how many are there?”
Alex gave an uncertain frown as he considered the questions. “A few minutes at best? But there’s at least a dozen of them. A firefight’s right out.”

He was right about that. One gun with five bullets didn’t give them much a chance even if they weren’t outnumbered.

“If they reach the airfield far enough ahead of us, they could have Sevard and Gibson in holding already by the time we get there,” Collins pointed out, before Farrier had a chance to collect his thoughts enough to formulate a response to Alex. “They might not be easy to find.”

Farrier sighed, rubbed his temples, and glanced back up at Collins with stoic resignation. “Diversion, then?”

“It’s worked before, innit? I’m game for it if you are.” The look on Collins’s face seemed to imply that he’d known Farrier would suggest it; perhaps that he’d wanted him to. It would take Alex and Tommy out of the line of fire if they split up and Collins was always at his best in the midst of utter catastrophe.

“Simone?”

“If you think it’ll work.”

Farrier wasn’t confident that anything they could try would work, but it seemed their best course of action at the moment. “Then we’ll split up,” he said, nodding in Tommy’s direction. “You and Alex try to find Sevard and Gibson. We’ll cover for you however we can manage.”

Tommy didn’t look terribly impressed by the plan, but it was the best Farrier could muster up. They’d just have to wing it.

“We’re almost there,” Simone finally announced some time later.

It was darker now than when they’d been approaching Lille, but up ahead they could see faint lights in the distance, marking the runways. Simone flicked off their headlamps as soon as she’d finished speaking, plunging them into near darkness and continuing on at a much slower pace to accommodate.

It wasn’t much longer before the lights up ahead could be distinctly categorised as stationary and mobile. The SS caravan, Farrier assumed. They’d caught up. That would give Tommy and Alex an advantage, he supposed. Less time to hide away their captives.

They rolled forward another few hundred feet and then stopped. Tommy and Alex looked around in confusion for a moment before finally spotting the caravan ahead at the front gate.

“Should we let them out now?” Farrier pondered.

Simone nodded. “I don’t want to get too close, risk being seen.”

Farrier turned back to Tommy, who was positively shaking in his boots. “Just stay out of sight, all right? So long as you keep a low profile, you’ll be fine. They won’t have gotten far by the time you reach the airfield, and we’ll do our best to clear a path.”

Tommy nodded solemnly in response, and not for the first time, Farrier looked at him and saw a child, a boy who should have been at university bettering himself, not neck-deep in a war that he’d had no say in.
“Good luck, lads,” Farrier told them, watching with an almost melancholic ache as they each embraced Collins in turn—Alex as if he didn’t ever plan to let go, Tommy with a measure of hesitation—before exiting the lorry and disappearing into the night.

Farrier turned his gaze toward the gate again once they were gone, trying to evaluate the caravan’s progress. They were nearly clear now, by the looks of it.

“What’s the plan, then?” Collins asked. “For the diversion?”

“There is no plan,” Simone replied. “I’m playing it by ear.” She slammed her foot down on the accelerator as soon as the caravan was clear of the gate, sending Collins and Farrier flying back. Farrier just barely managed to grab hold of the seat in front of him to avoid colliding with Collins as the lorry shot forward unexpectedly. He continued gripping onto it like a lifeline as Simone sped toward the closing gate, realising just before they reached it that they weren’t going to make it through.

The gate crumpled, sending a shockwave through the lorry and into Farrier’s hands, arms, at the moment of impact, but looking around, none of them seemed to be the worse for wear, and they were in.

Farrier could hear shouting all around them, and the sound of gunfire, but Simone was driving so wildly down the tarmac that he couldn’t make sense of any of it. Floodlights began to illuminate along the exteriors of the hangars, brightening the scenery enough that Farrier could now see the scattered aircraft along the tarmac that Simone was just narrowly avoiding as she weaved along the runway to avoid being hit by the bullets now coming their way.

Farrier’s eyes homed in on a plane near the very end of the runway, away from all the other vehicles, most of which were clearly used for transport rather than combat. But this plane he recognised, and he knew enough to know that a 110 would make for a better diversion than anything else they could come up with.

He tapped Collins to get his attention and gestured toward the fighter, waiting for the flicker of recognition in his eyes before turning to Simone to communicate his new plan.

“Drop us off near that fighter, yeah?” he said, mouth to her ear to make sure she could hear him.

She glanced back as if to check his sanity before nodding. “It’s not going to be much of a stop,” she warned.

Farrier knew that, and steeled himself for it, hoping Collins would be all right with his stitched side. He wrenched the door open and braced himself against it as they neared the plane, offering a hand to Collins. They’d make the leap together.

Simone slowed up some as they approached but didn’t fully apply the brakes until they’d almost collided with the plane itself. She used the momentum from the stop to careen into a sharp turn with the open door facing out, shielded from the scattered gunfire still biting at their heels.

Farrier pulled Collins into him and launched both of them out of the lorry at the apex of the turn. His shoulder hit the ground first with a loud smack and Collins landed almost on top of him, leaving Farrier to absorb most of the shock from the landing.

As they scrambled to their feet, they could make out the general chaos at the other end of the runway, where the German troops were still desperately clambering to organise an assault to deal with the intruders. Farrier didn’t intend to give them the chance.
“I’ll fly, you gun?” Farrier suggested as they made their way toward the fighter.

Collins paused just before they reached it. “You sure?” he said. It was a valid concern; Collins had undoubtedly flown more recently than Farrier, but Farrier still had more experience, and this wouldn’t be a routine flight by any stretch of the imagination.

Farrier arched his eyebrows, and Collins shrugged, acceding to the original plan. They climbed into their respective seats with little time to spare—a bullet cracked the glass of the windscreen only seconds after they’d settled in under the relative safety of the canopy.

“If we make it out of this alive,” Farrier heard Collins muttering to himself as they got strapped in, “I’m gonna have to think about going back to church.”

If Farrier had been worried about his flying being rusty, there was no need. He took to it like his last sortie had been only yesterday instead of more than a year ago, and it wasn’t long before they were fully airborne.

He felt nothing but exhilaration as he dived in on the German forces swarming near the foremost hangars, banking hard so Collins could get in a few shots at them. But the feeling was short-lived.

It felt as if they’d been in the air less than a minute before Farrier felt the tell-tale clattering of bullets striking the fuselage.

“All right, Collins?” Farrier asked.

“Aye.”

