The grit blew across the makeshift runway as I climbed out of the plane. Despite the summer heat, I wore a scarf wrapped around my face, just under my goggles. With my hair scraped against my head and pinned under the aviator’s cap, all my skin hidden by my flying gear, and my tall and slender build, you couldn't tell if I was male or female, black or white. Certainly the woman who was looking for me couldn't; I caught my name, whipped towards me by the wind. I didn't know why anyone would be looking for me. Nobody'd cared much for my whereabouts since I'd signed up for the Civil Air Patrol, proven that I knew my way around an airplane, and consequently ended up as a performing monkey, touring the South to promote the sale of war bonds. I didn't think that was likely to change.
"Miss Wilson?" By the time she made it over to me, her shoes were covered in a layer of the fine black dust, and the formerly crisp, white collar of her olive drab uniform looked on its way to being the same.

I took my time unwrapping my scarf, studying her as I did. Chestnut curls were secured firmly at the nape of her neck, and her lips were immaculately red. Despite the strap of the eyepatch that bisected her face, she was attractive, and she obviously took care with her appearance. I didn't recognize the insignia on her uniform, but I assumed she was a WAC.

"Samantha," I provided helpfully. I preferred Sam - I'd always been a tomboy - but didn't see any reason to get friendly with this strange white lady just yet.

"Miss Wilson," she repeated, and I realized she was English. The crisply enunciated syllables were unlike anything I'd heard growing up in Alabama, but I'd seen enough movies to recognize the accent. "I watched you fly in the show. You're a remarkable flier."

"Stunts are easy." In a sturdy Piper Cub, the CAP's standard fare, I could have done my entire show with my eyes closed. I'd learned to fly on a crop duster, and keeping a plane steady at a low altitude while avoiding obstacles was far more challenging. "Waste of fuel, if you ask me. But nobody asked me." I probably shouldn't have been sassing a stranger, but my mama had always said my mouth would be my downfall. I'd never been able to curb my tongue, and I wasn't liable to start now. Besides, my anger had been simmering over the long summer months of show after show after show, and I was tired of bottling it up.

"You want to be in the war." Her voice softened for a moment. "Making a difference. Doing something." Maybe, I thought, she knew the same frustration I did, to see so much going on and feel that your potential was being wasted.

"Didn't quit college to be in a circus sideshow, that's for sure." My parents hadn't been happy about that, but they'd understood. There would be time for education later; I'd felt a duty to act now. And where had that landed me? Closer to Jasper, Alabama than either Europe or the Pacific.

"My name is Agent Carter, and I'm with the Strategic Scientific Reserve - the SSR, for short. We have a program that I think you might be qualified for. I can't tell you much else, I'm afraid; you wouldn't be flying, and you'd be relocated to New Jersey to train with the Army."

Train with the Army? She made it sound like I'd be with the men, not the WAC, and I didn't know what someone like me would have to offer the Army. Hell, I didn't know what I'd have to offer the Strategic Scientific Reserve, whatever that was. And I loved flying, had ever since I was a teenager. But I wanted to do it on my terms, not the Civil Air Patrol's. I turned back to look at my plane. I'd miss the sky, but I knew I'd be back someday. I'd be a fool not to take this opportunity.

"All right." I nodded once, sealing my decision. "Whatever it is, sign me up."

A week later, I found myself in New Jersey - farther north than I'd ever been before. Not that I had much of a chance to see anything outside the Army training camp. There were four of us presented as candidates for something called Project Rebirth: two white men, Steve Rogers and James Barnes, a black man named Isaiah Bradley, and me, the only woman. I was still in the dark about how or why Agent Carter had picked me; the rest were all Army privates. They'd been recruited because they hadn't fit in with their original units. Rogers was skinny and clumsy - a kind man, but wholly incompetent at nearly everything he did. Barnes was younger than the rest of us, and from what little he'd offered, his temper had gotten him in trouble; he'd ended up in fights wherever he went. Bradley didn't offer his story, and I didn't do much talking, either. Didn't think they'd care to listen to what a woman had to say.
Everywhere I went, I stuck out like a sore thumb, even among my unit of misfits. They bunked with other regiments in the barracks; when it came to my first night at Camp Lehigh, I found myself shuffled from officer to quartermaster to another quartermaster before they figured out that the best place to put me was in a supply closet at one end of the infirmary. It barely held a folding camp bed, and the nurses who had to shift boxes of bandages out to make room for me were none too pleased. I heard them whispering among themselves, and I knew that they were supposed to be my wardens at night, keeping me from getting out and wandering around the camp. As if I had any inclination to do a goddamn thing after a day of training.

The part of me that had grown up as a preacher’s daughter was insulted by the insinuation that I’d leap at the opportunity to do anything immoral; the larger part of me that knew what the world was like outside of Jasper was just resigned. I was colored, and even in the north, that meant I was viewed with suspicion, that I was untrustworthy and lazy and shiftless. They probably thought I’d shoot up with the morphine if they left any in the closet with me. Never mind that I’d studied hard enough in school to get a scholarship to college, that I’d flown a plane in the Civil Air Patrol. All anyone saw here, just like back home, was the color of my skin. It was worse here, because they tried to pretend racism didn’t exist north of the Mason-Dixon line. Because I knew my place back home, knew how things worked in the south. All I could do here was keep my head down, and oh, it rankled. Was this really what my life was going to be like, one indignity after another? Was this why I wanted to serve my country, to fight in this war? It wasn’t like my country cared about me, after all. That much was clear, and had been ever since I was old enough to learn the rules that nobody came out and said, to see how people like me were treated.

"Is this where you are?" Agent Carter found me one night after dinner, my tray propped on my knees. I hadn’t bothered to leave it outside yet; I’d discovered that since I couldn’t eat in the mess (and didn’t much want to), they’d made arrangements to have my food delivered with the rest of the invalids’ in the infirmary. I ate on my cot and put the tray on the cart outside, along with all the rest. "Do you know how many people I had to ask to find you?"

"About as many as I had to ask to get this in the first place, I expect." I sighed and set the tray on a shelf, scooted over to make room for her to sit down on the cot if she wanted. There wasn't much room, but I didn't take up a whole lot of space. She just looked down at me. I wondered if I was supposed to stand and salute, if she outranked me. I hadn't even found out yet if I had a rank - I answered to 'Private' for ease of commands, but I'd never signed papers as part of the Army, just filled out paperwork for the SSR. (She probably did outrank me; I assumed that nearly everyone did.)

"Why are you in this-" She trailed off and gestured around at the space, and hit her hand on a shelf. "Oh, blast! Why do they have one of my recruits in a room that isn't big enough to swing a cat?"

I raised an eyebrow at her and leaned back against the wall. Maybe being English, she didn't realize how things worked here. Never mind that with white and black units both here, the camp was carefully organized to shuffle them around without the two intermingling. "$'Cause they didn't have anywhere else to put me. You gonna sit down before I get a crick in my neck from looking up at you?"

She put her hands on her hips, looking affronted, but eventually she unbent herself enough to sit down next to me. "$They have nurses here," she huffed indignantly. "$Surely they could have put you in the same quarters as them."

"Only white nurses." I thought that would be enough, that I wouldn't have to say any more.
"And?"

I sighed heavily. Was England some sort of paradise where nobody cared about race, or was Agent Carter just a special kind of oblivious? "I'm not white."

"So I'd noticed." Her tone was tart, and I couldn't tell if it was directed at me or at society as a whole. I hoped for the latter.

"Where do you stay, Agent Carter?" I hesitated for a moment before I added another question: "You got a first name, or should I just keep calling you Agent?" The corners of my lips turned up in a smile.

"Don't get fresh, Miss Wilson."

"I'm always fresh, Agent. Just about drove my mama crazy with it. She said if I'd been born a boy, she'd've slapped that fresh mouth right off my face. With how much I made her laugh, though, I don't know how true that is." My mama never seemed like the slapping type, anyway. She'd always let me be myself, scolded me if I got into trouble, but didn't punish me much. She left the stern lectures to my daddy - who, being a preacher, excelled in that sort of thing. But they both encouraged me to find my own path in life, even if that meant that sometimes I was too sassy for my own good.

"I could make you do push-ups for mouthing off to a superior officer."

"You could," I agreed, "but then we'd have to go out there." I gestured to the open door - the closet would have been suffocating if she'd closed it, and probably wouldn't have held the both of us. "And I'd be putting on a show for the fellows in bed out there." Even wearing men's pants and a white cotton t-shirt, and even with my lack of a figure, men would be men.

"Too much work." She sighed. "So you're stuck in a closet because you're-"

"Serving my country." I gave her a bright smile, one that showed too many teeth and didn't reach my eyes. "Ma'am." That was all she was going to get from me on the subject.

