Red, white and blue; what does it mean to you?

by Odsbodkins

Summary

AU: When war breaks out in Europe in 1939, Steve and Bucky cross the border into Canada, pretend to be Canadian and join the RAF.

"Another two men came through the door. Quite the contrasting pair—one tall and dark, the other one blond and so short that the recruiting officer must have included his hat to get him over the regulation height.

The two introduced themselves as Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers, in accents that John had never expected to hear in the RAF. Naturally he’d heard that some Americans were passing themselves off as Canadian to join in the fight, but…to be entirely honest, he’d thought that they’d be more convincing Canadians."

Notes

The bomber and its crew are taken from the 1942 film "One of Our Aircraft Is Missing", though I have changed people’s positions on the aircraft (and obviously switched out two of the crew for Steve and Bucky).

Title is from the song "There'll Always Be an England".

Avoiding the US's neutrality laws by pretending to be Canadian, and joining the RAF/RCAF certainly happened in the early stages of the war; later it became organised and the Eagle Squadrons were formed. As has been pointed out, Steve and Bucky really should have joined the RCAF rather than the RAF, but since I had an RAF crew in mind I put them into the RAF.

See the end of the work for more notes.

John perched himself on the edge of the table to wait for the rest of the crew. He knew he wasn’t flying with anyone he’d trained with; in fact, all he did know was that their callsign was ‘A for Archie’. Everyone he’d met so far in training had seemed decent sorts, so he had no concerns on that front, but there were definite differences in aptitude. And well, although luck played a good part in it, one’s life could well depend on the aptitude of one’s comrades.

A man, tall and slightly familiar-looking, entered the room. “Are you one of A for Archie?”

“Yes, or at least I will be as soon as we have the kite.” He offered a hand. “John Haggard, second pilot. I say, have we met before? You seem awfully familiar.”

“Frank Shelley, wireless operator, and I don’t think so. Before all this I was an actor, so if you were in the habit of attending the theatre...?”

“Oh, yes, rather keen on the theatre, but I can’t place where I’ve seen you—"

He didn’t work out the name of the play, as his train of thought was interrupted when another two men came into the room. “A for Archie?” They introduced themselves as Tom Earnshaw and Geoff Hickman, a Yorkshireman and a Home Counties countryman, who were rear and front gunners respectively.

Before they had gotten beyond introductions, another two men came through the door. Quite the contrasting pair—one tall and dark, the other one blond and so short that the recruiting officer must have included his hat to get him over the regulation height.

The two introduced themselves as Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers, in accents that John had never expected to hear in the RAF. Naturally he’d heard that some Americans were passing themselves off as Canadian to join in the fight, but...to be entirely honest, he’d thought that they’d be more convincing Canadians.

Tom said, “So where are you two from?”

“Toronto,” said Steve.

Frank raised an eyebrow, “That would be the part of Toronto connected to Manhattan by the Brooklyn Bridge, I take it?”

Bucky rolled his eyes.

Geoff said, “But Manhattan’s New York, isn’t it?”

“That’s rather the point,” said John. “Americans can’t fight without losing their citizenship. But Canadians can.”

Tom look at the two of them, “You’re risking being kicked out of your own country just to help us?”

“No, we aren’t because we’re Canadian,” said Steve.

“Canadian as maple syrup,” said Bucky.

“Oh, right,” said Geoff. “Canadian.”
Tom nodded. “Canadian.”

There was a pause, and Steve said, “You’re the first on this side of the Atlantic to notice.”

Frank said, “Actors have to have an ear for accents. And I’ve played New York a couple of times as well; last time I was there was in ’38.”

“I must say,” said John, “it was rather obvious to me as well. Diplomatic service, rubbed shoulders with all sorts. Dashed noble thing to do, by the way, so none of us are going to blab.”

“Blab what, gentlemen?” That was the Wing Commander coming into the room.

“Oh, that Frank here is a professional actor, and so first choice for any unit am-dram,” said John smoothly.

“Hey,” said Frank, “that’s blabbing. Never trust a diplomat.”

He found out over the next couple of days that they were very decent chaps, all of them. Even for all their quirks, such as Tom’s inability to understand that none of the rest of them were actually interested in sheep farming, or Frank’s devotion to his wife’s singing on the radio, or Geoff’s insistence that Steve and Bucky could be converted from baseball to football.

Steve drew almost all the time he was seated and could legitimately have a pencil in his hand; his notes in briefings were covered with drawings, most of them relevant (maps, silhouettes of aircraft or targets). But when the briefings were dull, he’d draw other people in the room, or the view from the window, or caricatures.

“You should draw us,” said Frank. “A group portrait. I’m sure my wife would love something like that.”

Steve smiled and shook his head, and John thought he wouldn’t do it. But the next day he presented them with a drawing which was a perfect parody of ‘Washington Crossing the Delaware’, with Frank with one foot up on the step of the plane as Washington, and the rest of them gathered around him.

Frank did send it to his wife. “She says that it has pride of place on the wall in the ENSA office. Unfortunately, she also says this is because the girls needed a laugh.”

John had written a couple of discreet letters to some old diplomatic corps friends asking in very general terms about the US government’s position on its citizens serving in Britain. The replies he got were reassuring; not only was Roosevelt’s administration politely looking the other way about individual cases, it was actually ignoring some large-scale organised recruiting of American citizens.

Steve had looked thoughtful at being told this. “But I think we’re still Canadian. I’d rather not draw extra attention.”

That was another interesting thing. Steve and Bucky, although they were the youngest in their crew (Steve was not quite twenty-two), were both Flight Lieutenants, which meant that they must have been very impressive during the short amount of time they’d been in the RAF. In the few days of training together, it emerged naturally that in the air, or in briefings, there was no question that Bucky was Skipper, Bucky was in charge; but anything less formal and the roles reversed so that Steve (all five-foot-four of him) was the de facto leader of their little group.

The crews were all waiting around for their next briefing, taking advantage of the sunshine to sit outside (and rather hoping that they weren’t going to be rudely interrupted by the Luftwaffe).
Geoff said, “Per’aps you should take voice lessons from Frank.”

“North American accents are not my forte,” said Frank.

“Oh aye?” said Tom. “Let’s hear you butcher their accents then.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Only fair,” said Geoff, “Bucky’s butchered mine twice.”

“Oi ‘ave not,” said Bucky, in a bizarre accent that even the most charitable listener would not have identified with Geoff’s. The rest of them winced collectively.

“Buck, no,” said Steve.

“He started it.”

“All I said was baseball is a fine game for girls.”

“Payback for that should be your chocolate ration for the next year at least. I swear, if you said that in some neighborhoods back home, you’d be a dead man.”

Edmund, a chap John had trained with, and pilot of ‘C for Charlie’, leaned over and tapped John on the shoulder. “I say, mum’s the word and all that, but the jungle telegraph says tomorrow we’re on a little outing to the Happy Valley.”

Calling the Ruhr Valley the Happy Valley was more than a little sarcastic. It had the heaviest air defences of anywhere in Germany, protecting refineries and factories.

“Are you sure?” asked Steve.

“Well, as sure as one can be with a rumour, old thing. Birdie heard it from Harry, who heard it from the delightful Deborah, who knows everything about everything.”

“Quite the thing for a first outing, isn’t it?” said John.

“Quite.” Edmund grinned, “So all of you chaps will be joining us in the pub tonight?”

The jungle telegraph was indeed right. He didn’t say anything, but John was sure they hadn’t had enough training, enough flying hours either individually or as a crew to be going out on operations. Before he left, he tuck a letter into the sheets of his bunk—his goodbyes to his sisters and mother. Just in case.