It was too dark to make out a smoke trail, but Farrier had been in enough fighters to know when one was toast. It only took one cursory glance at the instruments to determine that if they stayed inside the aircraft much longer, they weren’t going to make it back down to the ground in one piece.

“We’re bailing,” Farrier shouted over his shoulder, already beginning to ascend. They needed as much height as possible if they were going to make a clean jump.

“There’s only one chute!” Collins called out in a panic almost immediately after Farrier jettisoned the canopy.

Farrier felt the low thrum of fear buzzing beneath his skin and forced himself to keep it together. He continued climbing, aware in the back of his mind of Collins struggling to pull himself out of the gunner’s seat and into the cockpit with him as he focused on the stars directly overhead.

This had to be the craziest thing he’d ever done, Farrier found himself thinking as Collins endeavoured to make enough room to belt them together chest-to-chest while Farrier kept them steady. It was perhaps the most daring manoeuvre either of them had ever attempted in their careers, but Farrier forced himself to stay calm, to focus, knowing that one wrong jerk of the stick would send them flying out of the exposed seat prematurely.

Finally, Collins tapped Farrier on the soldier to signal that they were secure, and just in time: the engine sputtered and then went silent.

Farrier inhaled deeply and tapped Collins back against his thigh as a moment’s notice. Then he plunged them straight into an aileron roll, sending them shooting out the top once the plane was fully upside-down.

Farrier was sure that, no matter how many times he was forced to bail—thankfully, not many—he
would never grow accustomed to the sharp swooping feeling of having his stomach fly into his throat immediately upon being jettisoned from the plane. Neither would he ever get used to the abrupt sickening jerk of his chute opening, worsened this time because it wasn’t his chute but Collins’s, and it was now feebly trying to slow the descent of their combined weight as they plummeted toward the ground.

It was a rocky landing. They hadn’t been high enough for a comfortable tandem descent, and they came in faster than Farrier would have liked. He braced himself as best he could and felt the ground slam into him, tucking and rolling to make up for the additional force.

He lay on the tarmac for a minute gasping for breath as Collins struggled to unbuckle them. Collins pulled him up into a seated position right there on the runway as soon as they were free, his hands skimming over every inch of exposed skin to assess his injuries.

“Just a little road rash,” Farrier coughed out. “I’m fine.”

“Shut up,” Collins said, and then kissed him soundly, leaving Farrier breathless again for an entirely different reason.

But there was little time to celebrate their survival.

Farrier quickly got to his feet, using Collins for support, and gazed out at the mess of destruction they’d left. Up ahead he could see the flash of gunfire coming from one of the aircraft sitting on the runway, and just as soon as he’d spotted it, Collins pointed toward it.

“That’s our way out,” Collins said, and when Farrier squinted to get a better look, he could just make out the shape of Simone crouched next to the massive helicopter, firing back at the Germans from cover.

They hurried over to her, using whatever debris left in their path as a shield from stray bullets.

“I’m surprised you survived,” Simone said by way of greeting once they reached her.

“Nice to see you too,” Farrier replied, crouching down beside her while Collins bypassed them both and climbed straight into the helicopter with no warning.

Simone’s face softened. “I’m glad you made it, but it was still stupid.”

Farrier had to give her that one. She had a rifle on her, German-issue, and she was shooting back at the soldiers aiming at them every so often, but it was a fight she would lose if they stayed there much longer. Farrier could just make out the small wave of soldiers steadily closing in on them from the gate.

“Any sign of Alex or Tommy?” he asked.

“Not yet—” she started to say, but almost as soon as she opened her mouth, Farrier caught sight of a gaggle of human figures lumbering toward them from out of the mouth of one of the nearby hangars.

“Fuck,” he said, though inwardly he was relieved to at least have confirmation that all four of them were alive and still moving under their own power. “Cover us, yeah?” he remarked to Simone before darting off toward them, not bothering to give her a chance to respond.

Collins had managed to shoot out a number of the flood lights during their ill-fated flight, giving Farrier enough cover to reach the others without being seen by the German forces, who were still distracted with Simone. But they were running out of time. As Farrier drew closer, he could see that
Gibson had Sevard at gunpoint, and that neither looked the worse for wear, but that Tommy was practically supporting all of Alex’s weight next to them, and that Alex himself looked on the verge of collapse.

Farrier lent his own support on the opposing side and they hurried the rest of the way over to the helicopter where Simone and Collins were waiting.

“I hope to God one of you knows how to fly this thing,” Simone said as she helped Farrier load the others in.

“I do,” Collins chirped from the pilot’s seat in the cockpit. Farrier heard the blades start to whir overhead. “Everyone in?”

Farrier kept hold of Alex while they started their gradual ascent, his eyes connecting with Gibson’s weary ones from across the cargo-hold. He felt Alex’s head loll onto his shoulder and glanced down at the boy in alarm to find that his eyes had rolled into the back of his head. He’d passed out. Farrier quickly peeled away the corner of Alex’s jacket to find the gauze wrapped around the boy’s wrist stained with blood and his mouth went bone-dry.

If they didn’t get him help soon, Alex was going to die.
IV. Tommy

Chapter Notes

Penultimate chapter! I’ll upload the epilogue here on Thursday.

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Tommy clung to Alex’s hand like a lifeline as they sped toward the airfield, afraid that if he let go he’d find himself spinning into the dark chasm at the back of his mind that he could feel waiting there, beckoning to him. His whole body ached from the impact of hitting the ground after Alex had pushed him off the train, but he wasn’t angry, just relieved. And worried, because despite the fact that Alex had made it back to them, Gibson was still missing and the window of opportunity to rescue him seemed to be quickly closing.

The fingers curled around the pistol Farrier had given him were slick with sweat. None of them were ready for what was about to happen, but Tommy felt even more ill-prepared than the others.

Tommy felt detached from his physical body as they quickly approached the airfield, like all his nerves had been severed somehow and his consciousness was floating in a void, aware of sight and sound as if filtered through a veil. And then before he knew it, they were being let out ahead of the others a few hundred yards from the gate, Alex stumbling onto the grass and then standing there wobbling as he waited for Tommy to join him.

“I’ll take point,” Alex said between gasping breaths. “Just cover me.”

“Are you sure?” Tommy asked. He could barely see Alex even with the full moon overhead, but his silhouette was still visible enough, as was the useless lump comprising his right arm, securely tucked into the sling Farrier had made for him.

