The Nightshade Chronicles: Great Britain

by ohmwarrior

Summary

A mysterious visitor with a tragic past and many dark secrets makes his way to the 501st JFW headquarters in Great Britain, a living weapon that the Allied Command believes is better suited being part of an elite unit rather than a lone wolf. He is afraid and unsure of himself, for he is a warlock, the last of his kind, one that the witches themselves reckoned extinct, killed by their own hands. Ancient rivalries rear their ugly heads and our reluctant hero finds himself facing major headwinds in his quest for acceptance, peace, redemption, even love. Over time, he wins over them all through acts of kindness, transparency, sacrifice, honor, and camaraderie, combating the Neuroi and worse. However, storm clouds gather on the horizon, manifestations of the terrible sins of his past, surrounding him and his new found friends, threatening their very survival. Can the warlock atone in time, to be an instrument of salvation rather than damnation?
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Commander Minna Dietlinde Wilcke gets a new pilot, however, this pilot is unlike any that she or any witch has encountered in over a hundred years. How will they greet this mysterious stranger and how will he react?

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The Nightshade Chronicles: Great Britain

Chapter I: An Unwelcome Guest

“I’m not going to sugar coat it when I say that I felt like an innocent man being given a death sentence for a crime he didn’t commit, by those who acted out of good intentions. You have no idea how much I wanted to grab that bulldog faced gnome of a Prime Minister, rattle his cage, and tell him that he made a mistake that put the Gallipoli debacle to shame. I was scared, and I had every right to be, for I was being sent to fight alongside those that, if it weren’t for the war, would’ve been my enemies. Tomorrow may well be the first of my last days. Wish me luck.”

Diary Entry March 2nd 1944
Commander Minna Dietlinde Wilcke got up from her oak desk chair and walked to the window, the pane shaped like a ships port hole, and stared through the glass and out into the chilly March evening. The moon was full and cast its nocturnal glare across the churning body of water that was the English Channel, cresting waves rustling like a horde of washerwomen unfurling their ebon sheets all at once before pegging them on a drying line. Overhead, the stars could be seen, winking like diamonds in a mine shaft of onyx. It was a calming, soothing, and pleasing sight to behold, but tonight, the view gave her no comfort, for tonight she was being forced to accept a decision that had been made at the highest levels of the Allied Command, a decision that didn’t sit well with her at all. Why are they doing this to us? What did we do? What did I do to deserve this? Wilcke closed her brown eyes and focused. Think about this logically Furstin. Let’s go over the details: You are getting a new recruit, one that is, shall we say, quite unorthodox at the very least. We know nothing about him and I’m willing to bet that the two gentlemen in here with me know even less. All they, and by extension, you have, is the recruits’ testimony, discipline reports, and the exercise/trial scores. The scores are impressive, the behavior leaves something to be desired, but seeing the pilot in the flesh will tell me more about his personality and demeanor than any grade mark or report. The problem is, they will not permit you to see the man, which is understandable, considering the circumstances, but they seem pretty sure that this “test run” will be a success. Maybe we can trust them, this time. Despite her best efforts, the reasoning did little to ease her anxiety.

Slowly, like a revolving door to a hotel nudged by a soft touch, she turned around and faced down the seated men in front of her desk. One was an officer, the other a politician, a combination that even in the best of times yielded dubious results. The officer, aged somewhere in his fifties, sat tall in the seat, the Lincoln Green of dyed United States cotton plainly evident, even in the low light emanating from the overhead fixture. His head was unadorned out of respect, starched cap sitting off to the side. White hair clung to the sides of his skull, like a patch of winter snow refusing to give way to spring sun, contrasting with the tanned flesh, the byproducts of growing up in the American South. The blue grey eyes watched her intently, not out of fear or expectation, but concern, ensconced within a face that could’ve belonged to a college professor, serious and patrician. He placed his hands, strong and rough with age and hard work, on the desk and clasped them gently, leaning forward to the point where the recently awarded five silver stars of the Supreme Allied Commander shined bright, illuminating the embroidered EISENHOWER tag, letters sewn in white thread within a black background above the left breast.

“Commander Wilcke,” Eisenhower began, his voice level, accented with a slight southern twang, and father-like, the kind used to reassure others, “in my youth, my brother lost an eye in an accident. I attribute that moment for making me understand the value of being concerned with the welfare of others. The unease that I felt for him then is the very same that I feel for you now. If the roles were reversed, and I stood where you stand, I would argue up and down against this. After all, you know nothing about him other than the dossier we gave you at the start of this meeting, a record that, I will admit, is lacking a great deal of pertinent information. However, the man is a tremendous soldier who has displayed great heroism and courage under fire. An experienced asset like that is too vital not to use. Out of all the squadrons on this island fortress, yours and yours alone, was deemed the most worthy of being the recipient of this unexpected boon, and I do not jest when I say that.”

Wilcke nodded out of both understanding and deference and shifted her attention to the politician who marginally adjusted his position. He was an old statesman, older than Eisenhower by a good fifteen to twenty years, his short stature barely cresting the back rest. At first glance, he seemed quite out place. With a black overcoat, black dress pants, white undershirt, and spotted bow tie, he looked for all the world a prototypical banker, more at home in a board room than the halls of Parliament,
but that suited Prime Minister Winston Churchill just fine, for it allowed him to catch his political
opponents off guard. Like the general, his pate was bare, both in mane and cover, yet his starched
black top hat sat next to a cane, stained a dark walnut and topped with a silver lion head, its’ lifeless
gaze staring imperiously at Minna’s heart and into her soul. Though the official of state was
weathered by stress and age, his face, upper class paunch, and blue eyes betrayed a certain vitality
and an adamantine determination that was very uncommon at such a venerable stage in life. His
jowls shook as a harrumph exited the throat. “To continue with what my esteemed colleague started,
I, and many others within my cabinet, have great concerns with this person as well. Though I am not
one of you, and thus blind to a good deal of the traumas your predecessors have suffered in the past,
we all have heard the stories; bloody and terrifying tales that shock all decent folk with an
unfathomable malice and vile cruelty that can surpass the moral depravities of Caligula himself.
Never was a race so rightfully extinguished than that of warlocks; such a sentiment cannot be argued.
Such a being, raised from the ashes of his blood kin, coming to my country at an inauspicious time is,
to be frank, disturbing and frightening. In the three months that he has been here, rehabilitating just
down the street from me in London, I had the man watched like a hawk with a full brigade that were
equipped with enough firepower to conquer anywhere. The warlock has, despite the misgivings and
protestations of others, mostly behaved himself and has displayed a willingness, almost a dire need to
get back into the fight, to which I say is a great weight off my shoulders since I can safely state, for
the record, that, thank God, he is on our side.” Churchill added, his refined British voice worn with
many a speech yet powerful enough to command attention.

Yes indeed Prime Minister; a weight that is about to sit on my shoulders. Minna looked away for a
brief moment and pursed her lips, her arms crossed. There is no getting out of this, is there? Well, if
they think they can foist this burden on me without it being on my terms, then they are deeply
mistaken. She breathed in and sighed softly, resigning herself and her unit to fate. “I agree to your
proposal, but I would like to make a request in order to compensate for this risk I’m taking.” Wilcke
boldly ventured, her brown orbs fully fixated on the Prime Minister. Both men displayed varying
degrees of surprise at such an uncharacteristically audacious request; Eisenhower swallowed deep
and Churchill leaned back in his chair a tad and cocked an eyebrow, ascertaining whether this was
all a bluff. Minna held Churchill’s questing glare for a few silent seconds, before he rubbed his chin.

“Yes your bargaining position is highly ambiguous Commander, but very well. What are these
stipulations?” Churchill asked, clearly intrigued and, though he did his best to hide it, willing to
settle. I’ve got them where I want them, but don’t push your luck.

“I would like a redrawing of the defensive perimeters over the Channel, a better overlap if you will
around Dover specifically. From our founding, my pilots have borne the brunt of the Neuroi forays
into Great Britain during The Blitz. Even after the worst, we are constantly harassed day and night
by the enemy. Though, as General Eisenhower states, we are the best, even the best get ground
down without help. If we shift and reserve elements from Southampton, Canterbury, and, possibly
London, we will be able to rest and recoup from our engagements better. I’m not advocating that this
change be permanent, only a few weeks at the least, at most, a month and a half. Also, we will be in
a more advantageous position to properly train this new recruit and get him acclimated to our unique
position.” Wilcke answered.

Churchill took his hand off his chin and turned to look at Eisenhower, deferring judgment to the one
man in the room who had the power to make such a theory reality. The Supreme Allied Commander
looked down at his hands for a split second before looking back at Minna. “I can get two out of those
three realigned to better suit your suggestion within the week, but the squadrons around London are
an absolute no go.” he replied, unused to being strong armed.

As a debt collector says, “Better something than nothing.” Commander Wilcke, for the first time this night, smiled genuinely and gave a razor sharp salute to both men. “Then you have yourselves a deal. I deeply appreciate this.”

Eisenhower was the first to stand and returned the gesture. “No, we appreciate you and your unit for taking him in. Have a pleasant evening.” he said and gave a helping hand to Churchill as he planted his cane onto the hardwood with a harsh tack and rose gingerly from his seat.