All the training in the world wouldn’t have been a true preparation for taking actual flak, or for dodging fighters, the wind whistling through the bullet and shrapnel holes in the fuselage. Nonetheless, they were a well-oiled machine, and no-one lost their head.

As they closed on their target there was only one plane of their squadron, C for Charlie, that was close enough for them to see, illuminated in flashes of flak, and occasionally picked out by searchlights. Steve had just asked permission to come forward to the bomb aiming position when there was a blinding flash and blast wave and… C for Charlie wasn’t there anymore.

“Shit!” said Bucky.

“What the bloody hell were that?” asked Tom.
John realised that only he, Bucky and Geoff had actually seen the explosion. "That- that was C for Charlie. Must have caught a direct hit to their payload."

"Parachutes?" asked Steve.

"Ain’t nothing left to parachute from."

There was an unreality to it, something that made it seem like a mock-up for a film—instead of the fact that they had just seen six of their friends die in front of them.

Perhaps that made it easier to carry on with the mission, bomb their target, and head home.

As Bucky cut the engines, John worried that the others would see how badly he was shaking. But all six of them virtually fell out of the plane, bumped shoulders as they walked, didn’t talk.

They split up, went their separate ways after they reported in. They were supposed to sleep then; John knew he wouldn’t and guessed that none of the others had headed for their bunks either. He walked out into the countryside, wandered the lanes, not going anywhere in particular. A few hours later, his head a little clearer, he returned to find the rest of A for Archie in a quiet and half-empty mess hall. He tried not to look at the spaces where the lost crews should have been sitting.

Bucky looked at Steve, who was fidgeting with a napkin and said quietly, “I’m sure we hit the refinery.”

“That size explosion?” Tom answered. “‘Course we did.”

Steve said, “I want to be sure that we’re not hitting anything other than the target.”

“The Germans haven’t much cared about civilian casualties—” started Frank.

“That’s the point. We have to be better than them.” Steve looked at all of them with an intensity that John had rarely seen in anyone before. “I’m not here because I want to kill people. I’m here because this war is *wrong*. They should be stopped.”

There was a pause before Geoff said, “I once met a lovely girl from Stuttgart. A nurse she was. Wouldn’t want to think I was killing any lovely girls like her. So you keep on being sure that we’re hitting the right places.”

The others nodded in agreement, and John felt a little weight he’d been carrying lift. He’d hated hearing “the only good German is a dead German”; he’d met some rather decent Germans before the war and didn’t think that the declaration of hostilities meant that decent Germans had suddenly ceased to exist. John was very aware that he was involved with killing people who barely more than a year ago he could well have been seated opposite from in a pleasant cafe somewhere. So he was grateful that he was flying with these particular men; not just competent, but humane as well.

Over the next three sorties, A for Archie gained a reputation for precision, for good flying, and for being a close-knit crew—insult one, and you insulted all of them. Among themselves, they might make jokes about Tom’s sheep or Steve’s height, but woe betide an outsider who did the same.

Steve’s height was a decided advantage in a number of matters. Not only was the chap the only one of them who fitted comfortably in their kite, but he could also be easily pushed through even the smallest window on the base. Naturally, the diligent and efficient crew of A for Archie were the last people anyone was looking for when, for example, the quartermaster found that a somewhat annoyed duck had been introduced into his locked office overnight.
It also meant that he could get the whole crew in his car. Being a sporty little model, it was rather a squeeze with four people in it, so six was definitely ridiculous—but just about possible if the three in the back didn’t mind being crushed together, and Steve rode in the front footwell.

The extra weight did terrible things to the acceleration and the fuel consumption, so given petrol rationing, they only made infrequent jaunts in the car.

“Must be a little different sitting on that side and not driving,” said John.

Bucky grinned, “You gonna teach me to drive on the other side of the road?”

“I don’t know. It’s one thing to have you at the controls of government property, but quite another to risk you at the wheel of dear Valerie.” John patted the dashboard fondly.

The dances were close enough that they didn’t need to take the car. They all went, even though Frank was married and Tom engaged; it did one good to get out, even if the two of them and Steve never actually danced. Both he and Geoff had the occasional dance, and Bucky was barely off the dancefloor for the whole night.

It was at the second of these dances that when Bucky briefly passed by their table to grab a drink, Geoff said, “Reckon you’ve danced with every girl here.”

“Barely danced with half of them.”

“I’m sure you could, though,” said John, “if you put your mind to it.”

“Not every British girl goes weak at the knees for an American accent,” said Tom.

“Canadian,” chorused the rest of them.

Bucky grinned. “Wanna bet?”

“Aye, you’re on. Three shillings says you can’t get a dance with every girl in here. And I do mean every.”

“You’re counting from the start of the evening, yeah? So I don’t have to dance with anyone I’ve already danced with?” Tom nodded, and Bucky grinned. “Deal. Every girl. You just watch.”

Bucky practically ran back to the dancefloor.

Steve shook his head and said, “You should start finding those three shillings now.”

John watched Bucky’s progress. The chap approached the task with complete honesty and told the girls that he’d been bet that he couldn’t dance with every girl there. Then he followed it with compliments and just straightforwardly asking nicely, so by the third number there was an orderly queue of girls who would step in, be whirled around by a beaming Bucky for two turns of the dancefloor, and then swap with the next girl.

Half an hour later, Bucky practically collapsed at their table. Steve pushed a pint in front of him, and Bucky drained it in one go.

“So,” he said breathlessly, “I reckon I’ve got those five girls sitting by the band to go. I miss anyone?”

Tom smiled. “Just Doris.”
They all looked over at the bar. Doris was a solid late middle-aged woman who ran the bar with an iron fist—and had been known to bodily throw out rowdy customers.

Bucky grinned. “Just you wait.”

They watched him dance with the five girls (three of whom took some persuading, and it seemed as much a lesson in dancing as anything). Then, pausing only to be handed another pint by Steve for fortification, Bucky headed to the bar. It was a shame they couldn’t hear what was said from where they were sitting, and it wouldn’t do to walk into earshot.

Bucky was leaning over the bar, an easy smile on his face. He’d expected there to be a long period of negotiation, but Doris grinned back and was slipping around the side of the bar to take his hand.

Frank said, “Now that is impressive.”

“They’ve still got to actually dance,” Tom replied.

But dance she did, with both enthusiasm and some skill. She and Bucky monopolised the dancefloor for the next two numbers, and John thought they’d have been there longer if Doris’s eagle eye hadn’t spotted a couple of chaps using her absence to try and get one over on the other barmaid.

The evening was winding down, and they walked out as a group. Tom handed over Bucky’s winnings with good grace. “How did you get Doris to dance?”

“Her late husband was a big dancer.” Bucky was grinning, and had barely stopped grinning all evening. “She’d been waiting for someone to ask.”

“Some lads is just born lucky,” said Geoff.

John smiled happily. It was strange to think that he’d met these chaps a little over two months ago, and now he was thinking of them as family.

So it was very concerning when, a few days later, after their latest sortie, Tom and Geoff came into the mess with faces like thunder.

“I say—” started John.


He glanced at Steve, Bucky, and Frank, but only received blank looks in return. They all followed Tom and Geoff off the base and into the countryside to a small copse at the edge of some farmland.

“So what is this about?” Frank wanted to know.

Tom nodded at Steve and Bucky. “About them two. They’re a pair of fairies.”

“What?” John asked.

“You heard. Me and Geoff, we’d gone for a walk, and we saw the two of them…together.”

“And don’t you try saying that we got the wrong idea. Couldn’t get any other idea, if you get my meaning.”