Alex snorted in irritation and just replied, “C’mon,” before lumbering off into the night.

They crossed the open field in just minutes, managing to slip in under the wire mesh surrounding the place just as the caravan they’d been following slowly rolled past them, causing Tommy to hold his breath and freeze as the beams from the headlamps swept down the runway. They laid there in the grass for a long moment as they watched the soldiers trickling out of the grouping of vehicles, followed by two figures with sacks pulled over their heads, who were summarily marched into the building by two of the soldiers while the rest remained outside.

There was a loud crash to their left and the squeal of tyres against the tarmac. Tommy turned his head at the same time as the soldiers in front of them, and caught sight of the lorry they’d formerly been passengers in careening down the runway. It was only a few seconds before the Germans scattered and gave chase, clearing the way for Tommy and Alex to gain entrance to the building.

Alex moved more quickly than Tommy would have expected him to, but with the gait of someone ill-suited to the action. It was clear that the burst of energy Alex had managed to dig out of himself to accomplish the task ahead of them wasn’t sustainable. There was a limited window in which they needed to find Gibson and Sevard.
Tommy tensed in anticipation as they slipped in through the doors Gibson and Sevard had gone through, but inside they were faced with nothing but an empty corridor, lit from overhead with a line of dim lamps that cast barely enough illumination to navigate by. There were a number of doors on either side of the corridor. Alex gestured to the left with his good hand. “Check that side, I’ll get the other.”

Tommy didn’t much favour the prospect of taking his eyes off of Alex for even a second, but then decided that time was a more pressing issue for them after catching a glimpse of Alex’s glazed eyes in the lamplight.

There were tiny slots in the doors that made it easy enough to peek inside without fully opening the doors themselves, though the sound of the latch sliding was loud enough that it would alert anyone inside. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, each of the rooms was empty.

“Keep going, I suppose?” Tommy said to Alex, but before either of them could take another step forward, a shadow drifted into the junction where the corridor ended and met the next. They both plastered themselves into the nearest doorways, shielding their bodies in the shadows as best they could while they waited for the soldier to pass.

Tommy didn’t dare breathe until the man was gone from sight, but he remained wary upon emerging from his makeshift hiding place to peek out into the corridor. He signalled to Alex that it was clear and waited for the other boy to move up ahead again.

It became readily noticeable to Tommy as they inched down the corridor, even darker than the last, that Alex was starting to flag a bit, his steps less sure than they’d been just moments before. And as Tommy crept closer, he could hear Alex’s breaths, shallow and winded. He wasn’t so sure now that Alex would be able to make it out of the building, let alone out of the aerodrome itself.

Suddenly Alex stopped and backpedalled, nearly bowling Tommy over. “What—?” Tommy started to ask but Alex clapped a hand over his mouth to stop him and gestured just ahead. At the end of the corridor, they could see another shadow angled toward them from the adjoining hallway, but this one was stationary. They both stood there dead silent for nearly a minute, waiting to see if the person it belonged to would move, but when nothing changed, Alex finally let go of Tommy and slowly moved ahead.

Tommy followed close behind, not wanting to abandon Alex even if the both of them together stood more chance of being caught. Tommy winced as Alex craned his head past the wall to get a better look. He glanced for a second and then looked back at Tommy, holding up two fingers.

Tommy yanked him back a few feet, ignoring the disgruntled expression on Alex’s face at being manhandled. “We can’t take on two of them,” Tommy said in a whisper, though the fact that there were two guards stationed in that corridor likely meant that they had located the place where Gibson and Sevard had been taken.

Alex looked back at Tommy like he was an idiot. “You have a gun,” he hissed, gesturing forcefully toward the object in question. “Use it.”

“I can’t shoot them both!” Tommy pointed out.

Alex sighed, and his eyes fluttered closed. It was nearly a minute before he opened them again. “Fine then. But I don’t—” A loud bang from outside the building stopped him in his tracks.

Both Tommy and Alex froze as the guards around the corner started murmuring to each other, the words too distorted to make out, although Tommy could guess that they were debating whether to
leave their post to check on the mayhem outside.

“Look,” Alex said seriously once the noise had subsided again, “I can get them away from the door, and then you—”

“No!” Tommy retorted, a bit too loudly. They paused again to see if the guards had noticed, but the two were still occupied in conversation about the mayhem taking place outside. “No,” Tommy amended in a softer voice. “You can barely walk, I’m not letting you run off to play bait.”

Alex looked ready to argue, but didn’t have the chance. The next series of sounds coming from outside were accompanied by an explosion that rattled the building. Tommy reached for Alex instinctively and clung to him as he dragged them both into one of the unoccupied rooms off the corridor they’d been standing in.

The door closed just in time for them to hear footsteps on the other side, the sound of the guards running to find out just what the hell had happened. Tommy was keen on that too, but it would have to wait until they rescued Gibson first. He just hoped that whatever Farrier and the others were up to, it wouldn’t involve bringing the whole place down on their heads.

“They’re gone, let’s go,” Alex urged, far sooner than Tommy would have liked. The two soldiers had just passed them only seconds ago, but Alex was right. Time was precious.

Tommy pushed open the door slowly and peeked out. Once he was satisfied the way was clear, he pulled Alex back out into the corridor despite his continued protests and together they hurried down the hallway to the door just around the corner.

Alex reached for the handle first and gave it a valiant jiggle. “Locked,” he said.

Tommy had already tucked the pistol into his trousers and gotten down on his knees. He pulled a pin out of his boot and carefully sliding it into the keyhole. It had been Maggie, oddly enough, who had taught them how to pick locks when they’d first gone to live at the Cottage for training under Collins’s supervision. Tommy had turned out the best at it for whatever reason. Peter had said it was a matter of patience—Collins and Alex were both too easily frustrated by the meticulous task. Tommy worked deliberately, aware of each passing second as if it were an hour, ready to sock Alex in the nearest extremity if he so much as uttered a word that might distract him.

For once, Alex held his tongue, and then the lock clicked. They were in.

It was dark inside the room, but Tommy could make out the shapes of desks on either side, and at the very back next to a filing cabinet, were two human-shaped lumps. Tommy rushed over to them without hesitation and heard Alex’s footsteps following with a halting rhythm.

Gibson and Sevard were both tied and gagged, but the bags had been taken off their heads, revealing a gash just above Gibson’s eyebrow that was bleeding profusely but looked shallow enough that Tommy’s could file away his concern for the moment. Sevard appeared none the worse for wear.