When fully erect, Churchill regarded Minna. “Your negotiating skills are as eloquent as your voice.” he commented. Wilcke allowed herself a smile at such a flimsy attempt at flattery. Regardless of how talented she knew she was, she never let it go to her head. “He will be at the front door within a few minutes. I suggest you have someone let him in, lest he catch his death of cold.” he remarked and began to walk out of the room. Eisenhower got to the door first and held it open for the Prime Minister. He nodded in approval at such a deed and continued on his way. After he crossed the threshold, Eisenhower followed behind, closing the reinforced wooden door politely. Alone, Minna ran her hands through her faded rust colored hair, a coping mechanism she used in times of stress. Down the rabbit hole we go Alice. She reached to right ear and felt for her communicator dial that lay across her lobe and gently ticked down a notch. Then she pressed her index finger on the receiver, a small button underneath her right collar that held her Oberstleutant rank insignia, two silver pips over silver oak leaves.

“Mio? Can you read me?” she asked in a hushed tone.

The reply was almost immediate. “Loud and clear Minna. How did the meeting go?” The voice belonged to Major Mio Sakamoto, a woman that had earned Minna’s trust, and the ability to call her on a first name basis, a hundred times over, fighting alongside her unit, the Jagdschwader 3 “Udet”, helping her create the 501st , and locating suitable candidates for their squadron. It truly was a combinative effort; Sakamoto did the recruiting and training and Wilcke handled the administrative duties. Wilcke trusted Sakamoto implicitly and never left her in the dark about anything, even the top secret meeting she just had.

“We’re doing it. He’s going to be at the front door within five minutes. I want you to go down there and take him to the spare room. Keep your eye on him at all times, both of them. I don’t trust anyone that I haven’t met face to face. I’ll meet up with you later. Minna out.” Wilcke relayed before cutting the feed. She then regarded the dossier on the new pilot, or what laughably passed as one, and she briskly picked it up and threw it in the trash bin next to her desk. I’ll make a new one based on my observations thank you very much and, unlike the Allied Command, I’ll make sure that there’s no stone left unturned.

A bright light and everything comes into focus. Vision pans down from the dark sky revealing a large clearing, beginning in a forest of elm and pine and terminating at a forty foot high stone wall, crenellations with arrow slits keeping silent vigil. Silver rain lances through the air like pin thick tracer fire. It brings no comfort from the oppressive heat of the day, but it does serve a purpose. A
deluge like this muffles footsteps, quiets the issuance of orders, and, most importantly, stifles the screams. There is movement to the left, from the top of the wall. Quick glance and a grey mass is heaved up and over the battlements, tumbling down like a wounded duck. It appears to be refuse, but as the object comes closer to earth fall, one realizes that trash doesn’t have arms and legs. It is a human body, belonging to a man in a sopping wet poncho, mouth open in terror, screaming in the hope that someone, anyone, can save him from his inevitable demise. His entreaties fall on deaf ears, erased by the relentless tattoo of the heavens. He hits with a wet crump, sending plumes of rainwater to and fro. Through the sound of the impact, one could almost hear the distinctive snap and crack of bone. The skull compresses ever so slightly and ruptures, spilling brain matter and blood. Vitae spreads like a plague, contaminating the mud and grass with crimson. Turning away from the grisly sight, a large wooden gatehouse door is seen, strong and barred. Mixed with the plock-plock of rain is a deep hollow thumping. It’s the sound of a heart beating fast, not out of fear or pleasure, but white hot rage. A familiar voice calls out an order, ire seething from every syllable, “I’m going in alone. If anything comes out that doesn’t look like me, kill it.”

“Wake up lad,” an aged English voice with a slight accent of Belgian playfully jabs, “or do you want to look unprofessional?” All jars back to reality. The night still remains, but the rain, castle wall, gatehouse door, and the blood and death were replaced with a semi cramped vehicle interior lavishly clad in tan leather. The recipient of the scolding, a young man, probably barely old enough to drink legally, stirs with a jolt, his breathing deep, as it always was after waking up from a deep sleep. He silently cursed in every language he knew, all seven in fact, and gazed tiredly at his companion.

Direct across from him, dressed in the khaki tan of a British field officer and with a black eye patch over his left eye, was the one of the most famous soldiers that Great Britain had ever produced: Adrian Carton DeWiart. The man was in his late fifties now and had a sallow complexion, complete with a strong chin, hawkish nose, and thin cheeks. His one good eye was hazel, dulled with age, yet still possessing that spark, the inner fire of a soldier who refuses to believe that his time to be put to pasture wasn’t nigh. Though deemed to old to command a unit in the field, a decision he protested vehemently, Belgian born and English bred DeWiart maintained a legendary reputation for being a fantastic soldier and an inspiring leader of men. His service to king and country spanned over four decades, during which he earned the stars of a lieutenant general and, among other notable decorations, the Victoria Cross. Service often comes with great sacrifice, and Adrian sacrificed much during his time in the Great War. He fought at Arras, Cambrai, Passchendaele, the list ran on and on as did the number of times he ended up in a field hospital. He was shot in the skull, right ankle, the left hip, left leg, right ear, and lost his left eye and left hand, all by German lead and shrapnel. As incredible as it seemed to many, the young man included, Adrian maintained to this very day that he enjoyed the war. Many of his exploits had been greatly exaggerated over the years since the armistice in 1918, mostly cock and bull stories nowadays, but the one that seemed to be the most truthful was a statement given in a dispatch about Adrian by one of his friends that read, “he was a good natured man who, must I admit, hold the world record for colorful language.” DeWiart shook his head. “Just don’t want you to look like that this isn’t serious Aaron.” he admitted.

Aaron Divale, a name cobbled together from a dead chaplain’s Bible and a tattered herb doctor’s dictionary as his true name was unknown even to him, yawned and tried to stretch his arms. He was a big man, and when a lad like himself stood 6’4” and weighed in at a solid 200 pounds, finding a uniform and a pair of shoes in his size was impossible for the local quartermaster and a decision was made at boardroom level to have one custom made. He was ultimately given a tan GI uniform that was so long, that the coat rack had to be lifted up by two men just so that the pant legs wouldn’t brush the ground and get dusty. Even so, the tailors managed to mess up the back measurement,
restricting his ability to adequately lift his arms over his head without tearing the fabric. When Divale put it on for the first time he joked that he felt like a chick in an egg. The car interior wasn’t built with his bulk in mind either so now it was like being a chick in two eggs. He took off his aluminum frame glasses and shook his head briskly, letting his dark brown hair that was in a bad need of a haircut whip around his gaunt equine face, tanned with being outdoors and covered in a bushy brown beard that extended out like a lumberjacks. The face, what parts could be seen, was handsome, yet marred by a single faint scar that ran from the upper left tear duct and down the middle of his thin nose before curling sharply under the right nostril. Before putting on his spectacles, Aaron looked down at one of the lenses and saw his eyes, his true eyes, glowing like molten bronze, swirling with barely contained magic. Divale crafted the glasses himself and bestowed upon them the ability to mask his nonconformity, so that he might walk around without causing a panic amongst the townsfolk. “Can’t believe that I’m actually getting a rank now,” he started, putting the glasses back on, “and I’m not too sure that I will like it. Never had a use for one in the old days.”

“You won’t have much of a choice when you take that oath.” Adrian pointed out. He leaned forward and added rather conspiratorially, “From what I hear, Commander Wilcke is a stickler for the rules, so you’d better get used to it.”

As all Germans are. “They’ve been in there a long while now,” Aaron observed, looking down at a weathered time piece on his right wrist with a crack along the four o clock mark, “and it makes me think that they might’ve hit a snag.”

DeWiart’s good eye narrowed. “The Prime Minister doesn’t go into any negotiation with the intention of hitting a snag, lad.” he curtly clarified. He watched Aaron nod, noting his misstep. “You don’t want to be here, do you?” he queried with understanding, knowing full well what the answer would be.

Aaron looked at Adrian and stated matter of factly, “No, I don’t. I don’t like this plan, I don’t like this place. It feels more like a prisoner transfer than a return to active duty. For the first time in a long time, I’m scared out of my mind.”

DeWiart scoffed, “Scared? Of what Aaron? One would think being the sole man in a castle full of women to be paradise, especially as you seem to be quite fond of them.” Divale couldn’t stifle the grin that stretched from ear to ear, letting his emotions get the best of him. Though he had been in Great Britain for only three months, he had a firm reputation for being a famous, or infamous depending on which side of the moral pole you stood on, ladies man. “Of course if you need help with those jitters of yours,” Adrian offered as he reached into his left back pocket and produced a metal flask with practiced ease, holding it out to Aaron like a talisman, “this should help.” The boy’s eyes flashed with desire and he politely took the flask, his fingers and palm encapsulating the vessel so completely, that the two could’ve passed the time playing Guess Which Hand. With even more practiced ease, Aaron unscrewed the cap and took a quick swig. Expecting the alcohol to be watered down, as was customary in times of war when the commanding officer had to be in peak condition, he allowed the spirits to hit the back of his throat. This ended up being a huge mistake, as the liquor burned his gullet as if it were pinned to the floors of Hell by Satan’s hoof. Spluttering, he handed the flask back to Adrian who was chuckling that half hearted proud guffaw that only a true Englishman could pull off. “Just so you know,” DeWiart informed as he placed the flask back, “I only put gasoline in this for color.” After breathing in and swallowing the last dregs down, Aaron tried to answer with a witty quip of his own until he saw Adrian look quickly off to his right and away.
Divale sobered up on the spot, knowing what was happening. *He's receiving a message.*