John looked at Steve and Bucky. Both were standing very still and had gone pale, Bucky with his eyes cast down. Well, that was a turn-up. John knew they were close, but he’d never have guessed.
“We thought about going straight to the CO, but—we’re a bloody good crew and—oh, bloody hell, I don’t know what to do. We’ve spent three hours talking and we still don’t know.”

Frank calmly took out a cigarette and lit it. “I’ve spent more than a decade in the theatre. If working with queers bothered me, I’d have found a new career a long time ago.”

John shrugged. “Not the first chaps I’ve worked with who’ve batted for the other side.”

“You don’t mind at all?” said Geoff incredulously.

John and Frank both shook their heads.

“I knew city boys was different, but I didn’t know how different,” said Geoff.

“That’s not the point. It’s—they’re—it’s immoral, is what it is. Never mind that it should get the pair of them kicked out of the air force.”

“Seems rather a shame to do that after they’ve made such an effort for us,” said John.

“What it seems is that me and Geoff are the only ones here as know right from wrong. Perhaps if some of the rest of you ever showed your face in church—"

“Well, ‘thou shalt not kill’ seems rather negotiable for the duration, so why not this?” said Frank. “And half the squadron is regularly committing adultery, but you’re not having a meeting about them.”

“That’s different—"

“Why? It’s all in the good book, isn’t it?”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, until finally Steve said, “If you want a compromise, we could ask to be reassigned.”

“Do you know how few flying hours some of the new crews are being sent on ops with?” said Frank. “If you two are asking to be reassigned, I’m coming with you.”

“That’s why we’re not in the CO’s office,” said Geoff, “we’re too good to split us up.” He turned to Steve and Bucky. “Haven’t you two tried to...not?”

“Course we have. Didn’t work,” said Bucky, without looking up.

Steve looked at them, and said quietly but firmly, “This is how it is. That’s our decision. What you do about it, that’s yours.” He slid his hand into Bucky’s and held it.

That made Bucky look up, turn to Steve, and smile. Well, if the pair of them had been going around looking at each other like that, John would certainly have cottoned on that there was something going on between them.

There was another long silence. Tom and Geoff shared a look. Eventually, Tom said, “I don’t like it. But I like the idea of splitting this crew even less. Don’t mean you can start rubbing our noses in it.”

“I shall call the vicar and tell him the wedding’s cancelled,” said Frank.

“And after we’d gone to the trouble of sewing rank insignia on the wedding dress,” John put in.

“This isn’t funny,” Tom snapped. “And did you two know?”
“Not a clue,” said John.

Frank shrugged. “Some suspicions, but nothing more than that.”

Steve said firmly, “I don’t care what you do on the ground, but when we’re in the air, we’re still a crew. You don’t question his orders because of this.”

Tom and Geoff nodded. Tom said, “I’ll see you in the briefing tomorrow,” turned on his heel, and walked away.

Geoff hesitated before he said, “You seem like good lads. But I can’t...you’ve got to know this isn’t right.” He walked away.

John stuck his hands in his pockets. Everything had been going so well.

Bucky kicked at a stick. “Sorry.”

“It takes two sides to make an argument,” said Frank. “And though I’d rather not take sides, I think I’d take yours over theirs.”

“Don’t,” said Steve. “Don’t take sides. Don’t make it about sides. This—" he looked down. “I understand why they think like that. I—I believe God will forgive us. But they don’t.”

John said, “I don’t think I’d be half the man about this as you’re being.”

“Yeah, well, if we didn’t roll with the punches, we wouldn’t be here,” Bucky replied.

There was a long silence. It seemed that everything that needed to be said had been said, so John inclined his head to Frank, and the two of them walked off together, leaving Steve and Bucky alone in the copse.

Once they were out of earshot, Frank raised an eyebrow and said, “They meant it when they said war makes strange bedfellows.”

There was a moment, and then they both burst out laughing.

Frank glanced behind them before he said, “They do make for quite the odd couple. Even apart from the obvious.”

“I don’t have the foggiest what girls see in chaps, let alone what a chap might see in another chap.”

“You’ve got sisters, though, haven’t you? If you were going to think of who they’d want to ask them out on a date in this crew, you’d probably say Bucky; Steve would be last on the list.”

He thought for a moment. “Bucky and you first, Steve and Geoff last, Tom somewhere in the middle.”

“You’re too kind.”

John tutted. “And you a married man—"

Frank smiled, “Merely making a point. From what I gather, the rules for what we thespians would call omipalones are the same as for everyone else—the handsome chaps end up with handsome chaps.”

“Omipa—what?”
“Omipalone. Omi being man, palone being woman.”

“You’re pulling my leg.”

“Thespian’s honour, a word of grand old tradition. I’m sure that dear Oscar Wilde would have known it.”

They walked for a while in silence before Frank said, “Do you think Tom really will still take orders from Bucky?”

John thought for a moment. “Yes. I don’t think he’ll stop being angry, but he’s a man of his word.”

He was right. While on the ground there was a distinct coldness between some of them, but in the air A for Archie was still a well-oiled machine; a little grit in the gears, maybe, in the form of some stilted words over the comms, but that cleared quickly enough. Their next sortie was as routine as such things ever were in wartime; some losses, but not bad.

The mission after that started out seeming routine enough, but the weather started closing in before they’d even made their target. They had a quick debate about turning back before deciding that because the weather reports had said this would blow over, they should continue. It was already requiring a lot of work to keep her steady by the time bombs were away, and a few minutes after they’d turned for home the storm really hit.

The plane was being tossed about in the air like a child’s toy, and John caught a nasty wallop as they dropped a few hundred feet without warning. Navigation was becoming a nightmare—Tom and Geoff had stopped looking for enemy fighters at all, just searching for any landmark they could gauge their position from. John took station at the bomb aiming window, looking for anything familiar under him.

There was no chatter over the comms, only clipped observations and instructions, until finally, after having spent far longer in the air than they’d intended, they came in to land, aiming almost sideways across the runway to take into account the crosswind as they came in.

As they taxied from the runway, Geoff said, “Well, Skipper, even if it turns out that we’ve just landed in Frankfurt, that was a lovely landing—under the circumstances.”

“Good to hear you have confidence in my navigation,” said Steve.

“Proof of the pudding’s in the eating. If it’s our boys, I’ll say that was lovely navigating; if it’s all angry Germans, it wasn’t.”

They had made it to their home airfield and were only the second of the squadron back. Three had turned for home because of the weather before reaching the target; of those, so far only R for Rosie had landed. They headed for the mess to wait for news of the others.

“Look at your head,” said Tom.

John put his hand to his face and found that it was sticky with half-dried blood. He hadn’t even noticed he’d cut his head when he hit it.

“Doctor—” started Steve.

“I’m all right, I’ll just go and clean myself up.”

He was quite the gory sight in the mirror, deathly pale with the right half of his face covered in
blood. The cut was just at his hairline and already scabbing over. John’s hands shook uncontrollably as he ran the taps and began to wash his face.

Even in here, you could always hear the rumble of aircraft engines, whatever the weather.

All he could hear was the rain and his own ragged breathing.

He rejoined the others in the mess. There were just the six of them; the ground crew were either asleep or working, and R for Rosie had all accompanied their second pilot to the medics (the report was that he had been knocked about, but would recover).

Bucky lifted a bottle of whisky and waved it in his direction. John nodded, and Bucky poured him a glass, his hands trembling so hard that the mouth of the bottle clattered against the rim of the glass.

There was a long silence, still empty of aircraft noise.

Geoff said carefully, “I think it’s got to mean something. That we got back safe through that.”

“Good luck, good navigation, and good flying,” Frank put in.

“That’s what I was meaning. It was right Old Testament out there. And we’re back here, due to his navigation and his flying.”