"I came here specifically to ask how you're adjusting to life at the camp, but-" Agent Carter trailed off. "It's hardly proper to have an army trainee installed in a closet. I'm afraid I'll have to take steps to rectify the situation."

Oh, Lord, she wasn't going to let the matter drop, was she? I could see from the look in her eye that she had the bit between her teeth now.

"I'm fine," I reassured her. I wasn't fine at all; I was lonely as all hell, ostracized, and made to feel less than human. But I damn well wasn't going to throw in the towel or make her think that I wasn't a suitable candidate. I had a bed, three square meals, and a roof over my head, and that was more than a lot of people had. "It's the Army. You aren't supposed to be comfortable, Agent Carter. You haven't heard the drillmasters shouting?" Not that the four of us had our own drillmaster, but I'd overheard others yelling at their assigned companies when they used the equipment. We had Agent Carter, who certainly had the manner of one, if not the vocabulary.

(Not that I would have made the comparison to her face.)

"Bloody impossible not to." Something that might have been a smile's distant relative flitted across her face for a moment. "According to them, neither of us have the proper equipment to be a soldier. But you're doing your level best to prove them wrong anyway."

Coming from her, that was practically a compliment. Sure, I wasn't the best in our group - Barnes
and Bradley were both stronger and faster than I was. But Rogers and I both tried our hardest to make it through the obstacle courses and keep up with the others on marches. And although she never said it, I could tell from the look on her face that effort was what mattered with Agent Carter.

"I don't know if I can be a soldier," I admitted frankly. I'd never been the best at following orders; I was independent-minded and stubborn and, like she'd said, too fresh for my own good. "But I'll be whatever I can and hope that's good enough for you."

This time, there was no mistaking the smile. It was warm and genuine and the first of its kind I'd seen from her. "I think it already is, Miss Wilson." She rose to her feet, smoothing the wrinkles from her skirt. "I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." It was tinged with sarcasm; I wasn't going to deny that. But at the same time, I was determined to see my training through. I'd agreed to do a job, and that meant it was worth doing well - and part of my contrary nature wanted to prove all the men wrong, that a woman was just as capable of this as they were.

After breakfast the next morning, I joined the other three in one of the classrooms on the base. Barnes and Rogers chatted like they were old friends, while Bradley hung off to one side. It had to be as hard for him as it was for me, I reckoned; he couldn't get close to the soldiers he bunked with, because he spent his days apart from them, but he obviously didn't feel comfortable talking to the other two men, either. And as for me, I might as well have been another species entirely.

I had just about made up my mind to go over and talk to him when Agent Carter came in, followed by an older man in glasses and a white coat. As they closed the door, I caught a glimpse of armed men standing in the hallway outside, the SSR insignia glinting on their jackets. This wasn't going to be another awkward lecture about hygiene, then.

"Recruits," Agent Carter began once we were seated, "I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Erskine. He's the mastermind behind Project Rebirth. With his aid, I selected the four of you to serve as what will eventually be an elite unit of fighters."

"Elite? Us? You gotta be joking." That particular outburst was from Barnes, although the rest of us looked equally skeptical about the prospect.

"Not joking at all." The doctor spoke with a German accent, and rather than standing to address us, he pulled up a chair, sitting down so that he was at our eye level. "I am not looking for the strongest or the fastest recruits, but those with a certain mindset. Those who I think are capable of serving their country in the best way that they can. My country was the first to fall to Hitler and his armies, you see. My people embraced his ideals, and HYDRA, Hitler's secret science division, came looking for me and my work. They heard that I was developing a serum to make men...greater. They saw it only in terms of physical strength, amplifying their armies to make them true Übermenschen; the master race, crushing all of Europe under their bootheels. But the secret of the serum is that it does not only work on the muscles, but also on the mind. Those who are good become better, and the evil - they become monsters. It was not a secret I was willing to let fall into Hitler's hands.

"You four were chosen for your character," he continued. "Your strength of heart, your persistence. It is my hope that you will see this project through, but I wanted you to first know what you would be facing. The procedure itself is a series of injections, followed by exposure to Vita-Rays. I cannot guarantee a success, nor can I guarantee that it will be free of pain. I make no promises - obviously I hope that it will work, and I think that it will, but I wanted to give you the chance to back out before any true harm could come to you. You are the finest men - and women - I could find for this duty,
and I hope that should the day come, you will use your strength for what is right."

I wasn't sure what to make of this. I'd never imagined being trained to take my place as a test subject in someone's experiment; I'd thought maybe we were being recruited to work with the SSR, somehow, to infiltrate German-occupied Europe. But this sounded a lot bigger than that. And what I was pretty sure Dr. Erskine wasn't saying was that there was a good chance we could die during his procedure. Oh, sure, he'd made it sound like a noble calling, but he'd also said that it could fail. And was I really willing to risk my neck for this? I'd been fired up to fly a plane over the battlefields of Europe or Asia, and God knew that wasn't the safest place to be in this war. But that was dying for something, getting into the fight; this wasn't even a guarantee that I'd get there in the first place. I was starting to feel pretty stupid for rushing ahead and signing up for this before I knew what I was getting into.

"What do you think?" Barnes asked the rest of us after Agent Carter and Dr. Erskine left the room.

"I think it's the only way I'll ever see Europe," Rogers offered dryly. "Besides, he's right. The world has enough big guys. Someone needs to fight for the little guys. Someone needs to be able to stand up and say that what the Germans are doing is wrong. That's why I signed up for the Army. I don't wanna be stuck here behind a typewriter."

Personally, I thought that without the serum, Barnes would be better off behind the typewriter. He was the kind of guy who'd get himself killed within seconds on a battlefield - if he made it there to begin with, which was doubtful. I didn't think he weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, and even I was heavier than he was.

"Might as well." Bradley shrugged. "In for a penny, in for a pound. Only difference is that I'll be making a bigger target of myself afterwards."

And me? I kept quiet long enough that everyone else looked at me. Never mind that I'd barely spoken in front of them before; apparently my opinion suddenly mattered enough to hear it, even if they didn't pay it any mind once the words were out of my mouth. "I think Rogers is right," I said slowly. "Someone's gotta do this. I don't know if I'm one of these good people the doctor was talking about, if I've got a good enough heart or whatever. But I know the difference between right and wrong when I see it, here or in Germany." Because it made me wonder - sure, we were fighting for the freedom of everyone in Europe, but what about our freedoms here at home? What about all the people who were still denied the vote, the sharecroppers and the coal miners back home who worked long hours and barely managed to put food on the table? What about every black man, woman, and child who was treated as less than human by white people in the North or the South? That mattered to me just as much as the fate of those overseas. And for a moment, I thought that maybe if I fought over there, then maybe it might make a difference over here.

When I returned to my room after training that day, I found a note on my bed, penned in a neat hand, telling me to gather my belongings and report to officers' quarters. I groaned to myself. What on earth had Agent Carter done this time? I didn't think she had a grasp of the politics of the situation, being English. Her meddling would bring me nothing but trouble.

"She's not an officer," I heard Colonel Phillips protesting before I saw him. I pressed against the wall, just around the corner. "She's not even officially part of the Army."

"Neither am I," retorted Agent Carter in a colder tone than I'd ever heard her use, and that was saying something; she wasn't the warmest of people to begin with. "Perhaps I ought to take up residence on top of a sack of potatoes in the pantry. If you don't allow Miss Wilson to stay here, then neither will I."
"Agent Carter, you're a lady. I don't think you understand -"

"Being a lady, I think we can assume that I am therefore rendered incapable of understanding by virtue of my gender. Please, feel free to explain to me how Miss Wilson is any less a lady than I. Or would you like me to find a nurse to perform an examination for you? Will you be satisfied then?"

I had to admit, it was a little satisfying hearing Agent Carter ripping into someone else. I realized that she'd been holding back with us - we had never challenged her authority, after all, just fallen into step with alacrity. She'd barked at us like any drillmaster, but her words didn't have the thinly veiled venom that they did now, like a snake's fangs hiding beneath those ruby red lips.

"I don't- that won't be necessary." I could imagine Colonel Phillips blotting the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

"If it's her virtue you're worried about, then I'm sure she would have no problem with carrying a pistol to protect herself from any would-be assailants."

"Ah, well, it's more- her bringing, er, suitors to her quarters."

"Really? Because I've been under precisely the same supervision - or lack thereof - and I certainly haven't brought any would-be suitors to my room, as I'm sure you know. In fact, in that area, I'm positive she would comport herself better than many of the men here."

"The men-"

"Are only allowed to see women during their leave, I'm aware. I've suffered my fair share of lewd comments, as has every other woman on this base, regardless of skin color. And yet, I maintain that it's not the propriety and morals of the women you need concern yourself with, as a whole, or with Miss Wilson in particular."