“Looks like you’re in boy.” Adrian exclaimed merrily. He then made a fist with his sole good hand and banged three times on the metal slide that separated the compartment from the driver, a clear sign for the chauffeur to proceed. Without so much as losing a second of time, the car rolled forward a tad as the gears shifted, and then took off slowly, entering the shadowy gates of Dover Castle. On the outside it was nothing special, which seemed greatly at odds with the strategic importance of the ancient fortress, one that had stood guard against all incursions from the continent for over eight centuries at the point where France and Great Britain were separated by only twenty miles. It overlooked the town and rested nearly flush against the famous chalk white cliffs. The outermost walls had been strengthened in recent years with concrete and rebar, complete with searchlights, heavy quad linked machine gun nests atop each one of its fourteen bastions, and, here and there where the wall was enlarged to form a bulbous protrusion like a dolphins nose, sat either a recessed 81mm motor pit or a pair of 50mm twin linked Bofors antiaircraft cannons. That arsenal alone would virtually annihilate any attacking force brave enough, or foolish enough, to assault such a stronghold. If they managed to get past such defenses and the double steel gate, they would be confounded with a second wall, this one sixty feet, twenty feet higher than the previous, with the same protective sentinels, however, atop the nine bastions, protecting its’ absent crew with 2 ½’ thick gun plates, were nine 88mm antiaircraft guns that could also function as accurate artillery in a pinch. To further complicate matters, the next gate was on the exact opposite side, so then attackers now had to wade through a ring, a twenty five foot wide space, with no cover, for over a mile and a half. Even on the ground, the invaders would be bled white as hidden compartments along either side of the two walls would open up and vomit forth with compressed air long lines of barbed wire, sharp and thick, that would slow the advance to a crawl. The occasional bush along this hells highway would serve as ambush points where machine gun crews would mow down the assailants like wheat before a scythe or infantry could pop out of spider holes and launch counter attacks.

All this Aaron deduced within a fraction of a second as the images flashed by the window. *Combine all this with a full complement of troops and witches, this place would stand longer than Troy.* As the car made its long left turn around the inner ring, he became despondent, imagining himself a convicted murderer being thrown into an inescapable fortress, never again to breathe the air of freedom, nor feel on his skin the warm embrace of the sun, nor hear the frigid howl of the wind. A gentle tap on the shoulder made him turn, forgetting for just a moment the gnawing sense of dread. In his right hand, DeWiart held a cherry wood box the size of a tea case. “A gift from the 45th in Dover.” he explained. Aaron took the box from Adrian’s hand and let his thoughts drift back, recollecting those brave men who helped ferry him and some of his possessions out of occupied France three months ago. The wind blew like a hurricane, heavy with freezing rain and dime sized balls of hail, that rattled against the hull of the transport like the balls in a Bingo wheel. Several times the sea threatened to overturn the boat or dash it against rocks or battle debris, and several times him and crew prevented utter disaster through tenacity, hope, and a healthy amount of swearing. He remembered the captain of the vessel, named Diligent, roaring at the raging waves and foul weather, telling them, to all who would hear, that they were filthy cunts, fucking rotters, and bloody wankers that deserved no less than being shoved up the Devil’s ass and allowed to fester and sustain itself on excreta for all eternity. They originally set out for Southhampton, but the rudder gave out a quarter through the journey, listing them west towards Cornwall, which ended up being a blessing in disguise for the enemy caught wind of the operation and deployed several aircraft to sink it. Another half mile within maximum detection range and all would’ve surly perished. In gratitude, Aaron bought the crew, all ten, a round at a local pub.
The car came to a halt just in front of the keep, a three tiered structure that rose seventy feet into the air, its stone and motor walls gallantly defiant like a lighthouse betwixt the rocks and the ocean. Most of the lights were darkened amid the windows that he could see. The twin figures of Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower could be seen, standing patiently at the closed entrance. “Looks like this is the end of the line.” Aaron declared with a hint of resignation.

“Don’t be like that Aaron.” DeWiart countered softly, “Always hope for the best when confronted with adversity. It’s all you can do after all.” He extended his right hand and added, “It’s been a pleasure to know you lad. Good luck and be blessed.”

“You as well my friend.” Divale replied and he took the old man’s hand and shook it firmly. God I’m going to miss you. Out of everyone that I’ve met from the Allied Command you are one of the very few who would have my back at once in a bad situation. He opened the door with a quick flick of the wrist, tucking the gift in the crook of his left arm, and got out of the vehicle. The late night air was chilly, but tolerable and far cleaner than that of the ocean and interior. Aaron breathed in deep, relishing the fresh air entering his lungs, like a wine connoisseur sampling an excellent vintage.

Footsteps and the tack tack of a cane on the paved ground broke the moment as Churchill came up to him, the doughty statesman’s hat barely cresting his sternum. “It wasn’t easy convincing the Commander of our honorable intentions, but with my reasoning, and a few concessions, I and General Eisenhower, have managed to secure a post for you here. All that’s left is for you to uphold your oath.” he reported.

Aaron leveled his gaze. “This war has broken my body, mind, and soul, but not my word, and I don’t intend for it to give anytime soon.” he replied.

Churchill nodded approvingly, “Remember Mr. Divale: we make a living by what we get, but make a life by what we give, and I trust you to give them what for. Have a pleasant evening.” He tipped his hat in departing and walked to the open car door. Eisenhower came up within seconds of Churchill’s passing. Aaron immediately saluted out of respect. The Supreme Allied Commander returned it and looked up at him. The two men were tall, but Divale eclipsed his superior by almost half a foot. Dwight saw a quizzical air in the way that Aaron gazed at him and knew why.

“The concessions that Old Win mentioned have to do with defensive adjustments to the air cover Channel-side, nothing more.” Eisenhower answered, “Do us proud young man and good luck.” With that he nodded and joined the awaiting duo in the car. Aaron watched him enter the vehicle, the door closing behind him, sounding all too familiar like a slide being racked. The vehicle, a town car, circled around the open space, headlights swerving around like eyes, searching for a way through the darkness. They passed over him and turned to the way they came. Under the hood, the engine revved and the car moved out, turning away into the depths of the inner ring, and soon, disappeared, leaving nothing but the smell of exhaust and the retinal after glare of the taillights.

Aaron turned to the entrance and saw that it was still closed. There were no windows and thus no way to check if there was any activity from within. Good way to hide your intentions, keeps unwelcome guests out and second guessing, a position of strength, but I’m no fool. What appears to be vigor can easily be a cover for fear, and I know you are afraid of me. This wolf outside, pacing
around your door, scares the living daylights out of you all, and for good reason. Once I pass through those gates, I’m not locked in there with you; you’re locking in there with me. So show yourself, let’s end the posturing and start to talk turkey. As if they, through some means unknown, heard his challenge, a hard clang was heard, followed by the distinct resonant rattle of pulley chains being wound around a spool. The gate, a thick steel bulwark of a plate, slowly rose, light pouring out like a second sun from the vacated space. At two points, the luminosity failed to come forth, a pair of dusky areas that grew and grew in length and width.

A bright light and all that is seen in a sky full of flak and the deafening boom and crump of explosions gets smaller and smaller as gravity takes hold and exerts its influence. An unseen body falls, its heart pounding a million miles an hour. Then, the vision bobs up and down after the shock of ground fall, but terra firma isn’t solid; it’s shock inducing cold initially, and gradually changes to lukewarm then steaming hot at the very bottom. Suddenly, the smell hits like a cheap shot, the fetid pervasive reek of offal and human excrement. Barely anything shines down here, save for the gaseous haze of methane floating around like bloated ghosts. Realization kicks in: we are in the bowels of a sewer. A voice cries out, “Move! Don’t stop for anything!” Into and through the noxious gloom we go. Slivers of light trickle through cracks in manhole covers or gaping fissures in the streets above, illuminating the old decayed brickwork of the tunnel, the color of clotted blood. Shell impacts from the fighting above reverberate all along the passageway, at times crystal clear detonations, and others deadened, like a grenade going off underwater. Dust comes down, obscuring the way forward. Bubbles come up through the oftentimes waist deep mire. Busted pipe, a man gargling his last cries, who can say. Gaze sees an intersection up ahead, baleful, hot red light crisscrossing the passages, the telltale keening freem of Neuroi bolts answered periodically by barks from rifles. Whoever is firing back won’t be alive for much longer in that murderous crossfire. “Blow through!” the voice yells, “We have to get to the rendezvous point!” Closer and closer the final destination comes, the intensity of the gunfight escalating with every step. The voices of men and women can be discerned fully amidst the sloshing steps and beams, yelling for covering fire, pointing out positions, medical attention, support. The intersection is met and traversed. Three quarters of the way through a violent hissing and crackling is heard, like bacon fat being fried in a pan. Someone took an enemy bolt. A head turns just in time to see a blackened, yet still meaty jawbone spinning towards…