“We get lucky on one mission and you suddenly think all that’s just grand, do you?” asked Tom.

“Most missions it’s Germans shooting at us. Not forces of nature. This was different.”

John had napped through most of his religious instruction in school, and although he would describe himself as firmly Church of England, he was a little hazy on the details. So a theological debate between a Baptist and a Methodist concerning two Catholics was going rather over his head. He shared a look with Frank, who just shrugged.

Neither Steve nor Bucky seemed particularly invested in the debate, either. John supposed that if you were that sort of chap, you had to develop a thick skin about what other people thought about you.

But it was a welcome distraction from the silence, as Geoff and Tom picked the Bible off the shelf and started arguing passages with each other.

Then Frank sat bolt upright. “Engines!”

Two more of their squadron landed in quick succession, and their crews joined them in the mess. They all talked about the weather, cursing the forecasters for a little while, but conversation gradually tailed off. Everyone knew how much fuel they carried. Very soon they would be at the point where no-one else could possibly be coming home.

At the point they had just about given up on any of the others, they heard engines again. E for Eric made it, landing on little more than fumes and hope. Shortly after that there was a call that P for Peter had landed at a naval air station in Kent, and her crew were being thoroughly mocked for their navigational skills by a mess full of sailors.

They kept waiting.

Squadron strength was twelve planes; all twelve had gone out that night. Short of a very unlikely circumstance, they’d lost half. The crews might have bailed, or ditched; they might have parachuted down somewhere in England, or parachuted over Europe and been taken prisoner, or be trying to
make their way back to Blighty.

They might.

The squadron was stood down for a few days, and the weather brightened into an Indian Summer, like the storm had never happened.

The chaps needed cheering up: get off base, even if no-one would give them a 48 hour pass. “We should have a picnic.”

“A picnic,” said Tom.

“This could be the last nice day of the year. We’ll take the car, drive up to the hills, have a lovely day out and a picnic.”

“Where are we going to get a picnic from?” asked Geoff. “Them ladies in the NAAFI aren’t vulnerable to being charmed into making us extra sandwiches.”

“Watch and learn, boys,” said Bucky, “watch and learn.”

It truly was educational. Bucky, instead of his usual swagger, approached with a chewed lip and upturned eyes, almost blushing. He genuinely used the phrase ‘aw, shucks’, which John had never previously heard cross his lips, as well as telling the ladies that John and Steve needed feeding up. That was a bit rich. He might have been on the slender side, but he wasn’t that bad.

Frank whispered, “And to think all that talent charming women is going to waste.”

“It’s not going to waste if it’s getting us a good lunch,” John whispered back.

It did indeed get them lunch, sneaked out of the back of the NAAFI, and accompanied by one of the stolid matrons of the NAAFI pinching Steve on the cheek and telling him to get a good feed. They also borrowed an oilcloth, as the ground was still rather wet from the storm. With all that on board it was a triumph of engineering that his car moved at all, let alone that it still managed a respectable speed.

They left the car and walked out onto the heath until they found a little depression, enough to shelter from the wind, and spread their groundsheet. The picnic consisted in its entirety of rather too few corned beef sandwiches—a little dull, but one made do.

Geoff said, “Do Americans—"

“Canadians,” chorused the others automatically.

“—have picnics?”

“Yeah. Church picnic was our summer treat when we were kids. Only as far as the park, though,” said Steve.

Bucky waved a sandwich. “But church picnics have better food than this.”

“You can blame the Jerries for that,” said Frank.

“This is awfully nice though,” said John. “The food could be improved, but I couldn’t ask for better company, or better weather for the time of year.”

Frank raised his canteen. “To A for Archie, and the promise of a better picnic when all this blows
over.”

The others all raised their canteens—including, after a hesitation, Tom—and joined in the toast.

Tom paused and then said, “Don’t think this means I think that sort of thing is right. But you’re not bad lads. Misguided, that’s all. My mum’d say that’s what you get when you let men in dresses run your church.”

John smiled. “If all Catholics were like that, we’d be running short of Catholics.”

“Aye,” said Tom. “But you can breed off an unwilling ram, if you just—”

“I don’t wanna know!” said Bucky, quickly, hands at the ready to stick his fingers in his ears.

“Just how unwilling was this ram?” asked Frank. “Has it occured to you that what you might have on your hands is a queer sheep?”

“No—you don’t get—” Tom opened and shut his mouth a couple of times, before sitting back and looking thoughtful.

“Farm in our village, their bull would mount anything cow-shaped,” said Geoff. “It got out one day and made an awful mess of their new car.”

Bucky made a strangled noise and curled into the fetal position with his hands over his ears as the others laughed.

Geoff shook his head. “City boys aren’t half delicate, aren’t they?”

Steve had a reassuring hand on Bucky’s shoulder, but he was now grinning. He lifted one of Bucky’s hands from his ear and said, “Geoff said you were delicate.”

Bucky sat up, faux-menacing, and Geoff put his hands up, “Never said you was a bad fighter. But when it comes to nature, red in tooth and claw and all that, the four of you don’t know what to do with yourselves.”

“Guilty as charged,” said John. “Happy not to know one end of a sheep from another.”

The conversation tailed off as they all relaxed in the afternoon sunshine. John dozed and woke with a crick in his neck. He rolled over to rub at it and saw that Tom and Frank seemed to be asleep, and Geoff was contentedly watching the clouds. Steve was lying with his head pillowed on Bucky’s chest, Bucky’s hand around the back of his neck, one thumb stroking the short hair at his nape.

The two of them didn’t move from that position when Tom woke up and looked over at them. But Tom didn’t say anything; he just stretched and lay back down again.

It was just lovely, but it had to end eventually, and they had to bring themselves back to reality. Not that reality had ever been far away; they were all still in uniform, and even out here, there was still the faint sound of aircraft engines.

In their next briefing there were an awful lot of new faces, but the mission was familiar, yet another raid on factories in western Germany. Initially, everything went well, and again they hit their target. Then there was a crash that shook the aircraft.

“We’ve been hit!”

John looked out the windows. “Starboard engine’s shot. Port’s just barely making it.”
They turned around and limped for home, but after a few minutes the port engine gave up as well.

Bucky gave the orders: destroy the codes, prepare to abandon aircraft. Steve had just noted the course of a railway underneath them as a rendezvous point when the port engine failed. They bailed out, fortunately without losing anyone, and found each other without too much difficulty.

But they’d bailed out in a heavily watched area; they had barely regrouped when a large patrol came across them—though they were all carrying pistols, they weren’t going to get the better of a heavily armed ten-man troop, so they surrendered. They were marched through the streets and to a barracks, where a second set of German soldiers joined them. John’s German was good, though not quite fluent, so he understood the debate that ensued. It seemed that the soldiers who had found them were part of some subdivision of the Wehrmacht called HYDRA and were claiming them as their own prisoners; the regular Wehrmacht, who were in the majority, were saying that all prisoners were to be taken to some central processing bureau.

There was something distinctly off about these HYDRA chaps, and John was hoping that the regulars would win the argument. Unfortunately, there was a phone call; a lorry soon arrived and they were driven away by the HYDRA soldiers, even as the explosions of the bombing raid continued.

It was hard to tell exactly where they were going; the guards sat by the rear of the lorry, obscuring what little view there was out of the back.

“Where are you taking us?” asked Bucky. Their guards looked at them blankly.

“Wohin gehen wir?” tried John, but he only got the same blank looks. These chaps were unlike any Germans he’d ever met before, even when he’d had the misfortune to be on the edge of a Nazi rally. They were almost like automata, animated only when they had a task to perform.