I reckoned I'd probably spent enough time eavesdropping on things I shouldn't, especially since I was the topic of conversation. I cleared my throat pointedly and stepped around the corner with my armful of uniforms.

"Miss Wilson." Agent Carter greeted me while Colonel Phillips shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away. "I don't suppose you have any opinion on your femininity."

Normally, I knew better than to stir the pot. As mouthy as I was, I'd learned that there were some things you just didn't talk about. But something about Agent Carter made me want to talk back just as much as she did - although I was a lot blunter about it.

"I think they'd prefer it if I weren't feminine at all," I replied. "Seeing as how white men have a long history of lusting after black women and blaming it on us. I don't see where the color of my skin makes me more or less immoral than any other woman, and since my daddy is a preacher, I think he'd be offended if you believed he raised his daughter to be that kind of woman."

Agent Carter's smile grew as I spoke. "There you have it. I'm certain you'd find a white reverend's daughter to be beyond reproach, so surely Miss Wilson must be the same way."

That wasn't entirely true - I'd done a bit of kissing, and maybe a bit more, at college, but I didn't feel the need to share that. I was a grown woman, and I reckoned that if nobody cared if men remained chaste and celibate, why did it matter for women? But that was a secret I didn't plan on telling anyone; I knew what my daddy would've said about it. He'd encouraged me to form my own opinions, but there was certainly a limit to that.
But I smiled and nodded anyway, doing my best to look like a good church-going girl. Never mind that I hadn't attended any services since I'd left Jasper to go to college in North Carolina, I could still play the part.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Carter," the colonel grumbled. "Because if your little project fails, I'm never going to hear the end of any of this."

"I've sacrificed far more than you have for Project Rebirth," she reminded him coolly, though her hands fisted in the fabric of her skirt. "If you're quite done terrorizing me, then I'm going to help Miss Wilson move into her new quarters."

'Quarters' was a grand term for a room that, as it turned out, was barely bigger than my closet had been. But, unlike the closet, it was blessedly empty, and-

"A window." Agent Carter smiled brightly, as if this pane of glass were her crowning achievement. She leaned over me and slid the sash up, letting in the cool night air. "Surely, Miss Wilson, you feel less like a caged animal with a room you can actually see out of."

I sat myself down on the cot, crossing my legs; unlike Agent Carter, my clothes were standard Army issue, albeit hastily tailored, which meant that I wore trousers. (I'd had to supply my own underthings, the one article that couldn't be converted to suit me.) "A cage," I drawled, "has bars. Just 'cause you're giving a lab rat a breath of fresh air doesn't make it less of a lab rat."

"But your conditions are now on par with the other lab rats."

"Huzzah for you," I muttered. It seemed more like something Agent Carter had done to prove a point and assert her own dominance rather than anything that had arisen out of a genuine need to better my life.

"And what's that meant to mean?" She narrowed her eyes. She could be a bull-headed fool sometimes, but that didn't mean she couldn't read people better than anyone I'd ever met. Not that I proved much of a challenge just then.

"Do you really care about me, Agent Carter?" I crossed my arms over my chest, challenging her. "Did you pick me just to feel good about yourself for including a colored woman in your little squad of elite soldiers? Because I don't know what my qualifications for this program are or what you think you're doing. I don't know if you're just a damn crazy English lady who doesn't know how things work in America, or if you really want to make my life better. I don't know anything about you, you don't seem to know anything about me. So why are you doing all this?"

"Samantha Thomasina Wilson," she said simply. "Daughter of Paul and Darlene Wilson. Born in Jasper, Alabama; formerly a student of comparative theology at North Carolina A&T. You dropped out after the war began and signed up with the Civil Air Patrol as part of their initiative to include more black women in their program. You performed stunts in seventy-eight air shows across twelve states to help sell war bonds, and not once did an announcer mention your gender, let alone your race. Your father is a pastor, your mother is an artist, and you're an only child. You had your appendix removed when you were twelve. You've spent your summers employed in your uncle's crop-dusting business in the Mississippi Delta since you were fourteen. You received top marks in everything at school, and you were the salutatorian of your high school class. You've helped at every church supper and fair, and nobody in Jasper seems to have an unkind word to say about you, although several seem to think your parents were far too lax in raising you. Your parents said that they didn't care what other people thought, so long as you were healthy and happy, although I imagine they might have had other opinions if you'd ever caused any serious trouble. Your
classmates at university spoke equally highly of you, although a few of them made allusions to parties at which you sipped moonshine, and occasions on which you joined them in sneaking out of your housing, which actually serves to make me feel better about you. You have a scar on your left knee from when you ripped it open on a rusty nail jumping into a swimming hole, and you may or may not have been doing so in the nude - nobody was willing to clarify that point. I assure you, Miss Wilson, I absolutely have done my research - and, for the record, it required a great deal more work than the others did, because I could simply avail myself of their Army paperwork and their compatriots' opinions. Not to mention that Rogers and Bradley are both from New York, so considerably less travel was involved. And, as a final note, I suspect that the moonshine and the potential nudity may have been related."

"Please tell me that isn't in my official file." It was the only thing I could think to say, hearing my life summed up like that. I hadn't imagined she'd go to such depths to find out about me - and interviewing people in Jasper? Lord, I could only imagine the gossip that must have been flying around town, all the suppositions people would have made. And all of them were less fantastic than the honest to God truth.

"Observations only. And the SSR's files are sealed; only those with the proper security clearance can read them. Future generations will have no idea of your adolescent bacchanalia, should the experiment be a success and you and your companions earn your place in the history books. Besides," she added, "I can't say I didn't do the same myself." The last was added in a conspiratorial tone, like that was supposed to make me feel better. "Though perhaps with slightly less illicit alcohol."

"Moonshine's kind of a coming of age thing in the South." At least, it was now. Back before the Twenty-First Amendment, it'd been the only way to drink, and everyone knew someone who brewed it. I'd still been too young to drink then, but old enough to know what everyone talked about with a wink and a nod. "You haven't lived till you've wanted to die from a hangover." And, in my case, felt like your leg was about to fall off.

"From what I've heard, drinking paint thinner might be a more enjoyable experience." She wrinkled her nose. "Are you convinced, Miss Wilson?"

"About paint thinner?" I knew full well what she was talking about. "Because I've had some peach-flavored moonshine from Georgia that was damn fine. Overall, though, I'm inclined to agree."

"You have just as much right to be here as any of the men." She continued like I hadn't said anything at all. "And I did more than enough digging to assure myself of that fact. Since your arrival, you've proven yourself in every test set for you; if at any point I had decided you were an unsuitable candidate, you would have been sent away. I had other female candidates, although I'll admit that you were the only one of your race. You were the one I chose above the others, because you had a tenacity that set you apart from the rest - and, trust me, that's saying something. The men were all misfits, of a sort; they didn't fit in normal regiments. To find you, I had to search outside the Army entirely."

"Careful, all the compliments'll make me blush." It was certainly more praise than I'd heard from her the entire time I'd been here. Agent Carter was sparing with it, but this was effusive, almost like admiration.

"I know something of what it's like, pursuing a field in which few women have ever tread. It's tiring to be a pioneer, Miss Wilson. To endure the muck others sling at you - and I'm positive I've only experienced a fraction of what you must have received by the simple nature of your birth. If I want to help you, it's only because I know you have enough obstacles in your path without adding the
discomfort of minor indignities to the burden you have to bear. Because, like the rest of you, I want to right wrongs when I see them. I fancy I share a few qualities with all of you - but at the end of the day, I'm a spy, not a soldier."

"Sam." I offered my name up quietly. Truth be told, I'd been sick of 'Miss Wilson' ever since we'd met, but she didn't seem to want to unbend enough to call me Samantha. I didn't even know if she'd accept the gift, but surely she'd spoken to enough people in Jasper to know what everyone called me.

She studied me for a long moment, and I wondered what was going on in that mind of hers. She was complicated, and she didn't let much show. I wouldn't have wanted to play cards with her.

"Peggy," she finally responded. "Although if you use it in front of the men-"

"You'll make me do push-ups, I know."

"I'll make you run the obstacle course the next time it rains, with your full pack on your back. Then I'll make you do push-ups."

"It'll be our little secret," I assured her. Wasn't like I thought she'd start flinging my first name around during training, either. We were different people out there, but in here, at least, we were two women fighting the same fight. It seemed like she wanted to be allies, and I was tired of being so damn lonely. Because she was right, and it was hard doing this alone, to push and push and never let your guard down, to know when to speak up for yourself and when to let things slide. I was so used to bulling my way through that I'd just assumed she was doing everything to make herself feel better, rather than wanting to help me. I was big enough to admit when I was wrong.

"I hope you didn't hear too much gossip about me," I added, venturing a cautious smile as I tried to be a little friendlier. "I never figured anyone would tell the story about the swimming hole." Lord help me if anyone I'd kissed had told.