The hard clang of the gate, now fully risen from the earth, brings all back to reality. Aaron’s eyes are temporarily blinded by the glare, but adjust quickly. It wasn’t long before he had his answer as to what the obstacle behind the portal was. At the threshold stood a woman, roughly 5’4”, of Asian decent, dressed in the characteristic white of a senior officer of the Imperial Japanese Naval Air Service. Bronze oak leaves on the starched collar twinkled vibrantly along with the gold buttons and cufflinks, each shaped in the likeness of the Imperial chrysanthemum. Her face was hard and stern, pose ramrod straight, long black hair held in check by a red string tie. A light breeze came up, whisking the scent of cherry blossom perfume across Aaron’s nose, and something else, a stench that made his gorge rise. Lavender. I hate lavender. He noticed two things about this major that he didn’t like right off the bat. The first was that, unlike him, she was armed. Attached by a brass belt loop on her left side was a hardened leather scabbard, holding within its’ jaws, an officers katana. Divale knew by reputation only just how deadly those swords were in combat, and he wasn’t too keen on seeing if the rumors were true. The officer had a white eye patch with a blue bar across it covering her left eye, the other deep brown orb scrutinizing him with the cold lifelessness of a shark. The last thing was her posture, the one thing that unsettled him the most. A cursory glance by a blind man could’ve seen that her feet weren’t set, that she was keeping herself ready, lest the encounter turned south, to either run or maneuver for a first strike. Clever.
Separated by seven feet, a distance that could be closed within a fraction of a second, Mio sized up the new arrival. Her face retained the nonchalant façade, while inside, she was slightly awed by the young man. *Mother of God he is huge. Maybe 6’4” if he took off the shoes and easily 200 plus. Fills the uniform nicely, but it billows in spots. Maybe more of a toned physique than a burly one. Looks horribly unkempt. The knees are bent, the feet evenly spaced. He’s readying to counter any overtly violent intention from any direction. Smart. I would do the same thing.* “Mister Aaron Divale, I presume?” she asked with the authority of a monarch.

Aaron, by the smallest of degrees, inclined his head to nod, never taking his eyes off of the major less than two of his arm lengths away from him. “Correct major.” he responded.

“That is Major Mio Sakamoto to you.” she retorted without cordiality. Her eyes drifted to the cherry wood box that Aaron had and pointed at it, her finger straight like a dagger. “What is that?” she demanded.

Divale shifted the case. “I do not know.” he reacted honestly, “I haven’t opened it. It’s a gift to me from DeWiart.”

“Lieutenant General Adrian Carton DeWiart?” Sakamoto exclaimed shallowly, her right eye visibly widening, “Apparently you do have friends in high places.” She then, using her left hand, flipped up the eye patch. Aaron stiffened as he was confronted by an intricate amythest colored lattice moving around in Mio’s eye socket. Coruscating lines of rainbow colored magic crossed this way and that, giving him such a sense of unease that he had to physically stop himself from shivering. *The third eye, the ability to see the unseen! I thought that was a myth!* After a few seconds, Mio placed the patch back over her eye and stepped off to the side, her left side. “Come on inside,” she ordered gruffly, “We aren’t footing the bill to heat the outdoors. Your bag that was left here by the chauffeur is to the right of the threshold interior.” Aaron breathed in.

Once more into the breach.

He walked forward slowly, deliberately measuring his steps in relation to Major Sakamotos position, which was increasing in distance away as he advanced. Mio backed towards the wall, going upwards into the interior hallway, at a dialongal slant, hand never far from her sword. She watched him enter cautiously, like a prairie dog venturing out of its hole. He turned to regard his luggage, a black duffel bag, with the most marginal of head turns. *Still keeping me in his line of sight. This one is no rookie.* The warlock stooped a tad, running his hands along the zipper until grabbing the straps with his right hand. Mio smiled inwardly. *That small hair thin piece of black paper you inserted near the top of the zipper line to detect tampering was ingenious and hard to spot, but not for me. I don’t need to open that bag to know what’s inside.* Aaron hefted the bag and gauged his surroundings. The hallway was wide, very wide, to the point where he could’ve drove a covered jeep all over the emerald green carpeting and not even come close to scratching the blue wallpaper covering the wall from the floor edge to a staggering eight feet up, ending under a foots worth of plaster siding that depicted medieval society and battle scenes. White ceiling tiles completed the passageway, illuminated by witch fire, a magical torch that burned inside wrought black iron sconces in recessed niches. Along the walls, were cases of ancient armor and weapons, labeled with white placards. *Makes me wish that I was born in less interesting times, striding across a battlefield swinging an axe like the Norse or Irish. Would be damn good at it too, good enough to even become a lord of a realm in my own right. Could have anything I want, but alas, here we are. Lost for a moment, he uttered a single word, “Wow.”*

Mio pounced on the reaction. “Have you never been in a castle before?” she asked.
“Yes, just never one this spacious.” Aaron admitted, cursing himself for letting his guard down.

Sakamoto went to the wall where a red button jutted out from a control box and pushed it with her left elbow. The gate started to descend with the speed of a melting glacier. She gestured down the hallway with her head and the pair began to travel its length with a gulf between them that neither dared cross. “Dover Castle underwent major renovations during the interwar years to better accommodate a modern army and the technology to support it.” Mio elucidated.

“Won’t do much good if the enemy gets this far.” Aaron pointed out.

“They won’t.” Mio stated emphatically, “Our defenses are impregnable.”

“I seem to remember many a German and Frenchman making those exact same statements regarding their Siegfred and Maginot Lines respectively.” Aaron countered. He turned to regard the witch, adding with no humor, “And look where it got them.”

Sakamoto stopped on a dime and glared at Divale. “Touche.” she muttered after a few seconds and continued walking. Aaron followed, matching her stride, no small feat considering the size discrepancy between them. They made a left turn that ended in a large double staircase, going up to the next floor, carved out of Italian marble, with bronze inlay along the length of the banisters. The small steps made the two come closer together, the area now less than two feet between the two reluctant travel partners. Even at that point, the duo did not break step or relax during the journey upwards and onwards, not at the first step nor the final forty fifth. Along the way Mio recognized Aaron subtly shift his eyes to and fro. Looking for escape routes, avenues of retreat, possible chokepoints, ambush sites. He’s scared. That’s bad. Being scared equals tension and that spells trouble if he gets spooked. Lord knows what would happen after that. Maybe I calm him down? She waited until they got to the next floor before attempting conversation. “Where did you manifest?” she asked, well aware of the origins of warlocks, who instead of being born, were disgorged like vomitus from sites of negative trauma, the aetheric energies polluted with malignant influences.

“I didn’t manifest.” Aaron replied with a fair degree of annoyance. Uh-oh. Mio whipped around, right hand on the hilt of the katana, the left firmly on the scabbard, knees bent, eyes trained on Aaron who didn’t move a muscle, but simply stared right back at her, almost daring her to strike him down. Silence reigned supreme as the two warriors gauged their options. Mio slowed her breathing and cleared her mind. All it will take is one cut. He’s in the open and unarmed, but then again, he’s a warlock. He doesn’t need weapons to defend himself for he’s magic incarnate. Finally, Aaron broke the standstill. “The way that warlocks are traditionally brought into this world doesn’t apply to me. I may not be human in your eyes, but I was once. You can trust me on that.” he stated.

Major Sakamoto took the revelation with a grain of salt, a big one. It was a laughable attempt at falsehood, yet as she continued to look at him, Aaron betrayed no outward signs of it, not even his voice altered in pitch or tone upon delivery. Either he’s very good at obfuscating or he’s actually telling the truth. “That remains to be seen.” an unseen voice declared further up the hall. Divale immediately backed up a step, placing both Mio and this new arrival within view. The one who spoke, with a voice that was strong and carried itself well, was another witch, roughly the same
height as the major, but this one was clad in the characteristic gunmetal grey and black of the
German Luftwaffe, sporting faded rust colored hair, Oberstleutant collar studs, and brown eyes that
bored a hole through Aaron’s skull. She drew closer, eyes never diverting from the warlock,
reminding one of a hawk diving at its’ prey, moving along the right side of the wall, the carpet barely
managing to dampen the lead lined soles of the jackboots she wore. *Moves with purpose. Definitely
the squadron leader to be sure.* The German witch stopped near a painting, one that Aaron couldn’t
see in his position and bade Major Sakamoto to come forward with a hand gesture. Mio obeyed and
quick stepped away from Aaron. Upon reaching her superior, she about faced and took position next
to her. “I am Commander Minna Dietlinde Wilcke, your squadron leader.” she proclaimed. Minna
turned to Mio, who nodded out of thanks, assuring her that she was alright. “Come here Mr. Divale.”
Wilcke commanded, resuming her gaze at him.

He tried to ease his grip on the duffel bag, but his right hand refused to cooperate, instead tightening
like a vise, knuckles turning off white. Aaron swallowed, the spit scratching his suddenly dry throat
like sandpaper. Like he did with Mio, he kept his sights trained on Minna and moved forward. The
steps were light and deliberately paced, giving him time to judge his next action. *Two now, both
equal distance away. Some doors along either wall, likely reinforced. Wouldn’t take much to
shoulder barge through them, but I don’t know whether salvation or damnation lies beyond them.
Best to stay the course, show no fear.* The space between them got progressively smaller and smaller,
each step feeling like sloughing through quicksand. The subject of the painting also became clearer,
that of a knight clad in armor kneeling before a lord who held a sword, with blade flat, to the tip of
his burnished shoulder. Symbolism was evident and Aaron understood what was about to happen,
allowing himself to relax a tad. *If they wanted a rumble, they would’ve done it long ago.*

Stopping a respectful distance away, yet near enough to smell a citrusly tinge emanating from the
commander, he stood tall and waited. “Before anything else happens, I want you to know something Mr. Divale, and I’m only going to say this
once.” She leaned forward, giving him a look that could split stone. “I don’t want you here.” Wilcke
delivered through gritted teeth, “You are not welcome here and your presence is unnecessary. If it
weren’t for the fact that you have support and were traveling with an august figure, I would’ve
sounded the alarm and had the gun crews blow that car to pieces, to hell with the consequences.”
Her mood seemed to soften as she continued, “However, that matters naught. You are here and you
will remain here, whether we all like it or not. We may not have a Bible at hand to do this with, but I
do have an adequate substitute.” Without so much as a look, Minna ordered, “Your sword major.”
Within a half second, Major Sakamoto unsheathed her katana expertly to the point that not even a
dog could’ve discerned soft grinding interplay between the scabbard and blade and handed it off
with reverently. She took the hilt and laid the flat of the blade against Aaron’s throat. If he was
afraid, he didn’t show it in the slightest. “Recite the Oath of Enlistment.” Minna demanded, gaze and
voice level.