He’d guess that they were going into the countryside—they’d been driving for hours, and the ride was getting bumpier and bumpier. The six of them were sat in silence, waiting to see what would happen. Then the lorry hit a large pothole, and Steve gasped in pain.

“Steve?” There was just a slight quaver in Bucky’s voice.

“’M fine.” Steve almost mumbled that, which was out of character.

John said, “Chin up, old thing.”

Steve didn’t say anything, and that in itself was worrying. John slid along the bench to be closer to Steve and felt that Bucky had already put an arm around Steve’s shoulder. He just barely heard the suppressed gasp Steve gave as they hit another pothole.

It was another hour before they finally stopped, and were taken out of the lorry. It was so dark that he couldn’t see much, but there was a silhouette of a very large building, which gave the impression of a factory. They were marched inside, the brightness of the lights stinging his eyes. To anyone who didn’t know him, it wouldn’t have been obvious there was anything wrong with Steve, but John could see his suppressed winces, the slight oddness to the way he was walking. The others seemed fine though, and at least Steve was still walking.

They paused and an officer looked them over.

“We’re prisoners of war and one of us is sick,” said Bucky. “That means you gotta get us a doctor.”

The officer gave no reaction. John tried saying the same thing in German, but he didn’t get any
“Hey! You ain’t deaf, and if you don’t understand me, you understand him. We’re POWs. Verstehen?”

The officer inclined his head to the guards and they were marched away, through a set of corridors, to a large fetid-smelling room lined with cages. They were all pushed into a cage, and the door locked behind him.

“Hey! Guard! You’re gonna get us a doctor!”

The guard ignored Bucky and just walked up and down the room.

“Where are you hurt?” asked Geoff.

“Ribs,” said Steve quietly. “Hit the edge of the hatch when we bailed.”

“Let’s have a look,” said Frank. “Though I warn you, my first aid training was all of two hours long.”

Steve undid his heavy flying coat, then the uniform underneath. There was a large red mark across the left side of his chest, and it seemed he’d broken at least two ribs. They took their scarves and strapped up Steve’s chest the best they could. While they were doing that, the lights snapped off, and a grinding noise of mechanical shutters above them revealed windows high in the wall, showing starlight. Prisoners obviously didn’t get electric light wasted on them.

The cage was solid, and they couldn’t get the guards’ attention, let alone distract them; although escape was the first order of business, there was no chance of doing so right now. So they all curled up as best they could to sleep, Steve sleeping upright because of his chest, propped against Bucky.

Soon after morning light filtered through the high windows, six small bowls of gruel and larger canteens of water were pushed through the bars of the cage. They tried again to communicate with their guards and got nothing.

“We’ll have been reported missing by now,” said Tom.

“They should tell our lads that we’ve been captured,” Geoff agreed.

“No-one’s asked us our names,” Steve said.

There was a moment while that sank in. Such a little thing on the surface, but it meant they weren’t being acknowledged as prisoners. As far as anyone knew, they’d gone down with their plane. They had none of the protection of POWs, and these HYDRA types seemed the sort—well, the sort for whom keeping prisoners in cages was just the start.

They were quiet for the longest time, until eventually Geoff said, “We’re going to miss the big game.”

“And Frank’s wife is due to be singing on the radio again this evening,” John put in.

“You think these chaps would lend us a radio? Not much of a chance of getting a Forces Programme signal out here, but it’s worth a try,” said Frank.

“More important, it were steak pie on the menu for dinner tonight,” Tom lamented.

“That ain’t any steak I’d ever recognise,” said Bucky.
The floor was concrete; the bars were welded metal. When their meagre meals arrived, the men who brought them were accompanied by heavily armed guards, and the door of their cage was never unlocked anyway. Unless something else happened, there wasn’t a chance of escaping.

Everything had been confiscated from their pockets—they had no cards, no paper and pencils, not even their cigarettes. So the time was passing like treacle. The guard walked up the room, turned, walked back. Again. And again.

It was only the sun crossing the high windows, gruel three times a day, nightfall and then daylight again, that told John that time hadn’t stopped altogether.

That and the way Steve was slumping more against Bucky, his breathing increasingly laboured. They asked for doctors again and again—still no response. By the second evening, Steve was in such a state that Bucky shifted their position, sitting Steve between his legs, holding him as he talked nonsense and making him drink water.

The rest of them tried to keep Steve’s spirits up as well; Frank told funny theatre anecdotes, John told stories of places he’d been. Geoff even promised to learn the rules of baseball.

John woke up in the middle of the night, looking over to Steve and Bucky automatically. Steve looked tiny sleeping in Bucky’s arms. Bucky was awake, looking down at Steve, the moonlight showing clearly the tracks of tears down his face.

John was about to close his eyes and pretend to be sleeping (it didn’t do to let a chap know that you’d seen him crying) when Bucky looked straight at him and beckoned him over. He sat next to the two of them. Steve hadn’t stirred.

Bucky whispered, “You’re second in command. You get a chance to get out of here, you take it, and you take the others with you.”

“You’re not seriously asking us to leave both of you behind.” whispered John.

“I ain’t asking. I’m ordering. You know I can’t leave him, and he ain’t going anywhere like this. The four of you though—you speak German and French, Frank’s an actor, John and Geoff know the countryside, you’ve got the best chance of any crew to get back to England. Without us.”

“Without me,” Steve whispered, opening his eyes.

“I don’t like it,” said John.

“Neither do I,” said Tom, sitting up.

Geoff turned on his side and said, “Me neither.”

“Nor me,” Frank put in. “So it looks like we get out together or not at all.”

“You’re a bunch of idiots,” said Bucky.

“That’s as maybe,” said Tom. “But we’re a crew of idiots, and we’re sticking together.”
“I say,” said John, “Given that you two chaps are the ranking officers, is this technically a mutiny?”

“I’m prepared to stand in front of a court martial for not giving up on my crewmates,” said Tom.

“That’s settled, then,” said Frank. “Our navigator gets better, we get free, and he navigates our way home. Simple as that.”

“Idiots,” repeated Bucky, but there was a hint of a smile on his face, echoed in Steve’s expression.

In the morning, after they had eaten, two new figures came through the door, accompanied by a squad of guards. The two men were in white coats; the bearded chap stopped when he saw them and was shoved in the back with a gun by one of the guards. It seemed that he was as much a prisoner as they were.

They all stood up, Steve needing to be supported by both Bucky and Frank to stay upright.

The shorter white coated man said in German, “Choose your subject, Dr. Erskine.”

“Subject?” said John, in German. “We are prisoners of war, and we have rights.”

“Your German is good,” said Erskine in English. His eyes flicked to the guards, “But I find I have little choice in the matter. One of you is to be a test subject.”

“Everyone has a choice,” said Steve, firmly, even as Frank and Bucky were bracing him to stop him swaying.

“You would die for such a choice?” asked Erskine.

“Yes,” said Steve with absolute conviction.

“So you would volunteer to spare the others?”

“Yes.”

They all began to object, but Bucky was the most strident. “I’m in charge, and I’m responsible for all of them. You take anybody, and you take me.”

Erskine looked at the other man. “I will take two subjects. They have both volunteered—”

“Oberführer Schmidt was quite clear that he wished for one subject.”

“What is science without comparison? Two subjects will allow me to test simultaneously, to compare. And are they not the most contrasting of the prisoners?”

The other man seemed doubtful, but nodded to the guards anyway.

The door to the cage was unlocked, but there were eight guards pointing guns at them—too many to consider trying to rush them. Bucky looped an arm under Steve’s arms, and they walked out slowly. Bucky looked over his shoulder and said, “John, you’re in charge. Gave you your orders last night.”