"You never know what you'll hear if you start swapping stories of youthful misdeeds." She chuckled quietly. "And I might've shared a tale or two of my own first, though with some careful camouflage."

It was hard to imagine her sneaking out in the middle of the night to go drinking - or putting a toe out of line, for that matter - but probably anyone who'd heard everything Jasper apparently had to say about me would have thought the same. (The joke was on them; I hadn't even been a saint in high school, although I'd toed the line a lot more when I'd been with my parents. The fear of God had nothing on the fear of my parents' disapproval.)

That night was the first of many we spent holed up in our bedrooms after dinner. Peggy had been just as lonely as I was, and although she didn't share much about her past, she coaxed mine out of me, and occasionally offered a tidbit or two of her own. And one day, when Rogers asked if I wanted to go to the pictures with the rest of them on our leave, I suggested we invite Peggy along as well. The look they gave me was priceless - so was the look she gave me when I asked her - but sure enough, all five of us went to the cinema together, crammed in with all the other GIs who had the day off and any girls they could round up. Afterwards, walking back to the base, the conversation flowed with a surprising ease. Peggy didn't say much, but I could see from the smile on her face that she was content with the way our little unit was shaping up. It wasn't enough to just be a fighting force, she'd told me earlier; we had to be a team as well. The combat exercises were only the beginning of that, and I was starting to get a clearer idea of what we were supposed to be like.

And then the day came: the four of us were taken to Manhattan, to an underground lab the SSR had prepared. It was just us, Peggy, Dr. Erskine, and Howard Stark; the millionaire inventor had joined us to help run the equipment, apparently, and brought along prototypes of some weapons he was
making for us to run by Peggy. As it turned out, he was part of the SSR, as well as the man who sold planes and weapons to the government.

After the men changed into the clothes they'd be wearing, it was my turn for the small room. Peggy followed after me, and she stepped in just before I could close the door. "Whatever happens out there, Sam-" She hesitated. "Whatever happens, know that you did well." She reached out like she was about to brush my cheek, but gripped my shoulder instead. "Good luck."

Once the door closed behind me, I skinned out of my uniform shirt and jacket. I'd just pulled a cotton shirt over my head when the sound of gunfire erupted in the room behind me. Swearing under my breath, I dropped into a crouch and eased the door open slowly. It was obvious from a glance that the situation wasn't good: Peggy and Steve were hidden behind a bank of controls, and there was no sign of the others. As I looked around, I saw Erskine, Bucky, and Isaiah on the floor. One of the saboteurs grabbed a vial and ran, and the other covered him; a spray of bullets flew in my direction, and I rolled across the floor to cover.

"Sitrep, soldier," Peggy ordered in a brisk tone unlike the one she'd used just a couple minutes earlier. She held her folded jacket against Steve's ribs as the blood staining his shirt spread.

I swallowed. Despite all our training, this was the first violence I'd seen in person, and it had been a slaughter. "Erskine- I think he's gone. Barnes and Bradley are down. I didn't see Stark."

"I'm here," an unfamiliar voice croaked from across the room.

"One of them took a vial of serum," I continued.

"Help me into the chamber," Steve whispered as he reached for me. "C'mon, Sam, I can still stop 'em."

I shook my head. "You gotta keep breathing, Steve." There was no way he'd survive the procedure. "Stark?" I raised my voice so the other man could hear me. "I'm gonna need you to run this thing. Agent Carter, you cover me if they come back to try and finish the job." And, judging by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, that was possible. I took a breath and steeled myself; the Vita-Ray pod was open, and it was now or never.

In one mad dash, I ran for it. I tried not to look down, at the pools of blood on the floor, at my friends' bodies sprawled out on the concrete. I only focused on getting to the chamber in one piece. I was there before I knew it, the solid steel door clanging into place. There wasn't anyone to fasten the straps that would hold me down; I would just have to hope for the best.

"Start it up, Stark!" My voice resonated inside the chamber with a metallic echo, and I hoped he could hear me. Bullets pinged against the exterior as the machinery roared into life; I thought of Peggy out there, holding the Nazis off. I wondered what would happen if a stray bullet damaged the chamber at the wrong time - if it would just ruin the experiment, or if the chamber itself would be destroyed, if it might explode and kill everyone else. I was fine with dying, fine with providing a target to draw fire away from my friends, but I didn't want them to be injured because I'd thought I could do this on my own.

The gleaming hypodermic syringes swung into place over my arms and legs and depressed, jabbing the needles into my flesh. I'd always known this would hurt, but I still wasn't prepared for the pain. But I clenched my fists and focused on getting through the procedure and stopping the saboteurs. And then- then came the Vita-Rays. My entire body resonated with the hum that accompanied the light. I'd already bitten my lip when the needles injected me with the serum, and when the pain from the rays started, I bit clear through it, not even tasting the copper on my tongue. It still didn't keep me
"Should I stop?" I vaguely registered Stark asking, although I wasn't sure if he was asking me or Peggy.

"Keep going!" The words were more than half a scream, but I hadn't made it this far to back down now, even if it killed me. And I wasn't totally sure it wouldn't.

After what seemed like an eternity, the pain stopped, and there was blessed silence. The fabric of my clothing was soaked through, and I didn't know if it was sweat or blood. But I was still breathing, sucking gulps of air in as the chamber door swung open.

"Sam!" Peggy was standing over the prone body of one of the Nazis, and she looked up with a gasp when I staggered out. Everything felt strange, like my coordination was off. The cuffs of my pants hit clear up around my ankles, the cloth of my shirt bunched around my shoulders, and my bra felt like it was damn near choking the life out of me. "It worked!" The relief was clear on her face, but it was short-lived as she settled back into her business-like demeanor. "One of them got away. If you think you're up to it -"

"I've got it," I reassured her. Hell, I didn't know if I did, but if there was a time to prove myself, it was now.

The first few steps were jerky, till my arms and legs figured out what they were doing and all my muscles learned how to work again. I bounded up a flight of stairs, then another. I could still hear footsteps ahead of me, which meant the other Nazi couldn't have been too far ahead. I burst out into the sunlight, chasing after him, scrambling through alleys and side streets, jumping over refuse and dodging bystanders. This bastard wasn't going to get away from me, not with the serum he'd stolen, and not after what he'd done to everyone.

As time went on, he began to falter, and I didn't slow in my pursuit, didn't feel the least bit of fatigue while I ran, even barefoot and in clothes that didn't fit anymore. When he emerged into an open space, I plunged into the crowd after him, putting on a burst of speed just in time to tackle him around the waist. The vial he still held in one hand smashed against the concrete, spilling the last of the super-soldier serum.

"So much for the German master race, huh?" I asked him. I wanted to sock him in the jaw, at the very least - I didn't think anyone would blame me if I did - but I restrained myself. He'd been captured, and if I knew Agent Carter, she'd make his life miserable while she was interrogating him.

"This proves nothing," he hissed. "Only that the inferior races need help to equal the might of the master race." He bit down on something with a crunch, and I realized too late that he must have had a failsafe cyanide capsule for just this sort of situation. "Hail HYDRA," he groaned with his last breath, foam bubbling up through his lips.

Only then did I look at the crowd that had formed around us - and just where we were: right in the middle of Times Square. So much for the secrecy of that government project.

"Miss Wilson!" Peggy pushed through the crowds.

"I don't think you'll be getting anything from this one." I stood up, brushing the dirt from my rumpled clothes. "Sorry, Agent Carter. I tried, but -"

"Nonsense. There was nothing you could have done to prevent it." A flash exploded in our faces, and I blinked at the lights dancing in my eyes. "And now the Germans will know that we've foiled
their plans - and that the doctor's project succeeded." The smile Peggy wore was grim. "I think you'll be needing this."

She placed something large in my hands - one of Stark's prototypes, I assumed. My hand found the strap in back, and I held the shield in front of me, testing the weight. The camera flashed again, capturing the image for the history books - and by that time, Peggy had stepped back, out of the frame, leaving me standing triumphantly over the Nazi.

The next few days were a whirlwind of physical tests, getting blood drawn, interviews with reporters - it seemed that the Army had decided to embrace the public relations boom that came from taking down a Nazi saboteur in the middle of New York City. One of the USO costumers rigged up a uniform for me, the shield was painted red, white, and blue, and I made a pretty picture for all the newspapers. It was explained that I was the result of an experiment to create a new breed of soldier, but they didn't mention that I was likely to be the last. The blood the SSR drew was saved in hopes of analyzing it to recreate the formula, but nobody knew how successful they'd be.

As for the other three, they'd survived the assassination attempt, though they were still wounded. Barnes and Bradley were eager to make a recovery and get back into the fight; Rogers, from what I'd heard, wasn't likely to be sent over to Europe anytime soon. The serum had been his only hope, and now he was being honorably discharged. And Peggy - well, she was going down to Washington to deal with the government. I wished her luck with that; better her than me. The reporters were bad enough, I didn't want to have to face Congress.