“I, Aaron Divale, of my free will, do hereby declare, before my superiors, my intent to enlist in the
forces of the Allies, where I will serve dutifully and faithfully til death or dismissal. This I swear unto
God.” he recited with the practiced delivery of a valedictorian addressing a graduating class.

“Aaron Divale,” Commander Wilcke addressed, “on behalf of the Allies, I, Commander Minna
Dietlinde Wilcke of the 501st JFW Strike Witches, with the authority invested in me by the
aforementioned, do hereby acknowledge and accept your enlistment, award you the rank of
Sergeant, and affirm you as a member in good standing within my unit.” Suddenly, Minna flicked
the katana to its’ edge, cold steel pressed firm against the warlock’s flesh. “Pray you don’t renege this
oath.” she intoned. She finally broke sight with Divale, now Sargeant Divale, and directed the sword like a teacher’s pointer at a door, directly opposite of their position. “That will serve as your quarters. Breakfast starts promptly at oh six forty five hours. Don’t be late.” Minna informed. Aaron nodded politely and saluted. Both Sakamoto and Wilcke returned it and he walked towards the door to his new room in silence. Remembering something, Minna called out just as he opened the door, “Sargeant Divale?”

“Yes Commander?” he replied.

She gestured to her eyes, indicating his glasses. “Are those for show or need?” Minna asked.

Aaron lowered his spectacles just enough for a glimmer of what lay beyond the pale to shine through, the sight visibly having an effect. Both his superiors subtly backed away from him in fear, though they did their best to hide it. “A bit of both really. They’re so my Jekyll doesn’t Hyde.” he answered. He then stepped through the door and shut it behind him, the door bolt sliding in place with finality.

Both Mio and Minna stood in the hallway before the painting for several seconds before the commander gave the katana back to the major. “He’s a scary one.” Minna whispered, arms now hanging loosely to her sides.

Mio sheathed her blade and itched her nose. “The whole way up his eyes were like an addict’s, always moving. Tells me he knows what he’s getting into.” she commented, tone matching Wilcke’s. She nodded as she added, “That also makes him very dangerous. Want me to keep an eye on him still?”

“Affirmative.” Minna answered, “He does anything suspicious during the night, you inform me immediately. Be sure to accompany him to breakfast. Humbly doubt he’d be able to find the mess hall. Get some sleep Major.”

“I will.” Mio answered with a salute. “Good night Minna.” Wilcke returned it and the major walked up the hallway and rounded the corner. Before she left to do the same, Minna lingered for a brief moment, thinking on what she heard the warlock say. I may not be human in your eyes, but I was once. Sounded like the truth, but until we arrange a proper coven, everything he says is a possible stretch. Tomorrow, I’ll get my answers, true answers, even if I have to wring them out of you with my bare hands.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Our warlock, now known as Aaron Divale, tries to make himself at home, but will his emotions get the better of him?

Chapter II: Back In The Saddle

“I don’t like being judged with or compared to various metrics or statistics, especially since they clearly weren’t made with a person like me in mind, and I use the term person loosely here. Ever since I bit the bullet and got ferried over to this god forsaken rock of an island, I’ve been poked, prodded, rated, and gauged by so many doctors and military personnel experts, that I find it miraculous that they still have enough spare manpower to field an army and a navy. Least the nurses are decent looking, so there’s one good thing about this ordeal.

Diary Entry January 12th 1944

A lukewarm summer night breeze whistles through the lush forest, reeking of spent heat, ocean salt, and wood. The stars are out and about, some visible, others hiding behind clouds, and the noise of the day ceases to exist as nature slumbers soundly, as it has done since time began. Suddenly, an explosion is heard from far away, up above some cloud cover. A low groan rends the air, getting louder and louder. Vision pans up just in time to see a bomber, half of its’ left wing blown off by some massive munition hit, arcing like a whale breaching the water in reverse towards the the deeper parts of the forest interior. The nose clips the tree line, ploughing through the thin tops, the propellers of the remaining wing chopping into trunk and branch. It quickly overtaxes the metal blades and they seize up, pulling up tall trees by the roots like a gardener rooting out weeds. Excess weight causes the aircraft to spin like a pinwheel, the fuselage cracking under the strain, raining metal death across the land. The pieces that didn’t get scattered like seeds in a new field slam into a cleared hill top, barely noticeable amidst the green. Gnawing dread and fear kick in, turning blood to ice and taking breath away. Realization dawns; the plane hit a place that meant something. Another explosion is heard, seen, and felt, as the fuel reserves combust and go up, orange plumes of gasoline fed fire reaching like fingers to the sky. We gaze at the interior, or try to, for the vision pans too fast to allow details to emerge. Heavy breathing intrudes upon the night. Booted feet snap fallen logs into kindling and disintegrates dead leaves into mulch. A branch grazes an unseen face, yet we go on, oblivious or perhaps uncaring as the warmth of blood trickles from the open wound. It flows fast, but not fast enough to beat us to the clearing, now the site of a raging inferno of splintered wood, bent metal, and gasoline fumes, pitched atop what used to be a diminutive log cabin, its’ roof caved in, its’ timber construction unable to bear the weight. We feel another sensation on our face, this one cool, stinging the still bleeding cut, along with blurred vision. It’s the telltale passage of tears, wrought from heartbroken anguish, cascading down. Tension gives out in the knees and the body collapses into the stance of a penitent man. Movement occurs in the peripheral and a look right happens, the offender a
lone slightly singed blue ribbon, fluttering with the grace of butterfly to the ground in front of booted feet. With gentleness quite rare, large hands pick it up. Ears pick up a rustling sound within the pyre. Skin sloughs off the figure in burnt chunky sheets, the eyeballs cook in the sockets before boiling liquid spurts out, dribbling like rummy ichor, the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh causing a throat to gag violently. The jaw opens, the sinews incinerated and useless. “Why did you leave me to die!?” she wails with a horrifying blend of fury and dispar.

Aaron’s eyes flick open, his screaming much much louder than the nightmare he just had. It stops as his brain started to process his surroundings. There was no forest, no fire, no blazing avatar demanding an answer to a question. He was back in the realm of reality, the dream over. Divale pressed his clammy hands into his face, his breathing coming in ragged intervals as he calmed down. “Jesus fucking Christ.” he murmured, rubbing his temples with his thumbs. “Ignis fatuus.” Aaron nonchalantly said, taking his hands away. At his command, a flickering blue flame spontaneously emerged from the center of the ceiling above him, surrounded by a glowing green mandala, its’ rims filled with symbols. What was once in the dark was brought to the light, a room with a modest white tiled ceiling that Aaron could reach with an outstretched arm could now be clearly discerned. Unlike the outside, the walls of his quarters were mortared stone, dusty and robust, the original walls of the castle left unadorned and unaltered. Small wooden shelves lined the opposite wall, the deepest one, while the right side, the one you would see upon opening the door, played host to a wooden stool, tucked away under a desk with a large mirror. In front of his bed, lay a cassone of carved ivory inlay and bronze plates depicting various forms of heraldry, and to his immediate right was a nightstand where his glasses and his watch, the time reading six o clock in the morning, lay. He winced as he peeled off the sweat drenched white sheets from his naked body.

Damn this bed. It’s one size too small for me. Then again, most everything is, so I guess I ought to be thankful that I even have one. He placed his feet on the cold wooden floor, the boards, rough and solid, made not so much as a peep as he stood up. The surface was like ice, but Aaron paid the pain no mind, for he suffered worse, instead walking to the desk and opening the left drawer. Got to get some clothes on. Walking out with your dork out would be a sure fire to get shot, and that’s the best case scenario. Fishing out his GI uniform, he proceeded to put it on quickly, save for the pair of white cotton underwear that he loathed with a passion that burned greater than a thousand suns. Clear evidence of humanity’s inhumanity. Why would you even put such uncomfortable things on? It’s not like they’ll stop a beam. The white T-shirt was first, then the black socks, next was the khaki long sleeved top, and the ensemble was finished by the khaki pants, held secure by a leather belt with a steel buckle. “Mirror mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” Aaron mused out loud as he pirouetted in front of the reflective glass. His gaze saw nothing but perfect symmetry in his dress, yet searingly painful incongruent bulges and angles on his head and face. Damn I look terrible. Need to get cracking on that New Year’s resolution to shave and get a haircut. Thinking about it, he opened the right drawer and sorted through some of the contents of his black duffel bag that he simply emptied unceremoniously into the cavity and casually tossed inside the cassone before going to bed. His large hands clasped a bent tin cup with a broken handle, a whetstone, and a straight blade razor. Flicking it open, seeing the metal gleam in the blue light, Aaron ran a wary finger along the edge, testing for dullness or imperfections. Like the day I found it in Russia, a beautiful gift. Speaking of...
from ear to ear. A message was written in pen, the handwriting elegant: Welcome to England chum. Enjoy your stay. Cptn E. Peterbourough December 3rd 1944. “I will indeed Captain.” he uttered in a low voice. With an almost frantic glee, he took out both drinking items, cracked open the whisky bottle, and poured a generous helping of alcohol into the glass. Before imbibing, Divale placed his left index finger into the room temperature whisky, collecting enough moisture for a single drop to cling to his digit like a barnacle to a ship. Slowly, gravity took its toll on the droplet and it slipped its grasp and fell to the floor, leaving nothing but a dark dot. For those that couldn’t be here. May you all rest in peace. With a somber heart, he tipped his glass and let some of the liquour wash over his tongue and swished it around, savoring the taste. That’s pretty good stuff. May have to…