The guards slammed their cage door and locked it again. The four of them stood by the bars, watching as Steve and Bucky were taken away.

A pall of silence hung over them. John knew there wasn’t anything that he could have done, nothing that any of them could have done against those odds. It didn’t stop him feeling that he should have done it anyway, that a futile and fatal gesture would have been better than being left here like this.
They were brought gruel and water at lunchtime as usual, though they all barely touched it, and the same in the evening. None of them talked.

It had just become dark when they both heard and felt a low boom.

“That’s not one of ours,” said Tom. “No engine noise.”

“An accident?” Geoff guessed.

“Resistance fighters? We were pretty close to the border,” said Frank.

There was another boom, and now machine gun fire, and some other noises John couldn’t identify. The booms and weapons fire continued, seeming to be getting nearer. The four of them stood up, ready to take advantage of the situation if possible. Their guards had initially paused, and now were conferring by the door—obviously wondering if they should stay at their posts or investigate the disturbance.

Suddenly, the heavy metal door exploded inwards, flattening the three guards under it. As the dust cleared, he saw three figures coming towards their cage. It took him a moment to recognise that one of them was Bucky, another Erskine, and the other—“Steve?”

This man had Steve’s face, but the Steve he knew was a five-foot-four rake, not a broad-shouldered six-footer.

Bucky was unlocking the door to their cage. “Yeah, it’s him. Not sure I’d believe it if I hadn’t seen it happen.”

“The procedure has been more successful that I would have dared hope, but I believe we should be leaving,” said Erskine.

“Dr. Erskine helped us escape,” said Steve, “He’s coming with us. We can trust him.”

John took a proper look at Steve. It was unquestionably him—not just the facial features, but something about the way he was holding himself. He was barefoot, and had lost his shirt, jacket, and flying coat. His undershirt, which previously had been loose, was now stretched across his chest; the uniform trousers that had always been far too large and held up only by his belt now fit at the waist but were far too short. Even the identity bracelet which had always been in danger of slipping off Steve’s wrist now looked a little tight.

The four of them were all staring, somewhat lost for words.

“We need to move,” said Steve.

“There is an entrance for the railway at the north of the complex. I believe that it will be the least… busy,” Erskine suggested.

Bucky said, “We triggered a couple of bombs, and there’s a fire in the armory which should keep ‘em bus—” He was interrupted by a blast that shook the building and blew out all the windows above them. They all ducked as glass rained down on them, and John’s ears rang so he couldn’t hear anything else.

Steve made a standing jump that must have been more than ten feet to clear the glass and get to the door, then beckoned the rest of them to follow. Tom paused to pick a gun off one of the guards, and John and Geoff followed his example.
Steve ran easily, and (surprisingly, given his size) silently. He was ahead of them, looking out, Bucky just behind him, the rest of them a little further back. Erskine was just about managing to keep pace with them, but he was looking tired.

So when Steve yelled “Down!” Erskine was that second too slow. The hail of machine-gun fire passed over the rest of their heads but hit him in the chest as he was ducking down. They returned fire, and although John wasn’t sure which of them actually hit the chap with the machine-gun, he thought it was unlikely it was him. Steve had doubled back and was holding Erskine.

Erskine jabbed a finger at Steve’s chest, then slumped back, dead.

But there was no time to reflect, as there was another explosion. They were deep in Nazi territory, on a military base that was exploding around their ears, and they had to keep moving.

They ran, managing to dodge the few guards who weren’t fighting the fires, out along the railway lines and then veered off into the countryside. They kept going all through the night, not having to say that if the search for the culprits responsible for the destruction of the base hadn’t started, it certainly would at first light. As the sky changed to the grey of pre-dawn, they took cover in a small wooded valley.

“Keep our heads down in daylight,” said Steve. “Move again at night.”

To be honest, John was about ready to drop. They’d kept up a punishing pace all night, and that was the most exercise he’d done since his initial training. Frank looked to be in as bad a state as he was; Tom and Geoff looked to be faring a little better, but Bucky and Steve looked fresh, like they hadn’t exerted themselves at all.

After Frank had flopped to the ground, he said, “You’ve been running all night in bare feet. We should look at bandaging them, at least.”

“They’re fine,” said Steve.

Frank looked at him incredulously, and Steve sat down to let them examine his feet. There were a few marks and some cuts that looked like they were already healing—but they’d run over asphalt, along railway gravel, then rocky country ground. His feet should have been mincemeat. Whatever had been done to him, it hadn’t just made him taller and stronger.

“Right,” said Tom. “If we’re stopping here for a while, you’re going to tell us what happened to you.”

“Uh. It’s kinda hazy to begin with—” said Steve.

“‘Cause you were more’n half dead,” said Bucky. “They took us to a lab. Started off like any medical—height, weight, things like that. Asked us a bunch of medical questions we didn’t answer. Then tested how much we could lift, our reaction times. That took half of the day. Then they take me and strap me into a thing like a metal coffin, and Erskine says that this is a test, at ‘75% potency’. So he jabs me in the arm with something and shuts the coffin, then there’s a bright light and it hurts like nothing’s ever hurt in my life. I practically fall out of that thing, don’t feel much different, just glad that it ain’t hurting no more. The short guy was looking disappointed, but Erskine just moves on to Steve, and all I see is that he’s fussing and taking an age to strap Steve into that machine—”

“He was telling me his plan,” said Steve. “That the machine should make me stronger; if it worked, he would overload the system, which would blow up, and give us a diversion. Said that he had maps
and a compass and a contact—"

"Which are all in here," said Bucky, tapping his jacket pocket.

"I think if we hadn’t been there, he’d have escaped on his own," continued Steve. He looked down. "Perhaps if we hadn’t, then he would have made it."

"You can’t know that," said Geoff. "He didn’t seem built for daring escapes."

"Speaking of being built for things, are you telling us that one injection and a session in a machine did all that to you?" asked Tom.

Steve shrugged. "Yeah. And I’ve no idea what was in either. He said that he hadn’t written down the instructions for the real formula, or the details of the machine, to try and stop anyone else using them. I wish—I wish we’d gotten him out of there. He was a good man."

"‘Let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter,’” said John. “The Iliad.”

“That’s all well and good for Greeks, but I’m rather keen on keeping on living if possible,” said Frank. “So what’s our plan?”

“We’re on the border, and we’ve got a contact in France who was supposed to link Erskine up with people who could get him to England. Her name’s Hélène, and we’ve got a location and a description.”

“I just hope an escape plan made for one little scientist works for six big airmen,” said Geoff.

There was a pause and Tom asked, “That stuff cured your chest… did it cure…you know?"

Steve glanced at Bucky, then looked down. “No.”

Bucky moved to sit behind Steve, and wrapped his arms around him. “Make that two nos.”

Steve looked at Bucky, “I—er—I’m not the guy I was yesterday.”

Bucky smiled, and squeezed him. “Yeah, you are.”

“So Frank,” said John, “if your good lady wife turned up, six inches taller—"

Frank smiled, “I’d still love her. Bit of a dent to my ego that she’d be taller than me, though.”

“What about you, Tom?” asked Geoff. “Your fiancée ended up looking like that, you’d still go through with it?”

Tom fixed Geoff with a glare. “If my fiancée turned into a man—"

“No, just if she was suddenly six foot tall and with bigger muscles than you.”

“So still a lass, just a right strong one?” said Tom. “Course I’d marry her. She’d still be her, wouldn’t she? And a wife who could do the work of two men around the farm, you’d be daft to turn that down.”

John grinned. “A woman who can carry a sack of coal over her shoulders—"

“She can already do that.” Tom gave him a withering look. “A proper Halifax lass, not like those city
girls.”