Now that they had a super-soldier, the Army didn't have the first damn idea what to do with me. I heard a half-dozen ideas in those days, thrown out and discarded: touring to sell war bonds (I emphatically said no to that one), parachuting on Berlin to assassinate Hitler (a suicide mission), spying behind enemy lines (as if I could have infiltrated anything), and even more ludicrous suggestions. By the time I ended up in Europe some months later, they still hadn't figured it out. I found myself all over Italy, pushing back pockets of fascism here and there, helping to retake villages and move the front forward. It was useful work, but I felt like I could have been doing more.

One rainy night, in the north of Italy, I was sitting in my tent, flipping through a bag of envelopes the postmaster had given me. Apparently I was famous enough that I was getting letters from people I didn't even know.

"Captain America." A familiar voice came from just outside the tentflap. "Are you even a captain?"

"I don't know, but these letters say I am. Come in before you look even more like a wet rat, Peg."

"A wet rat," she huffed indignantly. She shook the rain from her leather bomber jacket, slinging it over the packs in one corner of the tent, and sat down next to me on the bed. "Really, Sam? I didn't come all the way to Europe to be insulted by the likes of you."

My heart started beating a little faster then, I had to admit. In the time we'd been apart, I'd forgotten the scent of her - now mixed with wet leather, but still the same as always - and what it was like to have the weight of her next to me there on the bed. I busied myself pulling another letter out of the bag.

"Do you reply to them all?" She plucked the letter from my hands.

"I tried to when I got the first batch," I admitted, "but I didn't have time. I read them, though. Kept a few."

Peggy slit the letter open and skimmed the first few lines, and her face quickly fell back into its
neutral mask. "I don't think you'll want to keep this one."

"Oh?" I leaned in - something that would've been distracting at any other time - and read over her shoulder. "Ah. One of those letters."

"They're vile, Sam!" She crumpled it in her hand before throwing the paper aside with distaste.

"Uh-huh. Was that one just the usual? Some of them have threats against my family. I've been saving those to give to you - if the SSR doesn't know what to do, then I'm sure you can pass them to the people who can. Maybe J. Edgar Hoover the next time you have coffee with him."

"It's SHIELD now, actually. I'm not sure I've ever heard a more tortured acronym, but there you have it. And I will. You're right in that it's not our department, but if I send them back over, someone will take care of investigating it and protecting your family."

"Good." Because I didn't doubt there were Klan members who knew my family, knew where they lived, and although they were a minuscule fraction of the letters that insulted me, I took them seriously. I didn't think I could afford to do otherwise; personal threats didn't scare me much, but my family couldn't defend themselves, and I didn't want anything to happen to them on my account. I'd already written to them after the first of the letters, warning them about the possibility of people coming after them, but it was still too soon to have heard anything back from them yet.

"I've never met J. Edgar Hoover," she added as an afterthought, "and you know I despise coffee." Peggy's gaze flicked to the tent flap, and for a brief moment, she let her head rest against my shoulder. It warmed something deep inside of me, something I rarely felt these days. I was segregated from everyone else here, just as I had been at Camp Lehigh - not just because of the Army's rules, but because I was different. A woman, and black, and now set apart because of the serum.

"You should see one of the good letters." I hefted the bag onto my lap and dug through it till I found one that had been addressed in a childish hand. "Here, try this one."

Peggy took it from me dubiously, but opened it anyway. "Mm. Little boy from South Carolina says that he saw you in the newsreels and he wants to grow up big and strong like you. He talks about picking up scrap and helping his mama with her victory garden. And there's a picture." She held out a crayon drawing of a boy wearing an Army uniform, fighting next to a stick figure that I gathered was supposed to be me, judging by the shield.

I touched the drawing lightly, my fingertips lingering over the lines. "I want to give them a better world to live in, Peggy. All the kids who write to me, all the girls who say that because of me they know they aren't limited by their sex or the color of their skin. It's not the sort of thing that stops here in Europe. We have to take it back home, too, or else why bother doing it to begin with?" I hadn't expected to become famous after the experiment; I'd never even really thought about what might happen after the serum, other than going to Europe to fight alongside the others. But here I was, a celebrity. A role model. And I felt like I had a certain responsibility to fulfill, that I'd been given a voice for a reason. Just because I wasn't religious anymore didn't mean that I didn't believe in fate - but we made our own fates with what the world gave us.

"I'm not the one you've got to convince, Sam." She smiled wryly. "I've always been on your side, whether or not you believed it at the time, and I imagine I always will be. It's the rest of the world you have to win over. But if you want my advice on how to do it? Don't budge from your convictions, no matter how many people are set against you, no matter how hopeless the situation looks. In the end, you'll be the only one left standing. You're stronger than you think, or else you wouldn't be here."
"I don't think I need a lesson on how to be muleheaded, Peggy Carter." I laughed, nudging her with my elbow. "But if I did, you'd be just about the only person capable of teaching me."

"I'm not sure if you're complimenting me or insulting me - or insulting yourself, for that matter." After the noise of the battlefields, her laugh was a balm to my ears; it reminded me that peace could still be found, even in the middle of war. Sometimes you just had to take it where you could get it.

"I just accept things the way they are." I grinned down at her, a little ruefully. I wasn't about to deny my own stubborn nature. "There are some things that can't be changed, serum or no, and that's one of them."

"And the other is that mouth of yours." She pressed the tips of her fingers to my lips, and I suddenly felt far too hot, even in the chill of the night air. This wasn't the sort of thing we'd ever talked about before - wasn't the kind of topic that could be talked about. I sure as hell didn't know how to bring it up, anyway. I'd only kissed a handful of other people, and the other girls had been the ones instigating it. I was a lot shyer around other women than I was with men, that was for sure.

"Um." I blinked dumbly for a moment, unable to think while my heart pounded in my ears.

"Sorry, I-" Peggy pulled back quickly, and I could practically see the walls slamming up between us. "It was nothing, Sam. I should go."

I caught her wrist as she started to stand. "Peggy, no." I tugged a little too hard on purpose, and she overbalanced and fell into my lap. "You..." My breath caught in my throat. "You weren't wrong." She'd hidden herself well enough that I hadn't guessed it, but I wasn't surprised by that. It had just made it harder for me, not knowing if it was safe to make a move or if I'd be risking everything. Peggy's friendship was too valuable to me - everything meant too much to me, but, I'd realized eventually, especially her. Seeing her for the first time in months just reinforced that.

"Well, then." She tipped her chin up stubbornly. "Aren't you going to-"

I cut her off in midquestion, meeting her challenge before she could ever utter it. Our lips met, and I instinctively wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her closer. This was what I'd been waiting for, even though I hadn't known it, had barely started to think about it before the experiment. It had crept up on me during all our talks late at night, all the times she'd watched me crawl through the mud, every time we'd argued about something inconsequential, until Peggy had worked her way into my breath and bones. There'd been a stray touch here and there, sitting so close our legs bumped together, nudging her with an elbow, the brush of a hand against my shoulder as she walked past me while I was sitting. So many little things, all adding up into a picture I'd overlooked, maybe on purpose.

"How's your lipstick look on me?" I asked when we broke for air, resting my forehead against hers. I wanted to grin giddily, like a moonstruck teenage girl, but I didn't.

"Not quite your color, I'm afraid." Peggy brushed a lighter kiss against my lips. "But I'm not finding a shade to suit you."

I couldn't imagine her in anything other than her characteristic bright red, anyway. "Like anyone around here would even notice something like that."

"You'd be surprised at what people take notice of. Any change in the familiar, even if they don't consciously register it, sticks in the subconscious." She sighed as she reached up to cup my cheek in a hand. "We'll have to be careful, Sam."
Oh, how I knew it. It wasn't just that it was two women together - it was that one of us was white and the other was black. But I was pleased that the thought of not being together hadn't even crossed her mind; apparently she thought I was worth the risk.

"I can't stay here long, anyway," she added. "I just came to inform you about your new assignment and take you to London. Then, I'm afraid, it's back to the States for a bit to help with organizing the entire restructuring of SHIELD. But I'll try to come back if I can."

I pulled back for a moment to study her. "Are you still just an agent?"

"For now, anyway, although I'm rather higher on the pecking order than I had been before. I have a feeling, but it's too soon to see how the game will play out." And she didn't need to say that if she got promoted to a higher position, she was liable to stay in America for the rest of the war. I didn't fault her that; she deserved to run the place. But, oh, I was selfish enough to want her by my side, too.

"So, what about those orders?" I started to pull away from her, but Peggy grabbed my wrist and held me right where I was.

"It's bloody cold," she offered by way of explanation, "and you took my coat."