His future thoughts were interrupted by three hard raps on his door. Aaron froze statue stiff. There’s no way in hell my scream woke somebody up. Nobody but me lives in this section. He quickly grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and put them on. “Door’s open.” he rang out, taking a small draught from the glass and turning toward the entrance. The door opened silently, the hinges fully greased, and in popped the head of one Mio Sakamoto, hand holding a flashlight with a face that was aghast at seeing such a light in a room with no windows at all, eye glued to it with suspicion, her cherry blossom perfume wafting in more than she. She stayed in that position for a good while, holding the door between her and the unknown aura that emanated from the ceiling like a warrior does a shield. “It’s alright major.” Aaron guaranteed, “This light is benign, unless you want it not to be.”

Mio gave the light one last look before reluctantly allowing her eye to drift to Aaron who stood to his full height, one hand resting on the desk and the other holding a glass. A quick sniff of the air told her all that she needed to know about what he was drinking and she exclaimed while pushing the door fully open, “You are drinking at six o clock in the morning?!”

Aaron shrugged his shoulders, a difficult maneuver due to his poorly measured over shirt that was drawn taut against his back like the hide of a snare drum. “Needed a little something to dull the aches of having a fitful sleep.” He gazed at her and queried, “You’re up awfully early too major. Why’s that?”

“I finished up an early morning run around the inner ring and was about to cross the hall to my room when I heard some screaming. Thought you were in trouble so I ran to a utility closet, found a flashlight, and came here.” Sakamoto explained haltingly.

Bull fucking shit you did. You would’ve been here by the time I took off those sheets if that were the case. Bitch is lying through her teeth. Aaron took another drink from the rocks glass and took a step towards her. “Major Sakamoto, do I look like a child to you?” he asked.

“No.” she answered cautiously, hand drifting to the katana hilt.

“Then why are you talking to me as if I were one, making some things clear and a lot of things not?” Aaron conjectured with an accusatory tone.

“Are you insinuating that I, your superior officer, am lying to you?” Mio asked with a hint of menace.

“No,” Aaron admitted, “I’m not insinuating that you’re lying; I’m telling you that you’re lying.”

Despite Aaron’s invocation producing colors existing in a limited color spectrum of blue, white, and black, he could see Mio’s face turning purple with rage at such a charge. “How dare you even…” she began, but before she could finish, Divale bolted down the rest of the glass and slammed it, bottom first, on top of the bed post knob, the sound ringing around the room like a gunshot, face and eyes intense.
“No!” he yelled, the force of his outburst causing Mio to draw her sword out of reflexive fear than need. “How dare you Major Sakamoto!” He stood there, fist now off the table, clenched into a mammoth fist, knuckles cracking. With his other hand, still holding the remarkably intact glass, he pointed to the door. “Take a good hard look at that door behind you!” he demanded, “What do you see?!”

Rather than give up her position, Mio flipped the eye patch up and turned her head slight askew, regarding the door. After a few seconds she answered, “I see a door, reinforced steel plates behind two thick oak boards, very flush with the frame.”

“No just very flush, but fully flush.” Aaron retorted, still steaming. “That door was not just meant to act as a means to get in; it was also intended to deaden all sound coming from within this room. I surmised this when I closed the door last night behind me. It’s not perfect mind you, but unless you were standing closeby, I could set a grenade off in here and no one would be the wiser. Plus, you said that you were coming back from a run. When I came up in the car last night, I calculated the distance to be roughly a mile and a half, give or take a few feet. It’s cold this time of year, so you would’ve had to bundle up for your jog, a jog that, regardless of how used you are to doing something like that, would cause anyone to work up a sweat. Of course, you could say that you omitted the fact that you showered after this run, yet if you indeed did so, your hair would be damp and leave a watermark on the back of your uniform. There isn’t one on your back major, so, when you combine all the aforementioned, it is plain to me that you are lying to me. Am I right?”

Mio went over her options in her head and gradually came to the same conclusion, over and over. *Cat’s out of the bag.* She sighed in resignation, flipped the eye patch back down, and sheathed her sword. “Yes, you are right Sargeant Divale.” she acknowledged. “And I’m fairly certain that your mind has gone ahead and theorized why this is.” She watched Aaron nod his head up and down. Sakamoto crossed her arms and leaned against the right side of the doorframe. “Can you blame us Aaron?” she asked, doing away with the honorific. “Think about it for a second. You’re a warlock, a type of being that was believed eradicated from the face of the earth over a century ago, an entity that wields unimaginable power that could do unspeakable things to man and witch alike. We may have the words of Prime Minister Churchill and General Eisenhower to console us and you may be on the same side as us, but we don’t know you from Adam Aaron. You’d do the same if the roles were reversed.” she reasoned.

Aaron heard her speech and looked down into the glass, wrinkling his face as there were some drops left. He took his shirt sleeve and wiped up the residue. When that task was complete, he placed the cap back on the Jameson bottle and placed both it and the glass back in the cherry wood case. “Yes, I would major.” he acquiesced, the wrath fully spent. “In a heartbeat, even though we are, as you said, on the same side now.” He turned to her and took a second to ponder his next choice of words. “Still, if I am to be spied upon, I’d rather have you be upfront about it rather than dance around the issue. I don’t like raising my voice if I can help it. Makes me sound like someone you’d wouldn’t want to be around.”

“Fair enough.” Mio agreed. “How did you know I was lying?” she asked while adjusting her position.

“You frequently started and stopped while talking. My simple question threw you off badly and you scrambled for a plausible story to give me. No offense major, but you’re a pisspoor liar.” Aaron enlightened, picking up his shaving kit in one hand. “Any way I can get to a restroom at this hour?”

“Follow me.” Mio gestured, ignoring the rebuke, walking slowly out the door. Aaron followed suit, closing it behind him. The pair walked down the hallway, backtracking to the main junction and proceeding in the opposite direction. The morning sun was barely creasting the horizon, casting rays
of yellow and red through the windows, making the carpet look like a hodgepodge of colorful furry piano key thin bars. “Are you okay?” she asked after they ventured a ways past a display case featuring a Scottish claymore.

“Yeah.” Aaron answered. “Just had a rough dream, that’s all.”

“Screaming like the Devil himself was chasing you isn’t my idea of a rough dream.” Mio countered, about facing. She looked up at him and stated, “They said that you were a great soldier, one that was courageous, one that knows no fear, but your reactions when you first walked these halls makes me wonder if we were given a lemon rather than the genuine article.”

Aaron’s gaze went stern and he took an inward step, using his immense bulk to add gravitas to his words. “Oh I am the genuine article, Major Sakamoto. I can back up any boast I make and throw down with the best of them, anytime, anywhere.”

“Not looking like that you won’t.” Mio bit back, “All I’d have to do is pull your beard and you’re mine.” She gestured to a door, one painted green amidst a hallway full of unpainted ones. “Maybe you should correct that.” she offered.

Aaron made a move to walk inside the room beyond the door, but stopped and turned to Mio. “You’re sure no one’s in there?” he asked.

“This bathroom is used for visiting dignitaries and guests.” Mio clarified. “The squadron bathroom is downstairs along with their quarters and the messhall.” She saw Divale put on an exasperated expression and hastily put forth, “It’s not because we wish to keep you at an arms length or even segregate you sergeant; it’s just that we don’t mix with the opposite sex at all by order of Commander Wilcke. The defense force manning the inner and outer rings has its own dorms, kitchens, recreation areas, and restrooms, completely independent from us. You are the first man to not only set foot within this castle keep, but stay within in it for more than an hour.”

“Hooray for me.” Aaron apathetically exclaimed and opened the door. He barely opened it a fraction of an inch, before he recoiled sharply, grimacing as if in pain.

“What’s wrong?” Mio asked.

“Lavender.” Aaron explained with disgust rolling off his tongue. “I loathe, hate, revile, detest, and despise that odor. I get that it’s easy to come by, but come on, at least make something that smells decent like pine or cedar. Hell, I’d settle for eucalyptus over this.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers Sargeant Divale.” Mio simply said. “In you go.”