Tommy fought to undo the ties around Gibson’s wrists, leaving Sevard’s intact for the time being, as Alex took care of their gags. Looking into Gibson’s eyes, with their faces only inches away, Tommy thought that if Sevard hadn’t been there he would have kissed Gibson right then and there.

“You all right?” he asked quietly.

Gibson answered with a curt nod. There wasn’t time for a drawn-out reunion, so Tommy helped him up and then Sevard in turn.
“I’ve got her,” Gibson said after Tommy cast a furtive look in Sevard’s direction.

“All right.” Tommy turned away from him to assess Alex’s condition. It only took a single glance to determine that he wasn’t faring well. “Come on,” Tommy started to say as he reached out to Alex, only to have the other boy shove him away.

“I’m fine,” Alex said gruffly as he marched toward the door.

It swung open before he reached it, revealing a man who occupied almost every square inch of space, totally eclipsing the light coming into the room. Alex stopped dead in his tracks, but didn’t have enough time to react further before the man’s arm came swinging around, batting Alex out of his path as if he weighed nothing at all.

He smashed into one of the desks, crumpling into a heap on the floor and groaning. Tommy looked from Alex’s huddled form to the giant of a man steadily moving toward the rest of them, and stood frozen with indecision before he finally remembered the pistol tucked into his belt.

He fumbled with the gun, taking barely a second to aim before pulling the trigger. There was a loud bang and then the man in front of them stopped moving as a dark stain began to spread across the fabric covering his abdomen. It was a few seconds before his body seemed to register what had happened and then he dropped too, mirroring Alex from just a few feet away.

Tommy started to run forward, instinct demanding that he check to see if the man was all right—but a hand around his elbow stopped him. “Let me,” Gibson said gently as he pried the pistol from Tommy’s grasping fingers.

Tommy wasn’t expecting the gunshot that followed, nor the sound of the man’s body thudding to the floor with a hole in the centre of his forehead. Even Alex looked shocked by the scene, and Tommy suddenly felt all the elation at reuniting with Gibson flush out of him, leaving him cold instead.

The logical part of him knew why Gibson had done it, but the less rational portion of his mind couldn’t comprehend what he’d just borne witness to, and Tommy found himself stepping away from Gibson without realising.

Tommy redirected his steps toward Alex instead in the seconds of silence that followed Gibson’s shot. The other boy was crouched with his back to the desk, his knees tucked up into his chest, protectively shielding his bad arm. When Tommy lent him a hand up, he groaned and then stumbled upon standing, almost toppling over into Tommy.

“What are you—?” Tommy asked as he peeled away the corner of Alex’s jacket to peek at his arm, only to stop after seeing the gauze wrapped around the blade still embedded in his wrist soaked in scarlet. “We need to go,” he said in an urgent tone to Gibson. He wrapped an arm around Alex and ignored his feeble complaints as they limped past the body at their feet and toward the door.

To his credit, Gibson knew how to move. At first, Tommy was worried that Sevard might try to escape or at least slow them down, but aside from the fact that it would be suicide for her to even try in their current circumstances, Gibson kept a firm guiding hand on her shoulder, the other holding Tommy’s pistol against the small of her back as they navigated the corridors leading out of the building while a cacophony sounded from outside.

Tommy’s feet stuttered when they reached the final corridor, only to have Gibson abruptly turn and go the opposite direction. “The entrance is that way,” Tommy called out to him.

“I know,” was Gibson’s faint reply.
Tommy sighed and spun around to follow him, hoping to God that Gibson knew what he was doing. They filed down a narrow passageway and then emerged at the back of a hangar, at the other end of which Tommy could see a massive helicopter and intermittent muzzle-flashes that accompanied the sound of gunfire.

Tommy stopped and saw Gibson do the same, but then one of the figures standing next to the helicopter suddenly broke away from the other and started toward them, and it wasn’t long before Tommy realised it was Farrier. He breathed out a sigh of relief and nudged Gibson forward.

“You should go on ahead,” Tommy said in Gibson’s ear, after trying to get Alex to move and mostly failing.

“I’m not going to leave you,” Gibson replied firmly.

Tommy nodded and they continued their slow trek together across the expanse of the vacant hangar while Farrier rushed over to meet them.

Tommy was practically dragging Alex along by the time Farrier made it over to them to help, and then the two of them were essentially just carrying Alex between them, his booted toes skidding across the ground as they pulled him toward the helicopter.

Simone was waiting there for them when they finally reached the hulking metal vehicle. “I hope to God one of you knows how to fly this thing,” she griped as she steadied Alex so Farrier could lift him inside.

“I do,” Collins replied just as the blades above them began to spin. “Everyone in?” He craned his head to get a look himself before taking off.

Alex was squished between Tommy and Farrier in the back of the transport helicopter, his body limp and lifeless like a doll. Tommy stared helplessly as Alex’s eyes suddenly fluttered closed, a heavy sigh exiting his lips as he lost consciousness.

Tommy started to unbuckle himself but a warning glance from Farrier stopped him. “Don’t do that,” he said firmly. Farrier tucked Alex’s jacket back into place after a brief examination of the wound and signalled to Simone.

“How bad is it?” she asked.

“Bad,” Farrier told her. “Help me with him.”

They both immediately unlatched themselves despite Farrier’s warning for Tommy not to do the same, and carefully laid Alex out on his back. Simone carefully positioned Alex’s legs on Tommy’s lap and gestured for him to take hold of his ankles.

“Keep his feet elevated,” she said seriously.

Tommy nodded to indicate he understood and wished he could do more. His eyes flicked over to Gibson who was staring down at Alex with a similar expression. Sevard was sitting next to him, her eyes closed as if imagining she was somewhere else entirely.

Almost as soon as Alex’s feet had been placed in Tommy’s hands, his eyes suddenly shot open, wide and panicked as he scanned the faces hovering above him. Farrier paid him no mind and continued to pry his wrist from the jacket-sling.

“You need to help Collins navigate to wherever the nearest hospital is,” Farrier told Simone, his calm
voice betraying no hint of underlying anxiety over the bleeding boy in his arms.

Simone shook her head minutely. “We need to get to the liberated zone.”

“We need to get him medical assistance,” Farrier retorted. “He’s going into shock.”