"Your coat was soaked!"

"Have you ever noticed how much heat you put off?" She placed a palm flat against my breastbone, and I suddenly found it hard to think about anything other than the thin cotton separating our skin. "A side effect of your heightened metabolism, I should think. I've read all the files on you, you know."

I swallowed a couple times before I found my voice, although my mouth was still as dry as if someone had stuffed it full of gauze. "Peggy, you wrote half the files on me."

"The scientific files." She placed a single index finger against my lips; perversely, I parted them just enough to lick the pad of that finger. "Samantha," she sighed, "you'd best know what you're doing."

It was the second time I'd ever heard her use my full name, and it held a certain appeal.

"Not a single damn idea." One trembling hand found the buttons of her shirt, and I undid the top one. Truth be told, I'd never gone past kissing and a little petting with a girl before, and I wasn't sure if doing more in the middle of an Army camp was a good idea. But I wanted to touch her, at least. My fingers itched to caress her skin, to see if it was as soft as it looked. I drew a fingertip along her exposed flesh, skimming the curve of her breast before it disappeared under the fabric of her bra, and she shuddered in my embrace.

"You'd better not stop now."

"Yes, ma'am." I knew an order when I heard one, and I smiled as I pressed my lips to her neck.

When we finally pulled apart to straighten clothes and catch our breath, Peggy was distinctly flushed. "I'm not sure how much that helped," she groused under her breath, and I knew what she meant. I positively ached for more, something that hadn't been an issue before. But at the same time, there was a satisfaction at what we'd done, knowing how pliable she'd been under my hands and lips, remembering every little sound she'd made. And there was the promise of more eventually, because there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I needed this to happen again, that Peggy needed it too. If we couldn't find a way to be together, then we'd make one.

But right now, I just wanted her to squeeze in next to me on my cot. I wanted the two of us to be
able to sleep together, as uncomfortable as it would be, and I knew it couldn't happen. That didn't stop me from imagining it.

"Our flight takes off at 0700 tomorrow." I'd almost forgotten about my new posting in the heady rush of all this, and I was glad she'd reminded me. "In London, you'll be meeting your new squadron and receiving further orders." Peggy smiled a Cheshire Cat grin. "I think you'll be pleased with them, Sam."

"Right now, the only orders I need are-"

"Those will come later." There was a dark gleam in her eye that hinted at something wicked. "When we have the privacy. Right now, Captain, I'm afraid the war comes before pleasure."

"Isn't that always the case?" I quipped wryly. Still, I would be glad to get out of Italy. I itched to be doing something useful with my time - and, better yet, out of all this damned mud and rain.

And so began my long trek of chasing HYDRA across Europe, from one facility to the next. Because, as Peggy explained, HYDRA was our real target; Germany was at the point where it would collapse on its own, given time and the opening of a second front. We were the precision strikes against what would prove to be the real threat. The Howling Commandos - Barnes, Bradley, and a team of other men - and I faced off against HYDRA's leaders again and again. Baron Zemo, the most normal of the bunch; Arnim Zola, who was half-machine, half-man, reduced to little more than a head floating inside a metal body; and the Red Skull, the leader of the organization, and the first subject of Dr. Erskine's serum. We destroyed their laboratories in crumbling castles, in repurposed factories, in the death camps, every experiment more monstrous than the last. It took us more than a year without respite, and even I was tired by the time the Allies neared the German border.

Peggy was waiting for me in my bedroom, somewhere in the depths of a thick forest. We'd found a small hunting lodge and ousted its former owners; I'd claimed the privilege of leadership, for once, and taken the master suite for myself. I'd tried to play at being calm the rest of the night, joking with the rest of the boys. They'd broken into the lodge's stock of spirits, but I couldn't get drunk anymore, thanks to the serum. Peggy had enjoyed a single round before pleading a headache and departing to her room, but I had to stay longer so it didn't look suspicious.

(I often wondered how much they'd guessed at. Nobody ever hinted that they knew anything was out of the ordinary between us, but these men had, over time, become my best friends. We'd bonded through battles; every one of them had saved my life at least once, and I'd done the same for them. I liked to think that they'd respect my choices, but I knew damn well that probably wouldn't hold true.)

I sure wished I could've had a drink to calm myself down; my hands were shaking again by the time I eased open the door to my room and found Peggy waiting for me. She'd climbed in through the window, I imagined, or-

"There's a secret passageway," she informed me, quite as calmly as if she weren't naked under a down coverlet. "Not uncommon in places like these, so that the masters of the lodge could sneak their mistresses in. Clandestine encounters are a time-honored tradition of the nobility."

I didn't have a key to lock the door, so I wedged an ornately carved chair under the knob. If I needed to get out in a hurry, there was always the window; by this time, I'd jumped through enough windows that I didn't even bat an eyelash at the thought. It would be worse to have someone get drunk and open the door to something they didn't need to see.

"Does that make me noble?" I joked. I'd already discarded the helmet from my Captain America
getup, but I was still wearing everything else. Too damn many layers for me right now, as I struggled
with the buttons on the tunic.

"If you really want to imply that I'm the mistress." Peggy gestured for me to sit down on the bed, and
while I kept working on the buttons - who the hell had thought this was a good idea, anyway? - she
unlaced my boots and pulled them off, followed by the thick wool socks.

"This is sounding more dangerous all the time." I freed myself from the navy blue cloth, pulling it
over my head at last.

"You're going into a Nazi-occupied castle on the shore of the North Sea tomorrow, and you think
insulting me is dangerous?" Peggy stopped to think about it. "Well, Sam, I think you've finally
learned to prioritize hazards properly. Good job. Now all you've got to do is master getting
undressed."

"Complain to my tailor," I grumbled. At least the pants didn't have as many buttons as the top did;
now that the boots were off, the pants were easy to shimmy out of. Although I was still wearing
more clothes than Peggy, I felt naked and exposed, while she seemed to be at ease in her skin. I slid
under the coverlet with her, and as she kissed me, she tugged my t-shirt up, more impatient than I
was.

"Sam," she murmured against my skin. "I want to look at you."

Nervous butterflies fluttered in my stomach, but I couldn't deny that I wanted to see all of Peggy, too.
"Be quick about it," I tried to joke. "It's cold." As she folded the coverlet back, I reached behind my
back to undo my bra, letting it slide down my arms.

The only light in the room came from the fireplace, but it was still enough to see her by. I'd had
glimpses here and there, tried to piece them together in my mind, but the whole - the whole was
goddamn stunning. She took my breath away; Peggy was the sort of woman I wanted to look like,
all curves and shapely legs and soft femininity. She made me feel intensely self-conscious; I'd always
been gangly, and the serum had only made me taller - sure, it had filled out my muscles, but that
didn't mean I was especially attractive. I ducked my head and tried to keep from tugging the blanket
back up.

The way Peggy looked at me made me feel like I was the only person who mattered to her, though.
That even if I wasn't perfect, she still thought I was beautiful just the way I was, that she would have
wanted me with or without the serum. She placed her palm flat between my breasts again, right over
my heart.

"Don't be so nervous, Sam. It's only me."

"Yeah, that's what I'm nervous about." I laughed breathlessly. I knew ostensibly how things could go
between two women, but putting that into practice? That was another matter entirely. I felt like a
skittish teenage girl again, sneaking kisses out behind the school gymnasium.

"I want to show you something." She met my gaze and held it, then slowly pulled off her eyepatch.
I'd wondered what had happened to her eye after we first met, but over time, I stopped thinking
about it at all. Eyepatch or not, she was just Peggy.

Furrows of scar tissue surrounded the ruin of her eye, but the wound was long-healed. The eye itself
was milky white, a film over the familiar warm brown of her iris. It was surprisingly normal, and I
found myself reaching out and gently touching the scarring. Peggy started to flinch away, but steeled
herself and held still as I mapped her eye with my fingertips.
"That's it?"

She relaxed, the last of the tension she always seemed to hold in her very bones, even around me, finally seeping out. "That's it. You're the only person I've known this long who's never asked about it, Sam."

"I figured that if you wanted to talk about it, you would." I shrugged with one shoulder. "Doesn't make a difference to me whether you have one eye or two, or none at all."

"I worry sometimes that people look at me with pity, you know." She quieted and moved to rest her head against my shoulder, her back leaning against me. "That they see a woman with an eyepatch and feel sorry for me because I'm damaged goods in their eyes. It's ridiculous; that's not how I see myself at all. But if there's one thing I've learnt, it's that what I think of myself has no bearing on what other people think."

"They think no one will want to marry a woman with one eye, you mean." I snorted and kissed the crown of her head. I wasn't a sentimental person by nature, but soft touches came easily with Peggy. They were all we had in the times we were alone together. "They're damn fools, Peg, and you know better than to worry about others' opinions."