Grumbling like an empty stomach, Aaron opened the door fully and went in. Inside was an immaculately clean and sterile bathroom with two toilets with privacy guards, three sinks with a soap bar resting on the one in the middle, and three shower stalls with white curtains. A lone wastebasket lay underneath a cloth towel rung, inhabited by two brown terry cloth towels. White skylights provided natural illumination, the sun’s rays pouring down like gold rain, refracting off the white and black checkered ceramic tilework. Very nice. He proceeded to walk toward the middle sink and deposited his shaving kit on the metal shelf above it. Mio stood by the door, her body propping it open, occasionally looking up and down the hall. She looked at him as he took off his khaki long sleeve over shirt, folding it with care, placing it on the shelf of the sink to his right. As one who trained heavily, both personally and professionally, Mio had a good eye for fitness levels in recruits. Many a prime specimen in the past came to mind, but she concluded that none were like Sargeant Divale. I was right; he is wiry with power lurking just below the surface. Very little body fat on that frame of his and besides what’s on his face, head, and eyebrows, the man is virtually hairless. Aaron
picked up the straight blade razor, looking comically small in his paw, and bent over the sink, letting his mane down. He grabbed a decent tuft in the front and ran the blade alongside, cutting through six months worth of growth in seconds, the strands dropping into the sink like molted crow feathers.

“We have a barber on standby in the inner ring.” Mio offered, concerned that he might cut himself.

“Thank you, but no.” Aaron politely answered, chopping away. “I’ve been doing this over four years now, and besides, I’m almost done.” With another clean pass, he shook his head over the sink, loose hair falling down, and reset himself upright. He looked over his work in the mirror feeling every square inch of his shorn scalp, looking for misses. Sakamoto couldn’t see any from her angle and was impressed with his choice of style, close, but not to the point of seeing skin in the back and along the sides, and short to medium length on the top, giving even volume. The bangs barely existed and parts of the sideburns were wiped out.

“Not bad.” Mio admitted, nodding her head from afar. “Halfway there.” Aaron then took off his white T-shirt without so much as combing his new coif. Her eye widened as she gazed upon a canvas of pain. Almost every patch of skin all along Divale’s back and upper arms was pockmarked with scar tissue from a multitude of wounds. Though probably no more than nine feet away, even at this distance, Mio could make out the telltale indented circles of bullet wounds, the lumpy white lines of cuts, the jagged depressed obtuse arcs of shrapnel impacts, the thick bars of burn marks, and the flying v shaped impalement gashes from what she could only conjecture. Looking in the mirror, she could see more scars on his chest, with a particularly nasty surgical scar just to the left of his sternum, each side lined with pin head thick dots, stitch entry points, along with a quarrel of six shrapnel marks. Sakamoto shook her head in awe.

How is this man still alive much less standing? That wound on his chest is lethal, for that I’m sure. Quite a few others would have done him in too, those on his arms would trigger lethal blood loss or even necessitate amputation, but he’s all in one piece. Can’t imagine what it took to keep going after such injuries. Despite knowing that she was gawking at him, Aaron paid it no mind as he proceeded to dry shave, grabbing his beard, thick forests of dark hair jutting from his long fingers like emaciated worms. He drew the razor close to the scalp, the grinding of coarse hair and metal reminding one of the sound of a power sander being pressed against a steel ingot.

“You’re wondering how in the hell is he still alive after enduring such a beating?” he answered, looking back at her, his face still retaining a third of his beard. After she didn’t answer, Aaron continued, “Truth be told, I’ve been wondering that for a long time. After I while I gave up trying to figure it out and put to luck and circumstance. I know I should be dead at least a dozen times over, yet here I stand, and fuck if I know why.” He returned to his work, whistling away for another few seconds before closing the razor. With both hands, Aaron scooped up a clump of hair that could’ve made three bald men happy, and deposited it in the wastebasket, rubbing his hands clean of stragglers with the towel. With a shorn face, he looked several years younger, paper thin facial scars visible. Then, he turned and grabbed his shirts and the towel and walked to the middle shower stall. Turning to face Mio, he asked in amazement, “Are you really going to watch me shower?


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“Orders are orders.” Mio simply answered. Aaron sighed, shaking his head, and wrapped the towel around his waist, the cloth looking like a short white skirt around his lithe girth. After securing it, he unbuckled his pants and pulled them off, casting them and his shirts to the outside of the stall, within reach of the shower curtain. He trotted off to the stall, closing the curtain behind him. Sakamoto let her eyes venture up the hall once more as Aaron turned the water on. The patter of water on tile filled
the room and careened down the hallway, before dying out a short ways off. The sun was still shining bright through the windows and she traced her gaze along the lines of light. She looked past the far wall and proceeded to turn back around to keep an eye on what was going on in the bathroom when she starting getting that feeling, one that could best be described as unease. Mio knew that feeling well. I’m being watched. She looked again at the far wall just in time to see the faintest movement of a head disappear behind the wall, the shimmer of hair, it’s color indiscernible. Who is that?

“Oh fuck me running with a rake sideways!” Aaron shouted, drawing Mio’s attention away from the escaping peeping tom, “Even the soap is lavender scented!” She couldn’t help but smile out of the sheer hilarity of it. “I can hear you smiling at my misfortune out there major,” Aaron gruffly declared, the water of the shower cutting out, “and I don’t like it.”

“Suck it up buttercup.” Mio shot back, as long arms grabbed the clothing outside the stall and drew it out of view, the sounds of dressing clear as day.

“Oh yeah?” Aaron prodded as he drew back the curtain, steam billowing out like smoke from a chimney, making him look sorcerous. He walked towards Mio and urged, “Say that to my face.”

Without skipping a beat, Mio moved from her spot, walked right up to Aaron, and jabbed a finger into his chest, every impact feeling like a hammer strike. “Suck. It. Up.” she repeated. Then a low growl erupted from the major’s stomach, followed soon after by another, coming from Aaron’s nonexistent paunch.

As if taking this as a proclamation, Aaron looked down at his belly and surmised, “My thoughts exactly.” He turned his attention to Mio and asked, “Where’s breakfast?”

“Downstairs in the mess hall. Come with me.” she answered. The two left the restroom, and walked down the marble staircase, with considerably less anxiety between them. As they went to the left of the staircase, Aaron could smell something very hearty, coming in waves. His mouth watered and his mind ran a series of hypotheses as to what was being made. I smell all sorts of scents. The earthy aroma of some grain, the protein stink of scrambled eggs, the perservative smoke of beef. What the hell is it?

Finally, they came to a pair of doors, ornately carved wood with crowns and crossed swords in recessed pockets. Sakamoto spun around slowly and stated, “This is where you will meet all of us for the first time Sargeant Aaron Divale. Are you ready?” Aaron ran his fingers through his now shortened hair and closed his eyes, focusing on what was about to happen. You could deny this you know, politely decline until you actually feel hungry, but that’s not your style Aaron. You never ran during the worst of times and you certainly aren’t going to start now. You must go on; whatever happens afterwards means nothing. This is where we see if you really are brave Aaron. Do you dare go back?

“Bring it on.” Aaron uttered, his eyes flicking open. Nodding, Mio grabbed the doorknobs and pulled the doors open with one swift motion. The messhall had a high ceiling with two large metal fans, unmoving and unneeded. The walls were whitewashed wood, windows tall and wide with green curtains, absorbing few stray rays from the sun. The floor was hardwood, waxed to a high sheen. Only one circular table occupied the whole place, surrounded by twelve chairs, nine of which were occupied by witches, mouths agape and eyes wide at such a gargantuan spectacle loitering just outside the threshold. Another pair of double doors could be seen at the far end of the room, presumably leading to the kitchen proper.

Commander Wilcke looked up from her water glass and remarked, “Ah, our newest recruit.” Her gaze drifted down and her mood instantly darkened, for in his haste to put on clothes, Aaron had apparently neglected to put on his shoes. “And already you have one uniform violation on your
“record.” she grimly stated.

Aaron didn’t need to look down to know what she meant. “I recognize my failure and will strive to do better in the future.” he responded.

“‘You better.” Minna warned. “Get three of those and you’re grounded until I say further; am I clear?”

“Like crystal commander.” Aaron answered.

“Now please, have a seat. Breakfast will be served soon.” WIlcke motioned to her immediate left with the empty three seats. Mio automatically walked into the room and made for the farthest one away from Minna. Aaron put on the bravest face he could and trudged along the hardwood floor, keeping his eyes riveted to the seats, looking for some possible reason why they were essentially hemming him in towards the higher ups.

“Which dost thou prefer oh valiant Odysseus? Wilt thou sail close to or ‘twixt Scylla or Charybdis? He groaned inwardly as he saw that everyone was packing heat of some kind. They all had pistols, one carried a double edged Bowie knife, and Major Sakamoto carried her katana. After quickly reviewing his options, he decided to take the lesser of two evils and sit next to Commander Wilcke. She only has a pistol, Walter PPK by the looks of it and on the same side as I’m sitting. I can deal with that.

The wooden chair held his bulk, groaning in protest, and he towered over everyone seated, the white lace placemat with a full set of silverware, porcelin coffee cup, and crystal drinking glass looking like an island archipelgo from cruising altitude.

“Everyone,” Minna declared, “this is Sergeant Aaron Divale. Let’s give him a warm 501st welcome.” She led a round of applause that was sporadic at best, the other squadron members less then motivated. It gradually got livelier when Major Sakamoto gave everyone a stern look.

Aaron, unused to being the center of attention, even when he infrequently desired it, meekly bowed his head and said, “Much obliged.”

“Let’s go around the table and introduce ourselves.” Minna not so opaquely ordered.