Simone’s cold stare made it clear she wasn’t going to back down. “Vichy is two hours away by air. If we try to land here, he dies anyway.”

Tommy flinched as if her words had struck him like a blow. He averted his eyes as soon as Farrier glanced over at him, not wanting to see the pity in his gaze. He told himself Alex would make it, that he could hold out for two more hours. He had to.

When Tommy looked up again, Simone was gone, and a quick glance confirmed that she had moved into the cockpit to join Collins. Alex’s eyes were closed again, but the pained look on his face conveyed that he was still conscious, for the moment at least. Tommy took a deep breath and steeled himself for the journey that lay ahead.

Alex was bone-white and delirious by the time they landed in a field on the outskirts of Vichy. The sweat pouring off of him made Tommy’s hands slip as he helped Farrier carry him out of the helicopter—dropping him had been a near thing.

They loaded him into the back of a dairy truck Simone and Collins had stolen just as soon as they’d landed, and then Tommy resumed his post at Alex’s feet while they all crammed into the back, waiting for Simone to take them to safety. Tommy watched Alex unwaveringly as they drove, measuring the shallow rise and fall of his chest without fail, even when he felt Gibson’s hand land on his shoulder with a reassuring squeeze.

When they finally arrived at the hospital, Simone took charge, nudging Tommy and Farrier both out of the way even as she gestured to Gibson for help with Alex. “We’ll deal with the doctors,” she said between grunts, Alex’s heavy frame causing her to sag under the weight as they exited the truck. And that was it. No goodbyes exchanged, just the sight of Simone and Gibson all-but sprinting for the doors with Alex propped up between them, and the smallest glimmer of hope that they might not be too late.

A hand came up to cup the back of Tommy’s neck, soothingly, despite it being unexpected. He glanced up to find Farrier looking down at him with a weary expression. “C’mon,” he said, “let’s get cleaned up while we wait.”

There was a hotel almost directly across the street. Farrier walked the four of them there like a mother duck with her ducklings. Sevard was still bound, with a coat tucked over her wrists so as not to attract attention as Farrier got them a room, but Tommy was pretty sure that their bedraggled appearances were attracting enough attention on their own.

Tommy couldn’t help but glance down every so often at the smears of blood staining the palms of his hands orange, and every time, he felt the urge to vomit.

Farrier instructed Tommy to use the washroom first when they got to their room. Tommy wasn’t sure if it was because Farrier could see just how close he was to breaking down in front of the others, but he was grateful for it in any case.

Tommy refused to look at his own reflection in the water-stained mirror and focused instead on methodically washing his hands, scrubbing until they were pink from irritation rather than Alex’s blood. Once he was satisfied that he was as clean as he could get without taking a long hot bath, he
stepped out of the washroom to find Collins and Farrier deep in an argument, with Sevard seated on one of the cots between them.

Tommy listened to just enough to figure out that they were trying to figure out what to do with Sevard before collapsing on the other vacant bed with his face mashed into the threadbare pillow. It was easy to tune them out after that, and Tommy let a wave of suppressed exhaustion wash over him as he lay there. He was out in seconds.

Tommy wasn’t sure how much time had passed when he was finally woken with a gentle hand shaking his shoulder, but he knew immediately that it hadn’t been enough. He sat up with a groan, rubbed his eyes, and blinked blearily up at Gibson. It wasn’t immediately apparent whether he’d been roused to receive good news or bad news, but then Gibson smiled warmly down at him, and Tommy felt a surge of relief blossom in his chest.

“I thought you might like to see Alex,” Gibson said.

Tommy shot bolt upright and regretted it immediately when his head began to throb in response to the sudden change in position. “He’s awake?” Tommy asked with a wince.

Gibson nodded.

“Your head,” Tommy noted, touching his own forehead sympathetically.

Gibson reached up as well to finger the adhesives keeping the wound closed. “Yes, I got fixed up as well. Simone thought it would be prudent since we were already there.”

“Less work for her,” Tommy joked. There was a moment where Tommy thought Gibson might lean down then and kiss him, or maybe the other way round, but then Gibson pulled back and it was gone.

“We’d best get going, then,” Gibson said stiffly.

Tommy clambered out of bed, swaying for a minute on legs that felt as if they’d atrophied in the mere hours since he’d last used them. The room was empty now except for Gibson and himself. He wondered where the others had gone.

Gibson, perhaps seeing the confusion in Tommy’s face, answered before he had a chance to ask. “They’re at the hospital. Collins was hurt as well, but it didn’t seem too serious.”

Tommy nodded and straightened out his clothes. They were unpleasantly stiff after the abuse they’d endured but he was keen to see Alex, so he put it out of his mind for the moment and followed Gibson out of the room.

It was dawn when they emerged on the street. Vichy was already bustling even with the early hour and Tommy trailed Gibson closely as they crossed over to the hospital on the other side of the road, attracting a few honks from impatient cars as they passed.

Alex was out cold when they reached his room, mouth wide open and mashed against the pillow, but he looked healthier than he had when they’d brought him in. Less like a corpse, at the very least.

“When will he wake up?” Tommy asked as he sat down at Alex’s bedside.

Gibson shrugged with his arms folded across his chest. “Soon, probably. They drugged him during the surgery, but he could come to anytime now.”
Tommy reached out to smooth away a wrinkle in the linens covering Alex’s lower body. He couldn’t see the injured wrist under the blankets, just a distinct lump where he imagined it would have been. “Is he still…?” he asked, not wanting to fully vocalise the words that had come into his head.

Gibson nodded tightly. “But he may never fully use his hand again,” he said in a quiet voice.

Tommy grimaced. Alex would be gutted at the news.

The door opened before Tommy could say anything else, revealing Collins dressed in nothing but a hospital gown himself, closely followed by Simone and Farrier, who both looked peeved and had Sevard walking in between them.

“All right, let’s get on with it,” Collins said irritably, his voice nearing a shout even before Simone had a chance to shut the door behind them.

Tommy glanced at Farrier’s perturbed expression and then at Gibson’s face, which had sunken into a similar state of malcontent as soon as they’d entered the room. “What’s going on?” he asked, directing the question this time toward Gibson specifically.

There was a beat of silence in which no one spoke, and then Gibson opened his mouth. “My sister lives in America with my grandmother,” he said. “Sevard would be safe there and it would provide a way for the SOE to make use of her from a polite distance.” He gritted his teeth through the words and refused to look at Tommy.