"Of course I do. But even I have my moments of doubt." She turned her head up to look at me. "Don't tell anyone."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I promised her. My hands smoothed down her arms, settled on her thighs, and I admired the contrast of my skin against hers, wondered for a moment what we would look like in a mirror. I reached up again to cup her breasts in my hands, the skin smooth and warm.

"It happened while I was rescuing Erskine." Her breath hitched in the middle of the sentence as my fingers found a nipple and coaxed it into a stiff peak. "HYDRA- they caught up with us when we were almost over the border. Sent some sort of deformed...thing, and it was too damn fast. I emptied my gun into it right as it slashed my face. There wasn't any time to stop and care for the wound, and...well. I don't think there was anything that could have been done for it anyway."

"Shh." When I bent my head to kiss her neck, I felt her pulse fluttering under my lips, and I wasn't sure if it was from my ministrations or her memories. "Peggy, I don't think most men could've stood their ground like that - and if they had, they probably would've pissed themselves instead of shooting the thing. Doesn't matter what it did to you, it matters that you survived, that you kept it from killing Dr. Erskine. You did your duty, and if I had my say, you'd get a damn medal for it."

"The nature of being a spy." Peggy laughed quietly. "Everything I do will be classified until long after I'm dead, I'm afraid. No medals, no rewards, just a lot of work that goes unappreciated. Better to have you in the spotlight, anyway."

"Me?" I snorted against her skin. "Have you read my newspaper interviews?"

"Every last one of them, actually. I clipped them for your file." She found my hand, laced her fingers with mine. "You're a hero, Sam, whether you like it or not. People would rather celebrate what you do than acknowledge the necessity of what goes on in the shadows, no matter how much bloodshed the latter might prevent. Frankly, I don't want to be in the spotlight; I find it too uncomfortable."

I didn't much like it either, but I hadn't been given a choice in the matter, as we both knew. Peggy seemed to be much more deserving of it, at least to me.

"I can still give you the reward you deserve," I offered. Somehow, while pressed together buck
naked, we'd managed to stray away from the original topic, which I felt was a damn shame. This was the first real privacy we'd ever had, and we were spending too much time talking.

"I don't know about deserving it, but I'd rather have anything you could give me than a medal." And judging from the way her hand settled on my thigh and squeezed it, she knew just what I was talking about.

When morning came and the first rays of light shone through the drapes, we were still tangled together in bed. Peggy's head was pillowed on my shoulder, and one of my legs was hitched over her hip. I heard the sound of the men coming out of their rooms - there'd been enough bedrooms in the place for each of us to sleep in a real bed for the night - and sighed.

"Do you think they're making an absolute mess of breakfast?" Peggy didn't open her eye yet, and she seemed as reluctant as I was to part ways. She stretched, cat-like, and I found myself reaching out to brush my fingers over the curve of her hip. She favored me with a sleepy smile as she reached for the strap of her eyepatch.

"I think breakfast was a lost cause way before that." Here in Germany, we had to resort to field rations. Though we'd looked for any food in the place last night, the only thing left had been the wine and whiskey.

"I'll think of you when I have an egg back in London," she promised, leaning in to steal one last kiss. She wasn't coming with us on our mission; her job had been to simply escort us to the site. After today, we'd be making our way into Germany, and she would be turning back to the Allied front lines, and then to England. "A proper boiled egg with soldiers." Peggy sighed wistfully; there were times when I thought she liked food more than she liked me.

"I'd give my right arm for some pancakes. Or buttermilk biscuits - god, you gotta try them someday." I thought for a moment about taking her home to visit my family, wondered if my parents would believe me if I told them she was just a friend. I couldn't imagine Peggy in the streets of Jasper, even though I knew she'd done it before. More precisely, I couldn't imagine her walking with me. I already knew that I couldn't settle for living in Alabama after the war, but the realization of it struck me then.

"Someday," Peggy agreed. "Once rationing ends." She slid out from under the coverlet slowly, taking her clothes from the chair where she'd folded them neatly after taking them off the night before. I watched her there, naked in the light of day, and thought again about how lucky I was.

The castle, we'd found out, housed the projects of not one, but two of HYDRA's heads. And although they swore that if you cut off one, three more would take its place, we didn't think that was exactly realistic. Zemo and Zola had both narrowly escaped from us too many times; with Germany beginning to crumble from the inside out, we didn't intend for them to get away again.

"Barnes, Bradley, Zemo's got something cooking in the courtyard." We huddled against the stone wall of the castle, and I kept my voice at a whisper. "You two stop it. Everyone else, start clearing the inside. Let me know when you find Zola."

Zemo, as it turned out, had some sort of plane; I caught a glimpse of it as we burst through the portcullis and into the courtyard. Bullets pinged against my shield before I charged straight into the knot of minions blocking the doors. Once I got started, I was about as easy to stop as a tank; one of the advantages of the serum. It meant that I was damn good at barreling through narrow passageways, and with my shield, I was bulletproof, at least from the front.

I headed down the first set of stairs I saw. In the past, Zola had favored underground dungeons and
lairs - who wouldn't? Half of Germany was probably living in bomb shelters by now. I trusted that he kept his valuable equipment well below ground, to keep it safe from any Allied bombing.

After the first knot of resistance, the castle was suspiciously empty as I crept through the subterranean tunnels. I was starting to think it was a trap, and I cursed myself for splitting up the team. It was goddamn hubris. Just because I'd been lucky so far didn't mean my luck was going to continue.

And then- then the hallway opened up into a laboratory full of humming machines, and one of those machines looked an awful lot like a doorway that opened up on what had to be another world, one full of grayish rock and a green-tinted sky. Beyond the door, I could see Zola and what looked like an entire garrison of soldiers, and beyond them, there were rat-like creatures wearing military uniforms. One of them saw me and let out a cry, and the Nazis started to head for the doorway - so, naturally, I threw myself through it.

From the looks of it, the rat-people, who all had swastikas somewhere on them, were setting up for an invasion; I could see weapons stockpiled everywhere. I didn't know how many more of these gateways there were, but if Zola brought reinforcements to prop up the failing German war effort, the tide of battle could be changed. Which meant, in my mind, there was only one thing left to do.

Although the battle had driven me away from the door, I fought my way back to it. I tried not to look at the castle as I drove my shield into the control mechanism with all my might. A spray of sparks cascaded in my face, but I kept smashing it till it was little more than scrap.

Zola howled with impotent rage, his voice a tinny echo from the loudspeaker that projected his words. "Captain America! Do you know what you've done?"

"Kept you from invading Earth with an army of rat-people?" My voice was steadier than I felt, but I held my shield in front of me, my back to the twisted metal of the gateway. The entire thing had imploded from the feedback of the destroyed control panel while I'd been busy wrecking it.

"Kept me from- Yes, invading Earth with all the armies of Dimension Nazi! But you've also destroyed your only way home!"

I'd known that from the start, but I hadn't wanted to accept it. Hadn't wanted to think about it, because there was no other choice. Someone had to stop Zola's plan, and that someone was me.

"There's never just one way out, Zola." I held my head up straight and used my free hand to unholster the pistol at my hip. "Sometimes you just have to keep looking to find another door." And no matter how long it took, that was exactly what I'd do. Right after I took down Zola.

"Sam?"

I felt a lump grow in my throat. I knew that voice, had been waiting countless years to hear it again. Didn't know if I ever would, even if I ended up in the right world; I'd learned pretty fast that the thing about space-time travel was that time was screwy between universes, which was why I didn't even know how long I'd been hopping from one world to another. Part of me didn't want to keep track, even if it was possible. They told me it'd been seventy-five years since I'd thrown myself into Zola's portal, and I just went with that number. Maybe it was more for me, maybe it was less. It had stretched out for what seemed like an eternity for me, and I reckoned it had been that way for Peggy, too.
"Sam," she repeated, taking a step into the room. They had me in a spare office - I'd started out in an interrogation cell, till someone had pointed out that it was bad form to keep a war hero locked up. I'd had a meal in the mess, slept on a cot in the infirmary, showered, and now I was cooling my heels. Waiting to see the woman who was standing before me. "God, it's been so long."

I was glad for her emotional control; if she'd been the kind of woman to throw herself into my arms and start sobbing, then I would've been a crying mess shortly thereafter. But Peggy's composure was as rock-solid as ever, with only the slightest crack to betray her emotion, the barest quaver in her voice and a softening in her eye.

"You sure don't look seventy-five years older," I remarked, swinging my booted feet off the desk and onto the floor before I rose from my chair. The chair slid back, squeaking, and I stepped forward to draw Peggy into my arms. She looked, in fact, exactly the same as she had the last time I'd seen her. But, then again, I looked more or less the same, too.