“Gosh.” John tried to imagine any woman of his acquaintance carrying a coal sack, and failed completely.

John slept like a log through the day, only waking when Bucky shook him and told him they needed to get moving again. It was almost a shock to see that Steve was still big; there had been something dreamlike about their escape, so he must have unconsciously been expecting Steve to be back to his proper size again.

“You should have woken me to take watch,” said John.

“They didn’t wake any of us,” said Frank.

“It’s fine,” Steve answered. “Didn’t feel like we needed much sleep.”

They went at a fast pace through the night again, covering miles, catching some glimpses of patrols, but never in serious danger of being discovered. Water was easy to find, but the hunger was starting to become painful. And flying boots were made for flying, not marching, so his feet were suffering as well. Not that John complained. It seemed a bit rich to complain about one’s boots when one’s comrade was still barefoot.

Neither Steve nor Bucky seemed to be feeling the cold either; Bucky may still have had his shirt and uniform jacket, but he’d lost his flying coat, and it was distinctly chilly whenever they weren’t moving. But neither of them so much as shivered.

It hadn’t even started to become light when they arrived at their destination—a farm cottage, to his eyes the same as any other, but Steve said that it was the one. The instructions were to knock at a particular downstairs window. Since the lady would only have been expecting one person, John sneaked across the yard alone, as the others waited behind one of the outhouses.

He rapped on the window. He waited, but there was no response, so he rapped a little harder. Then there were the sounds of movement before the curtain drew back, revealing a tremendously pretty girl. She looked more than a little surprised to see him, but opened the window anyway.

“Hélène?”

She nodded.

“Apologies for disturbing you,” he said in French. “I believe the code-word is ‘vitality’.”

“Who are you?” she replied in the same language.

“RAF, mademoiselle.” John flicked down the collar of his flying coat to show his uniform. “Dr. Erskine helped us escape from the HYDRA base, and told us how to find you. I offer my condolences; Dr. Erskine is dead. He died helping us escape.”

Her face fell.

“Mademoiselle, I am sorry—”

“There are more of you?”

“A crew of six.”

“You had best come in.”
She had a coat on over her nightdress when she came to the door, and after letting them in, she lit the fire in the small kitchen. When the fire was burning, she turned to them, and said, “I need to know that you are who you say are. You could be HYDRA agents who tortured Dr. Erskine for this location.”

John translated this, and then said to Hélène, “Aren’t our uniforms enough?”

“Anyone can get a uniform.” She nodded at Steve. “And he doesn’t have one.”

“How can we prove who we are?”

She took his wrist and looked at the identification bracelet. She nodded over at Geoff. “Ask him to tell me your name.”

He did, and Geoff said, “Why that’s John Haggard, our second pilot.”

“That proves you were well briefed, at least. Do you have anything else which could prove it?”

John relayed that as well, and they all looked blankly at each other. Then Steve said, “Tom, your fiancée sent you a newspaper cutting the morning we before she left, didn’t she?”

“Aye, summat a minister had said about hill farms supporting the war effort.” He brought it out of his pocket.

Hélène took it, and Frank said, “I don’t think there are many Nazis that read the Halifax Courier.”

She handed it back to Tom and said in perfect English, “What the hell did you do? Erskine would have been invaluable to the war effort, and we were on the verge of working out a way of getting him out of there safely. Now the whole base has been destroyed, and you calmly tell me he’s dead. He could have turned the tide of the war, gentlemen, so you had better have a bloody good explanation for what happened.”

They were all taken aback by the level of venom in Hélène’s voice, and John said, “Steady on—”

“Wait,” said Steve. “You know who we are, but we don’t know who you are.”

“I’m with MI6, which is slightly more than you need to know.” She looked speculatively at Steve, then stepped over to him and took his wrist to look at his ID bracelet. “I am aware of the general ideas behind Dr. Erskine’s research. Your bracelet is far too tight, Flight Lieutenant. But there’s no bruising or irritation of the skin. And your trousers show you’ve had a growth spurt. So I’m going to guess that you’re the proof that his ideas worked.”

Steve nodded.

“Have you the formula? Instructions?”

Steve shook his head. “Erskine said that it would only be safe inside his head; if he couldn’t control how it was going to be used, he would rather the secret died with him. And—it has. I—I owe him my life. If I could go back and—”

“Wishing on the past is fruitless. We may not have Dr. Erskine, but we do have his test subject. So the important thing is to get you back to London as soon as possible.”

“And the rest of us, I hope,” said Geoff.

“Were any of the rest of you test subjects?”
Bucky put his hand up. “I was the test run before him. Nothing like as impressive.”

“I would like to get all of you home, as I’m sure the RAF don’t want to lose any more crew than it has to. But if it comes to it, then my priority are these two—”

“No,” said Steve. “They wouldn’t leave me when I was nearly dead. I’m not leaving them. You’re getting all of us back, or none of us.”

“You cannot be unaware of the potential that this has—”

“I know. And we’re all going to get back.”

Hélène (which John doubted was her real name, but that was all they were getting) packed them off upstairs to the attic to hide while she found suitable disguises for them. She gave them a couple of loaves of stale bread, some cheese, and some very dry apples to take up with them, all of which tasted like manna from heaven after so long without food. There was old linen and furniture in the attic, enough for them to make a comfortable little nest to wait for her return; added to that, the grimy skylight was letting in some fresh air, and it was altogether the best accommodations they’d had since leaving England.

“She’s quite a girl, isn’t she?” asked John.

“Quite,” Frank agreed. “Wouldn’t surprise me if she’d planned to blow the place up herself.”

“She would definitely have shot us if she hadn’t been convinced we were who we said we were,” said Steve.

“Shot us?” Tom asked. “What with?”

“You didn’t see the gun in her coat pocket?” Bucky wanted to know. “Seriously?”

They all shook their heads, apart from Steve who smiled at Bucky.

“Remember what Mrs. McFarlane said, Buck? ‘Great art is great observation’? Guess we both did learn something after all.”

“Speaking of observation, I didn’t like the way she was looking at you when she was talking about you being a test subject,” said Geoff.

“Probably planning on handing you off to some government scientist to try and reverse engineer you,” said Frank.

“Yeah, well, they try that and they’ll have to go through me first,” said Bucky.

“Judging by the size of him, he doesn’t need your backup any more,” said Tom.

Bucky’s brow momentarily furrowed. Steve’s change must have been even more of a shock to him than the rest of them.

“I don’t know about you chaps, but since we don’t know what we’ll be doing over the next few days, I am going to have a nap,” said John.

He was awoken a couple of hours later by Hélène’s previously agreed-upon knock on the hatch. She brought them clothes for disguises. They were to be taken the first hundred miles in a cattle truck, in the company of a large number of cows.
It was just as fragrant as John would have imagined. Even Geoff and Tom didn’t seem overly impressed with their accommodations. Bucky kept Steve between him and the nearest cow, to the amusement of the rest of them.

“Good that he’s grown,” whispered Geoff, “otherwise Bucky couldn’t use him as a shield.”

“I ain’t using him as a shield,” Bucky whispered back with a scowl, “just getting comfortable.”

John arranged himself so he could see out between two of the slats of the side of the lorry. “There are some lovely historic towns in this area,” he remarked. “I always wanted to see them, but not quite like this.”

Frank wriggled down into the hay. “Someone wake me when we get there.”

It was a little too drafty to look out of the side of the truck for long, so John only looked when they were passing through villages. There were some lovely churches out here and some very pleasant countryside, he found himself thinking of coming back for a driving tour after all this had blown over. Geoff and Tom had a conversation about cattle farming that went entirely over John’s head.