But it still took Tommy almost a full minute before he registered what Gibson was really saying. “No,” he protested. “No, I’m not—you can’t—”

“It’s the best solution we have,” Farrier cut in, his voice soft like he was dealing with an unruly child. “And it’s not forever.”

Tommy looked to Collins only to find him staring stonily at the floor. He realised Farrier wasn’t coming back either, then, that Collins’s grave expression could only mean one thing. “How long?” he asked.

Gibson shrugged. “Months? A year, maybe?”

Tommy felt like he might throw up. Against all odds he and Gibson had been reunited by some twist of fate, only for the stars to wrench themselves out of alignment at the very last moment, sending them catapulting to either sides of the world.

“We could come with you,” Tommy said, desperately searching for an alternative to separation, but Collins was already shaking his head.

“No, I’m still needed for the SOE. Farrier’s right. And you—”

“You should stay with Alex,” Gibson interrupted. “It wouldn’t be right to send him home alone. He’ll need you.”
I need you, Tommy wanted to argue, but Gibson was right.

“And you, Simone?” Farrier asked, turning to her almost desperately. “You could still come with us, get away from all this.”

“Am I not needed in my home as much as they’re needed in yours?” She shook her head. “No, I’ll return to Lyon and do what I can there. Besides, Leclair should know that he got what he wanted.”

Tommy thought that if he ever saw Leclair again he would take a page out of Alex’s book and punch him straight in the face. He may have gotten what he wanted, but Tommy had come away with nothing. Just the grim satisfaction of knowing they’d completed their mission, in spite of the costs.

“Could you give us a minute?” Gibson said quietly. Tommy understood now that Gibson had likely meant to break the news to him before Collins had shown up and belligerently declared it himself, but the cat was out of the bag now.

Farrier nodded and placed a firm hand on Collins’s shoulder. “Come on then, better get you back in bed before the nurses notice.” He steered the blonde out of the room. Sevard followed at Simone’s behest, but Tommy’s eyes connected with hers just as she walked through the door. He could see nothing in them. If Leclair was determined to set her on a path of redemption, it seemed a long time coming.

Gibson stepped forward again as soon as the others were gone, the lines around his eyes and mouth softening ever so slightly.

“I want you to have this,” Gibson said, pressing something gold and glinting on the end of a skinny chain into the palm of Tommy’s hand. Gibson closed his fingers over it before Tommy could make out what it was. Tommy didn’t uncurl his fingers even when Gibson finally let go, savouring the sharp sensation of the metal biting into his skin. “It’s not—it’s a promise,” he explained. “That we’ll see each other again.”

Tommy turned away from him sharply, not wanting Gibson to see the tears pricking the insides of his eyelids, only to find Alex squinting up at them through one eye.

“Did I miss the celebrations?” Alex croaked.

Tommy shook his head and blinked away the budding tears. “Shut up.”

Alex seemed to notice the emotion in Tommy’s voice and looked to Gibson in confusion. “No, really, did I miss something?”

Gibson sat down on the edge of the bed and started to explain to Alex what had just been decided in his (mental) absence. Tommy, unable and unwilling to listen to it all again, stood up and stepped away from Alex’s bedside, ignoring the looks from both of them that followed him as he left the room.

He wandered the outer corridor aimlessly for a while, with no clear goal in mind. It was easy to tune out the doctors and nurses walking by for a while, and then after some time the quiet buzz of French became too much for him to handle and he ducked into the nearest room with an open door, only to come face to face with Farrier.

He was seated at a little table next to the window in what appeared to be an exam room, rather than one designated for longer-term care. There was a piece of paper laid out in front of him, and Tommy could just make out a few awkward pen-strokes before Farrier shielded the note from view with his
“Looking for someone?” Farrier asked with the hint of a smile.

Looking at him now, without threat or distraction, Tommy felt an oddly distinct sense of comfort emanating from Farrier. He was like Peter in that way, soft but steadfast; unthreatening despite his size and stoic features. Tommy felt drawn to sit beside him, but curbed the impulse. He hadn’t meant to come here in the first place and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself now that he had.

“I just…needed space,” Tommy answered finally.

“All right.” Farrier moved his arm away from the paper and resumed writing as if Tommy weren’t there at all.

A minute passed, then another, and suddenly Tommy felt like he could breathe again although nothing at all had changed. “Actually,” he piped up, causing Farrier’s head to lift in muted surprise, “can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” Farrier carefully set his pen aside once again and turned his full attention on Tommy, who reflexively shied away from the other man’s intense gaze.

“You and Collins,” he said, glancing down at his fingers as he picked nervously at the skin around his thumbnail, “you were close, too, right? How did you deal with him being gone?”

“Deal?” Farrier replied, crooking a single eyebrow in a way that felt to Tommy more like surprise rather than scepticism. “I suppose I didn’t deal at all. I just…accepted it. Because that’s what it was.”

“Okay.” Tommy had been hoping for better advice, or at the very least, advice that he could figure out what to do with. Farrier’s solution, acceptance, felt like falling into a deep abyss.

“That is to say,” Farrier continued, as if reading Tommy’s mind, “I don’t mean you should give up hope. Just that accepting circumstances that you can’t change is better than being angry with them.”

“Okay,” Tommy said again, but there was a slight note of optimism in his voice this time. “And… can I ask a favour, as well?”

Farrier blinked slowly and nodded. Tommy sensed that Farrier already knew what he was about to ask, but still, he felt compelled to say it anyway. “Can you… can you just make sure he’s safe? And that he makes it home to England with you—if he still wants to, that is.”

Farrier’s head tilted a degree to the left. “Why wouldn’t he want to?”

Tommy shrugged and slouched back against the wall. “Maybe he’ll want to stay with his family, get out of the war altogether? I don’t bloody know. You spent a year with him; I’ve known him all of two weeks.” He felt his face starting to crumple and valiantly fought back the impending tears.

Farrier sighed and stood up with a slight groan before crossing the room to come over to Tommy. They were the same height, and Tommy had filled out a little with age, but still he felt dwarfed by Farrier—but not smothered, even as the older man crowded into his personal space with a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “Sometimes you don’t actually have to know someone to really know them,” he said.

“What, like love at first sight?” It took everything in Tommy’s power not to scoff out loud at the concept, though it was hard to deny the way that Gibson had looked at Tommy in those quiet moments on Dunkirk Beach.
“If you like,” Farrier replied seriously. “Is it really so foolish to think of it like that when fate has drawn you together again, against all odds?”