"You're one to talk." She buried her face in my chest for a moment, her grip tightening around my forearms. "I thought you were dead. You just- disappeared between one moment and the next, and nobody knew what had happened to you. There was no sign of you, no sign of Zola...Howard examined the equipment left behind, but he couldn't say what it was for."

"It's a long story." I rested my chin on her head for a moment, closing my eyes. God, how I hoped the world had changed since the war.

"I've heard the bare bones of it, what you told the agents." Peggy took a deep breath, steadied herself, and stepped back, all business once more. She'd forgone her uniform for a black suit - one with slacks, even - but I suspected it was just as much a uniform as what she'd worn in the war. "You chased Zola into a different world, destroyed his gateway before he could bring in more troops, and then destroyed him."

"And then took seventy-five years to get back."

"You would take the long way home," she huffed. "We could have used you- I could have used you."

"From what I hear, you've been pulling strings just fine without me." I took a seat on the desk, crossing one leg over the other. "Director Carter. And, with all due respect, I took the shortest way I could. Sorcerers aren't real good at precise portals when you don't have directions to give them." At least, that's what every sorcerer I'd met (or, more precisely, every incarnation of the same sorcerer) had told me.

"Portals and sorcerers." She shook her head. "It sounds daft to me. Like something from a storybook."

"Speaking of storybooks, you got some kind of Sleeping Beauty deal going on there?" I gestured to her face. "Or Dorian Gray?"

Peggy's gaze darted around the room for a moment, and she smoothed her hands over her jacket in a nervous gesture I wasn't used to seeing from her. "After you vanished - actually, well before you vanished - scientists started trying to recreate the serum by analyzing what they could find in your blood. The problem, of course, being that we had a rather limited supply of blood to use."

"Didn't feel limited at the time." I rubbed my arm, remembering all too well the seemingly endless vials of blood they'd drawn from me.
"Yes, well, the point is, it took a few years for them to achieve what they considered to be a working formula. By then, they were nearly out, and I insisted that they save a few vials back for any future scientific advances. I wasn't the director yet, but I was in charge of the project - from the management side of things, of course, not the scientific side. And since I wanted them to stop, I offered myself as a test subject. I didn't risk the Vita-Rays; without the precise calibration, bombarding myself with radiation seemed like a poor choice. It altered my metabolism and my mind, but without the similar increase in strength and speed. And, well, the serum was unstable; it required further dosing on a regular basis, in carefully controlled laboratory conditions. Not the sort of thing we could approve for mass use, particularly after it was discovered that the formula didn't have the same results on everyone." By the end, Peggy was looking away and pinching the bridge of her nose. I wasn't sure if she was embarrassed, if she'd regretted her mistake - if she even considered it a mistake. It was obvious that she felt awkward telling me about it, but I wasn't sure why.

"So I'm still the only super-soldier?" Not that it made any difference to me personally, but I suddenly wasn't positive I wanted SHIELD to have access to that resource.

"Ah." Now she was chewing her lower lip and still refusing to meet my gaze. "Well. As the field of genetics advanced, we...used the rest of the blood."

And while I wouldn't have had the slightest idea what she was getting at when I'd left this world, I had encountered more advanced technology in other universes. "Peggy, are you saying that you cloned me?" Christ. What had she done while I was gone?

"We needed to refine the serum as it was found in your blood. The first generation was an identical clone, apart from gender, but the rest of them have been...tweaked to suit SHIELD's needs."

"Rest of them?" My voice rose. "How many are there?" It made my stomach twist to think of an army of clones running around. I'd never really thought about having children, and this- this was something else. Something warped that I wasn't sure I would have ever expected from Peggy.

"We're on the thirteenth generation now. Previous generations deteriorated over time, but this one seems promising." Her voice slipped into a more clinical tone. "Sam-13 has excelled at his training and is close to being permitted to go on solo field assignments, albeit with monitoring."

"How old is he?" I folded my arms over my chest.

"Seventeen."

"I'm taking him with me." If I could undo some of SHIELD's conditioning - and I was damn sure there was conditioning - then all for the better. "Once I get set up." Because I'd been in the twenty-first century for all of eighteen hours, and I already knew that I didn't like the direction the organization had taken. I didn't know if it was Peggy's fault, or if I'd misjudged things from the beginning, if the SSR had always been like this.

I didn't know if Peggy had always been like this, and the thought made me sick to my stomach.

Peggy finally looked at me again, and her shoulders slumped. "Will you come with me, Sam? I've been working for the better part of a day without a break, and I need to see my flat - something other than this sodding building."

We walked down the Mall together, our hands occasionally straying close, but not quite touching. "Things have changed," Peggy assured me as we stood in the shadows of the Lincoln Memorial, looking out across the Reflecting Pool. "For the better, mostly."
"I missed so much, Peggy. I should have been here." I started to reach out for her, then drew back. "I could've done something to change things." At SHIELD, in the world itself. I wasn't sure, but it was what I'd always intended to do after the end of the war.

"Maybe." She acknowledged me with a nod. "Maybe not, Sam. All I know is, you're here now, and there's still plenty of work to do."

I was struck by how bare Peggy's apartment was. Oh, it was furnished, and to a casual observer it might have looked like a normal home, but there was nothing personal there, no sense of the woman who occupied the space. For her, it was just a place to come to when she wasn't at work. No knick-knacks, no pictures, not even a single houseplant.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" I asked as she dug through a drawer full of takeout menus and used her phone to place an order.

"Trying to save the world, mostly. And eating more Chinese takeaway than one person should have in a lifetime."

"Uh-huh." I peeked in the fridge and saw a handful of plastic packets of sauces, but not much else. "I can see that. How's the world-saving gone?"

"Sketchy, at best." Peggy toed her heels off and wandered into the living room, where she curled up on the couch and tucked her legs underneath her. "Stop staring at the refrigerator; nothing's going to appear. I've prevented three presidents from being assassinated, didn't stop another, arranged the disappearance of a handful of troublemakers, and failed to prevent two wars. The latter not especially being my jurisdiction, but I tried my damnedest regardless. As you once told me, sit down before I get a crick in my neck from looking up at you."

I laughed ruefully, a little surprised that she'd remembered that for so many years. I remembered it, but I'd clung to all my memories of Peggy during my travels. Besides, I didn't forget much. "At least there's more room than there was in that closet."

"There's more room in my closet than in that stuffy place where they thought they could make you sleep." She shifted closer to me when I sat down on the couch, not close enough to touch, but I didn't expect her to. Beyond our initial embrace, we hadn't touched again. Physical intimacy had never come easily to Peggy, and those few moments where she'd rested her head against my shoulder or touched my arm meant the world to me.

And, well, it had been seventy-five years, at least on her end. I didn't have the faintest idea how she felt.

"You're welcome to stay here until you have your own place," she offered quietly, as if her thoughts followed the same path as mine. "We'll advance you enough pay to cover it, if you want a job. If not-I'll still help you find somewhere to live."

I glanced at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Technically," she added, her tone deliberately casual, "I should advise you that SHIELD has rules that strictly forbid any sort of fraternization between agents of different rank. Which might possibly be why I'm offering you a job as an independent contractor, and not as an agent."

"Or it could be because I'm not a spy. And if we're getting technical, you aren't an agent." Two could play at the game of semantics.
"You would make a rubbish spy." Peggy smiled softly at me, and the years separating us slipped away. For a moment, it was like we were back in that lodge in Germany. "If there's one thing I learned during the war, it was that you're about as subtle as a bull in a china shop. Who else would tackle a Nazi saboteur in the middle of Times Square?"

"Well, you didn't give me the shield first, so I couldn't chuck it at his head. Didn't even have a shoe to throw at him, for that matter."

"I can't believe you hung onto that shield the whole time. If Howard were still alive, he'd be proud of his work." I realized then that she'd watched everyone we knew grow old and die, that she'd been alone this whole time. "I'm afraid his son is...well. A handful."

"You never, uh, found anyone?" Talk about being like a bull in a china shop. "No kids I should know about?"

"No one." Peggy shrugged. "I'm afraid I've been rather married to the job, as it were. No time for things like that, and I never really found anyone I could tolerate for the long haul. I suppose asking the same question of you is pointless; I don't think you'd be sitting here now if you had someone in another world."

"I had someone in the world I left in the first place." I glanced down at my hands, folded in my lap, and then back up at her. "And look at how well that turned out."

"You did what you had to, Sam." She reached out and placed her hand over mine. "That stupid, reckless bravery is precisely why you were picked for Project Rebirth. Who else would have been capable of doing such a thing? I don't even know that I would have been able to make the same choice. I like to think I would. I've tried to live a life that you would have been proud of, you know, but...I'm not sure I succeeded at that."

"I'm not sure I succeeded at that." I laughed sadly before I reached out for her and tugged her closer, hooking an arm around her waist. "But we've still got plenty of time left to keep trying, and that's the important part, Peg."

"Indeed we do."

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