Steve was bent over the map, and Bucky was just looking at him, his hand resting on Steve’s back. It took a moment for John to work it out, but he realised that Bucky was watching Steve breathe.

That was the point that John realised that he had entirely become used to the smell of the cattle, and once he couldn’t smell it any more, the journey was actually slightly more pleasant than some mornings on the Underground.

They were transferred to another lorry somewhere on the outskirts of Nancy, then stopped at a house near Reims as the sun was setting. They were herded through an outbuilding, then in through a back door. The place had an air of faded elegance to it, all sun-bleached expensive wallpaper and scratched furniture.

“No movement of civilian vehicles is permitted during the night,” said Hélène. “We start again in the morning.”

After they’d been introduced to their hosts (spinsters with the same air of faded elegance as the house), eaten and cleared up after themselves (at Steve’s insistence, which seemed to endear them to their hosts), they had a chance to talk with Hélène alone.

“What are you planning on doing with us when we get to England?” Bucky asked.

“Handing you over to my superiors.”

“Don’t play dumb. What are they gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I intended to introduce Dr. Erskine to our scientific division to see if his research could benefit us. I suspect you will also be introduced to our scientific division.”

“So you’re gonna use him as a lab rat? ‘Cause you ain’t, ‘cause I ain’t ever gonna let that happen—”

“Bucky…” Steve had a hand on Bucky’s shoulder, and John wasn’t sure whether it was meant as a warning or as restraint.

“Steve, no. Erskine wasn’t sure that wouldn’t kill us, and he knew what he was doing. Some guys who’ve got no clue? That ain’t happening.”
“And what about ending this war early? What about the lives that could be saved if this could be made to work on other people?”

“And what if you die for nothing? They mess up and kill you with their tests and don’t learn nothing?”

Hélène said, “Why don’t you save this debate until you know the scientists’ intentions? Remember I still have to get all of you safely to England.”

The doorbell rang, and they all froze. Hélène said, “Do try and not look like you’re on the run, gentlemen. It makes my job easier.”

She walked out of the room, and they heard the door opening, a stilted greeting, and then she was following a man into the room. She had a stiff expression, which surprised John; up until now, she’d been smooth in all her deceptions.

The man was looking them over, and said in English, “Oh Peggy, we were promised an elderly Jewish genius. Did you get confused?”

“This is Hicks. He also works for intelligence.” She turned to him. “I would appreciate it if you would use my cover—"

“Of course. Hélène. A far prettier name than the one that you were given. I’m never sure if Peggy is actually an improvement on Margaret, but neither of them has the style of Hélène.”

Hicks had obviously come to crow over Hélène—Peggy’s misfortune, and John felt himself bristling. Peggy had been a model of bravery and competence, and this slimy chap had nothing on her.

“Margaret’s a perfectly lovely name,” said John.

“Peggy is and all,” Geoff chimed in.

Hicks was smiling again, and John was put in mind of a crocodile.

“Flyers, I take it? Certainly an aesthetic improvement.” The chap was practically leering at Steve, who had his arms crossed over his chest and a stony expression. Hicks turned back to Peggy, “So how did you lose your scientist?”

“She didn’t,” said Steve. “He died helping us escape.”

“How very noble of him. Strategically incredibly stupid, but very noble.” He took a step towards Steve, either unaware or ignoring the fact that Bucky looked like a volcano about to erupt. “As is an American enlisting in the RAF. Brave, noble, and entirely lacking in self-preservation. It’s a very… attractive quality in a man.” He gave an appraising look up and down Steve, and then turned back to Peggy, “I presume you need my help.”

“No, thank you.” Peggy’s words were so icy that John had to suppress a shiver.

“Girl like you, you’ll need a chap—"

“I have six already. A seventh seems superfluous.”

Oh, what a girl, what a girl. If anyone was going to get them back to Blighty, it was her.

“I have connections—"
“As do I.” She took a step towards him. “And I’m sure there are other pretty airmen in France for you to look at.”

Hicks tutted. “Implying such base motives. I only have your best interests at heart. Make sure you all get home safely.”

“Well, if any of your chaps want to come with me, instead—”

Now all of them had folded their arms and were staring Hicks down.

“We’re leaving with her,” said Steve, firmly.

Hicks sighed. “When you’re all captured and facing the firing squad, you can’t say I didn’t offer.”

With that he turned on his heel and left.

As soon as the door was shut, Bucky said, “I swear, if he’d come just one step closer—"

“If I thought that punching him would solve anything, I would have done it a long time ago. As it is, he would bounce back up, as smug and insufferable as ever.”

John tried to imagine a scenario in which he could ask her on a date which would not end badly. He failed. But as soon as he could think of a way of asking her which might possibly, just **possibly** work, he’d ask.

Then Steve smiled at Peggy, and John was struck with the sudden thought of what a lovely couple they’d make. That procedure hadn’t cured either Steve or Bucky of their little problem, but perhaps it was just a question of the right girl. So even if he thought…no, he shouldn’t ask Peggy on a date.

Steve asked, “Is he a risk?”

“Might he be going straight to a Nazi contact? I doubt that. Is he stupid enough to accidentally let something slip at a bar? Quite possibly. So we have two options: stay here and risk that he is that stupid; or attempt to get across town after curfew while not running into a single policeman or German patrol. How is your training in covert maneuvers?”

The six of them shared a look. They hadn’t a clue about covert operations. Staying put it was.

After that—well, it was probably the least eventful escape from France of the war so far. They were smuggled to the coast in the backs of lorries, then into a fishing boat (Peggy’s disguise as a French fisherman was quite the thing; John had not recognised her until she spoke), out with the fishing fleet, then a rendezvous with a torpedo boat out in the North Sea.

They were sat in the stern of the torpedo boat, trying to keep out of the way of the crew, when Tom said, “This is it, you know. No more A for Archie.”

“We’ll get a new kite—” started John.

“Aye, we will. But you think Intelligence is going to let them two back flying planes after what’s happened to them?”

Bucky scowled. “I like flying.”

Frank said, “I like your flying. It keeps us alive.”
“He’s right,” said Steve. “There’s no point putting us back in a plane. I don’t know what they’re going to do to us, but…”

There was a long silence.

“Going to be hard to replace you two,” said Geoff.

Bucky gave a cocky grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Damn right. Irreplaceable is what we are.”

“Well, I don’t know if there is going to be time to say this later,” said John, “but in case we are separated, it’s been an honour to fly with you. With all of you.”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Geoff, “It makes it sound like you don’t think we’re going to make it home.”

“Oh, you know very well that’s not what I meant. Parting is such sweet sorrow and all that.”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “That’s one of Juliet’s lines from Romeo and Juliet.” He cast a very meaningful look at Steve and Bucky.

“Don’t even…” said Bucky, halfway to a growl. He shot a glance in the direction of the crew of the boat, who were going about their duties and completely ignoring their passengers.

“We’ve…had our differences,” said Tom, carefully, “but it has been… good to know both of you.”

Steve looked down, then back up at them. “I guess…we’ve got a lot to be grateful for, to all of you. I don’t know if we ever said thank you. So thank you.”

“Yeah,” said Bucky, running a hand through his hair awkwardly, “Thanks.”

“We can stop this emotional nonsense right now, because you still owe me a drink, Bucky. I have no intention of saying goodbye until you make good on that,” said Frank.

As the coast came into view, John had never had a stronger sensation that the door on a chapter of his life was slamming shut. But as chapters went, it had been one of the most eventful, and one of the best—certainly with the best company.

End Notes

I have ideas for other stories set in this AU, but as I haven’t written them yet I offer no promises :)

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