Tommy got the sense that Farrier was no longer referring to just himself and Gibson anymore, but he nodded in agreement anyway, wanting to further the conversation so he could get back to Gibson and Alex before they were forced to say their goodbyes. But before he could excuse himself, Tommy was suddenly drawn into Farrier’s arms for a hug. It lasted a few seconds longer than could be considered appropriate for two near-strangers, but Tommy felt warmer when Farrier finally pulled away.

“What was that for?” Tommy questioned.

Farrier just smiled. “You looked like you could use it.”

Tommy supposed Farrier was right about that. He felt lighter as he jogged back down the corridor to Alex’s hospital room and went skidding in through the doorway to find Gibson still perched on the edge of Alex’s bed, Alex’s good hand held in both of his.

Tommy didn’t so much as pause as he dashed over to the two of them. He gave no warning, simply placing his hands on either side of Gibson’s face and pulling his mouth up to meet his own.

Gibson look stunned as Tommy pulled away. Alex wore a bit of a smirk as he looked between them, while the colour in Gibson’s cheeks blossomed into a brilliant red under Tommy’s palms.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” Tommy said fervently.

Gibson was breathless as he answered. “Of course I will.”
IV. Peter

Chapter Notes

This is it...for now. Fret not, there will be more Dunkirk to come and more in this verse, specifically. Hope you enjoyed!

Thank you so much for all the lovely comments and support! If you want to see more from me, I am currently working on a new fic (RPF, so sorry if that's not your thing but I am making it accessible to anyone who isn't familiar with the fandom if the premise interests you) and I also have original fiction that is free to read.

Follow me on Twitter for more writing goodies: @vondrostes (personal) & @TerranAlleen (writing updates)

Peter found himself surprised nearly every day by how much he appreciated having the Cottage full again, even six months on from the return of his troops (as he affectionately liked to refer to his colleagues within the privacy of his own mind).

Things were busier than ever with preparations from Christmas already in full swing; despite the rationing, despite the bombings, despite the ever-present looming threat of invasion—

Despite the absence of the two men whose letters had suddenly stopped arriving just a month earlier. It was something they all had wordlessly agreed to ignore, but it wasn’t as if they’d decided to pretend they no longer existed at all.

There were still presents addressed to Farrier under the tree, and one from him, written in Collins’s hand and addressed to Henry. And it had only been two weeks ago that Tommy had come to Peter to ask about setting out some candles on the mantelpiece. Peter hadn’t asked him why, sensing it might be a sore subject of conversation, but the blackened wicks on each of the candles, spotted out of the corner of his eye each morning on his way to the kitchen, were enough to put two and two together.

“Peter!”

He drifted back into the kitchen to find Maggie bent double in front of the oven. “Yes, dear?” he replied languidly, watching in amusement as she popped up and whirled around in alarm, though by all accounts she should have been expecting him.

“For God’s sake,” she muttered to herself, wringing her hands inside the oven mitts. “Would you go fetch Alex and Tommy, please? Dinner’ll be sorted in a few.”

“Course.” He leaned forward to give her a quick peck on the cheek before exiting the kitchen in search of the two boys who had managed to disappear for most of the day despite the hazardous weather conditions outside.

Peter had seen them come in together late that afternoon, pink-cheeked and laughing, but they’d promptly disappeared again after that and hadn’t left their bedroom since. He opened the door quietly, without knocking, only to come upon a sight he hadn’t expected and didn’t know how to
Tommy was in Alex’s bed, his back up against the pillows and his knees bent and spread wide. Sitting between them, curled up against Tommy’s chest with his long legs tucked up awkwardly under his body was Alex, whose mouth was pressed to Tommy’s.

Peter froze in the doorway even as the two of them flew apart like magnets encountering similar polarities.

Alex ended up on the floor, Tommy with the blankets drawn up around his waist though he had nothing tangible to hide. Peter was still just staring between them, not sure where to safely put his eyes.

“Dinner’s ready in a few,” Peter said uncertainly.

“Right,” Alex replied from the floor.

None of them so much as blinked, and then Peter spun around on one heel and marched back out of the room with his cheeks on fire. He lingered just outside the kitchen for a moment, trying to clear his head before he went back in to Maggie.

It was no use; she could tell something was amiss as soon as he stepped into the room. “What’s got you all in a tizzy?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing, I just—” Peter wasn’t sure whether he should tell her what he’d seen, though he knew she wouldn’t judge them for it like some might. “It’s just, erm….” He leaned in close to whisper the rest in her ear. “I may have walked into Alex and Tommy’s room without knocking first?” he said, allowing her to draw her own conclusions from that.

Peter hadn’t been expecting the sudden burst of laughter that belted out of Maggie in response to his confession. She laughed for nearly a minute, hunched over at the waist, and when she straightened up again she had to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie gasped upon seeing Peter’s helpless look of befuddlement. “I’m—you didn’t know?”

Peter shook his head, while simultaneously trying to run through every clue in the last six months (longer?) that he might have missed. He couldn’t think of anything overt, though he had noticed Alex and Tommy acting a bit differently after they’d come back from Dunkirk. He couldn’t figure out what Maggie had noticed that he hadn’t.

Maggie’s laugh had just faded into stuttered breaths when Henry came streaking through the kitchen toward the dining table, shepherded by Alex with his arms outstretched and bracketing the boy so he wouldn’t knock into anything while testing out his newly-acquired ability to walk. Tommy trailed in after them, his face just as red as Peter’s, only growing brighter when their eyes connected from across the room.

Alex remained relatively unfazed, catching Peter’s gaze once as he passed without so much as blinking. Maggie merely observed the spectacle with suppressed amusement before turning back to the food.

Peter attempted to help her for a few minutes but only ended up getting in her way. Maggie sent him out with a cup of tea for Nell, who had taken to reading in the parlour, as she did most evenings. Henry had escaped Alex’s clutches and reattached himself to Nell’s side, his head buried in the crook of her arm softly blinking up at her hands as she turned the page.
Peter watched Nell for a long moment before she finally seemed to realise he was there. She looked up with a grateful smile and set her book down to accept the cuppa instead.

“Dinner’s just about ready,” he informed her.

In the relative silence, they could hear the clank of dishes hitting the table as Maggie orchestrated the final preparations with Alex and Tommy’s help.

“I’ll be up in a minute,” Nell replied, giving Henry a gentle pat on the head as she adjusted her position on the sofa, jostling him a little.

She’d been happier in the months since Collins had returned from Dunkirk with a letter in hand from her husband, once-presumed dead but dead-no-longer. And despite that, Collins had still been known to share her bed from time to time—but Peter wasn’t about to ask any questions. Especially not when her mood had yet to turn to its former state of general ill-will, even after Farrier’s letters had stopped. Peter still wasn’t quite sure how she’d managed to decipher them when they had arrived, but that was another matter entirely.

The door opened suddenly, and Collins entered accompanied by a gust of snow and freezing wind. He shut it behind himself as quickly as he could manage with his arms full of firewood, but it was too late. Henry jumped up with a shriek as a stray snowflake landed on his nose, and went darting into the kitchen as if he’d been shot. Nell put her book down and got up to follow him with a sigh, giving Collins a resigned look as she passed.

He paid her no attention, his eyes fixed on Peter as he set the firewood down next to the mantle. “Help me with the rest?” he asked pointedly, and there was an undercurrent to his voice that had Peter worrying before they even made it outside.

There was a snowstorm in full force one step out the door, and Peter had to lift his arm to shield his face from the stinging bite of the wind blowing in from the sea.

“I saw a car up on the hill,” Collins said in a near-shout. Normal speaking voices were out of the question. “Looks government-issue. It’s stopped at two of the houses so far going down the road. Headed this way. Are we expecting anyone?”

As Peter shook his head he felt the ice seeping into his chest and freezing his lungs. He knew full-well that unexpected company was far too often the bearer of bad news. Particularly in this weather, where it was unlikely that someone was just stopping by for a chat.

Peter peered up toward the hill Collins had indicated and spotted the soft glow of headlamps reflecting off the snow.

“Maybe we should go back inside,” he suggested when the lights flickered and briefly disappeared from view before cresting over the hill even closer to the Cottage.

Collins followed Peter in, and they both bravely tried to keep their expressions neutral as they joined the others for dinner. Peter was already bracing himself for bad news, but he still hoped they would at least get through most of the meal before whoever was in the car managed to find them.

“Should we say grace?” Maggie proposed, with a hesitant look toward Collins. Maggie had grown up in a staunchly Catholic family and was over the moon when she’d found out both Collins and Alex had been baptised as well. That excitement had been dulled when she’d discovered that they also shared an aggressive disinterest in participating in the religious traditions of their childhoods, but ever since coming back from Dunkirk, Collins’s resentment had lessened somewhat.
Peter was hardly surprised at all when he offered to say grace himself, instead of merely allowing Maggie to orchestrate things as she always did.

"Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts," Collins said reverently, though there was a tremor in his voice that failed to escape Peter’s notice, "which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Alex’s grumbled ‘amen’ was as lifeless as it ever was, but Collins at least had the decency to paint himself a pleasant smile as he helped himself to the food, in spite of the knock on the door both he and Peter were nervously anticipating.

It came only a few minutes into the meal, after Peter had taken just three bites of his potatoes. He stood with a sigh before Collins had a chance to do the same. “I’ll take care of it,” he said quickly, before excusing himself.

There were two men standing on the other side of the door when Peter opened it. He stared at them for a minute, noting that both were bundled up well enough for the cold that they must have known about the storm before they’d left.

“Come in,” Peter said, ushering them past even as he continued his careful observation of them both.

They didn’t look military, though it was hard to tell what they were wearing beneath all the layers. Both were the same height but the man on the left was slightly broader than his companion, whose dark hair was encrusted with a fine layer of snow.

Peter had already begun to suspect their identities before either opened their mouths, but the lightly accented words that emanated from the man on the right was all he needed to confirm. “Is this the Dawson residence?” he asked, all wide-eyed wonder as he took in the firelit parlour and all its horribly dated décor.

Peter nodded, not quite sure what to say. “Nell!” he called out after a few seconds, deciding that she should be the first one on the scene. He backed away from the two men as she emerged from the kitchen, her look of tempered confusion quickly turning to disbelief.

She sprinted past Peter and launched herself into the arms of the older man, Farrier, Peter realised. Her dead-but-not-dead husband. Farrier grunted as he caught her and then wheezed out the ghost of a laugh, spinning her around in a quick circle before setting her down again.

Peter looked away as they kissed, catching the eye of the other man—Gibson, he presumed. He looked out of place standing next to Nell and Farrier, but then his eyes widened a bit in surprise and Peter turned to see what he was looking at.

Collins, Tommy, and Alex had all crowded in the doorway to the kitchen, with Henry seated snugly on Collins’s hip. All three seemed frozen in disbelief for a long moment, and then Collins took a tentative step forward. Peter watched as Farrier’s eyes misted over during Collins’s careful approach, and then they were standing practically toe to toe, with Henry looking up between them in childish bewilderment.

“This is Henry,” Collins said in a strangled voice. He seemed to be wholly unaware that all eyes were on him as Farrier reached out to touch first Henry’s chubby little hand before letting his fingers float up to brush against Collins’s cheek.

“I missed you,” Farrier replied softly.

The words seemed to trigger some sort of reaction from Tommy, who suddenly grabbed Alex by his
good hand and yanked him roughly forward. They both attached themselves like limpets to Gibson, whose uncertain frown melted away at the touch.

There was a moment where Peter felt almost envious of them, that they could get back what they’d lost when Peter’s dad, George, his brother—they were all gone. And they weren’t coming back. But he shook the thought out of his mind almost as quickly as it had come. He still had Maggie, and his mother, and Collins and Tommy and Alex and Henry and Nell. And now Farrier and Gibson. They couldn’t replace the people he’d lost, but Peter wasn’t alone, and that was what mattered the most.

“What’s all the commotion—oh.” Peter turned his head just in time to watch Maggie stop short with a tray of biscuits in her hand as she took in the sight of the Cottage’s inhabitants reuniting with the ones they’d left behind. “Suppose I should add two more plates, then.”

Peter laughed giddily and drifted over to kiss her soundly on the lips, nearly knocking the tray out of her hands in his enthusiasm. “Happy Christmas,” he told her as he pulled away.

Maggie shook her head with a breathless laugh, casting one last glance at the others crowding the parlour as Peter steered her back into the kitchen. “Happy Christmas, Peter.”

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