“My name is Francesca Lucchini, Pilot Officer of the 90th Fighter Squadron of the Regia Aeronautica.” a tiny woman, probably no more than 4'9”, with a very tanned faced piped up, her scent like that of the sun and sea. Her hair was nearly jet black, the same as Major Sakamoto’s, but it was braided into pigtails and secured by white bows. Emerald green eyes looked at him with an energy that spoke more to her curiosity than her vitality, for Aaron could sense that she was inquisitive. Francesca wore a white officers coat with a light blue cravat. A black choker and white shoes completed her ensemble. “Buongiorno signore. (Good morning sir)” Lucchini nodded with a wave of her hand. As Aaron looked at her, a lump started to form in his throat.

She looks way too young to be in the military. Didn’t they learn from the last war what happens when you send children to fight? It ends in nothing but laments. Of course, you weren’t that old yourself when you got your marching orders.

Grazie madonna. (Thank you my lady)” Aaron replied, smiling a genuine smile. Christ I haven’t spoken a word of Italian in almost six months and I’m not even Italian... I think.

Francesca rocked back in her seat, mouth wide open, inhaling deep in surprise. “Tuscan!” she exclaimed, “You have a Tuscan accent, same as mine! Where are you from? Is it Rome? It’s gotta be Rome!”

Aaron was about to answer when Minna barged in and said, “That is for another time; not here.” Francesca looked down dejectedly and Divale couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. I’m probably the closest thing to an Italian she’s talked to in a long while. Poor kid. Oh god am I really saying kid
A figure stood up and he looked just in time to see a hand extend towards him by a pale woman who was considerably taller than any he had encountered before, so tall she only had to bend halfway to reach across the table. *Yeah, you’re easily 5'5*”. “I’m Captain Charlotte Yeager of the 363rd Fighter Squadron, United States Airforce, but most call me Shirley.” the lanky Yankee said, doing her best to be brave in front of the squadron. He shook her hand gently and was taken aback by her scent, or lack thereof. *Now that’s something I haven’t experienced before. Must be obsessed with cleanliness and use her own soap rather than that lavender shit.*

Wearing a red coat with a white under shirt and brown shoes, she drew attention. Shirley had waist length fall foliage red hair, faint freckles dotting the cheekbones, and blue eyes that Aaron had trouble getting out of. *Blue like the sky. The perfect shade. Maybe I can recreate that…* His thoughts veered sharply off course when Yeager sat down and his eyes caught the faintest edge of her rather prestigious bosom. Despite his young age, Aaron had seen many women in his time. Everything from bee stings, cupfuls, handfuls, melons, and bazookas passed his eyes, but these were howitzers, plain and simple. *Don’t stare. Do something else.* He shook his head fast and rubbed his eyes, taking care not to move his glasses off his face when doing so.

“You alright sargeant?” Minna asked.

“Didn’t sleep too well last night commander.” Aaron admitted. He smiled inwardly when he added, “Felt like someone was watching me.”

Commander Wilcke gave a sideways glance over at Mio who could only look away, failure in her face plainly evident. “Let us continue.” she suggested, getting her mind off the setback. *He really is no fool. Might have to try a different tactic.*

“Captain Gertrude Barkhorn, Jagdschwader 52, German Luftwaffe.” a chocolate brown haired, light skinned, brown eyed woman briskly informed with more than a hint of wariness, never taking her eyes off him. *This one is scared, wait, strike that, she’s just alert. Looks like someone who never lets their guard down. I can relate to that.* Her style of dress was the same as Commander Wilcke’s with the characteristic gunmetal grey and black coat. Barkhorn was slightly shorter than Yeager, roughly 5’3”, and had medium length hair that could come down to her shoulders if it weren’t for the pigtails, secured with black ties, with some unruly strands falling into her face. She sat ramrod straight in the chair, revealing to all her pedigree. *Born soldier through and through. Most Germans are, though they’ll never admit it. Looks it too. Very stocky. Slight cauliflower ear. Looks like she got into a nasty brawl on more than one occasion.*

“Lieutenant Erica Hartmann, Jagdschwader 52, German Luftwaffe.” Erica called out in a voice that made it plain that she just got out of bed. The response made Aaron furrow his brow in thought. *Hmm… Definitely not like her fellow countrymen. Must get her in some hot water from the higher ups.* She was shorter than Barkhorn, 5’0” tops, and wearing a black coat, contrasting sharply with her light skin tone. Hartmann’s blond hair was cropped short near the jaw line, blue eyes twinkling, the faintest grin on her lips. *I know that twinkle and it ain’t the sun’s reflection. That’s the eye twinkle of a prankster. Note to self: Watch this one.*

“Sergeant Lynette Bishop, 610th RAF.” an English voice stated. Bishop was dressed in a black over coat with two layers underneath, a grey sleeveless V neck sweater and a white under shirt with a green tie. Shiny black shoes served as the genesis point for her long green and red stockings that ran all the way past the knee, making her 5’1” height that much bigger, at least to the untrained eye. Her skin was light, eyes blue, and her middle back length blonde hair was done up in a long braid, the tail tied with a black ribbon. *There’s a sadness about her, like she doesn’t want to be here. Fingers are strong and long and her upper body is stocky, especially around the shoulders. Probably a heavy
marksman. So many ribbons with this group. Uh oh. Pine, rustling of a summer breeze heavy with ocean salt. Not here! Not now! Bring it back Aaron! He did the only thing he could do; he chomped down on the inner part of his bottom lip so hard that he winced, the metallic tinge of blood oozing all along his teeth, tongue, and gums. Apparently, Lynette caught his expression of discomfort and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Aaron answered, swishing his tongue around the wound. “Just a minor complaint that acts up every now and then.”

“Moving on.” Commander Wilcke nudged, clearly analyzing these events with the clinical deduction of a pathologist. Aaron grew uneasy. Have to watch myself. Keep cool and keep it together.

“Lieutenant Eila Juutilainen, Finnish 24th Air Unit.” the officer chirped. She was paler than the others by several degrees, but it wasn’t an unhealthy tone by any means. Near white platinum blonde hair hung free down her back, clothed in a blue coat with a sky blue ammo belt pouch about her waist. Clad in white shoes, Divale estimated that she stood at 5’2 ½”. He noticed a strip of three red rose collar studs on her right side. Strange, that would indicate captaincy. Symbolic of something? Eila’s eyes, their color reminding one of just about ripe blueberries, gave Aaron pause. There’s that prankster twinkle again, but there’s something else. No not an intellect, though it’s there. It’s like she can look into my mind. Don’t try it Lieutenant; you won’t like what you’ll find.

“Lieutenant Alexandra Vladimirovna Litvyak, 586th Fighter Group, Soviet Airforce.” an exhausted voice spoke. As Aaron turned, his curiosity was piqued by the fact that the chair occupying who ever said the name had a white parasol over it. The woman moved quickly out of his view, ducking out of sight. In addition to being inquisitive, Divale was moved by shock to stand up and crane his neck over the table. Mother of God! A Russian! An honest to God Russian! The cowering witch, all 5’0” of her, was a sight to behold. Her flesh was snow white, a tone so pale that it made Eila look tanned. Silver hair flowed free to the jaw line. Her dress was white at the top and black around the chest leading to the two leg tails, the points displaying the Soviet star. Brown shoes could be seen, but Aaron was drawn to her eyes, a blue green hue, their gaze fearful.

A bright light and there is nothing but flame, a fire that had no business being there on the waters’ surface. It was a chemical fire, hundreds if not millions of gallons of oil, ignited by the Neuroi beams, bubbling up from below like lava from a volcano by a fleet now sinking like blackened sundered stones into the sea. The port of a large city could be seen amidst the smoke, a hot and heavy black fog that stung the eyes. In the past it had once been proud and prosperous, yet now, it was in the process of being laid low by the enemy, air units and ground forces blasting it apart as they moved inland in unison, block by block, street by street, house by house. They are methodical to a T. There would be few if any survivors from that quarter. Over the sound of destruction, one can make out cries from the sailors treading water, the orphaned few, some screaming as flames consumed them, some praying for deliverance or delivering their last rites, and others simply calling for help in voices than didn’t hold out for much hope. Attention turns to a pair of hands searching frantically under the water, trying to grasp something, anything resembling life. “We have to move! It won’t be long before they see us!” a voice yells, deafening the ears of the unseen rescuer. “I know!” another screams back, “Just one more!” Suddenly, fingers sense the gentle caressess of cloth, the backstraps of a backpack. Heartbeat quickens and powerful arms pull against the rainbow stained deep. With a grunt, the object is above the surface, the savior triumphant. Yet fate is cruel, and the elation is soon replaced by sadness, as the winds of hope pass over the scene. A young man, face streaked with oil, looks on with lifeless eyes, rictus locked in fear, glazing over as death takes another soul down that road where none return. Tears well up, the moment too heartbreaking to bear any longer. “Mnezhal, moy drug. (I’m sorry my friend)”

A swift movement brings all back, the form of Eila standing in front of her squad mate. Aaron tensed
for he didn’t need to look around to see that Minna had her right hand under the table, feet positioned
to quickly get out of the way and give herself some room to draw her pistol. Sensing the danger he
was in, Divale slowly pulled back, hands held out to the side, palms up, a universal gesture of
meaning no harm and that the situation had passed. “I’m sorry,” he remonstrated as he sat back
down, “it’s just that I haven’t seen a Russian in many years.” An awkward silence passed until the
silver haired Litvyak peeked around Eila’s left side, fear abated and replaced with an understanding
that bordered on the fringes of gloom. She nodded silently, and Aaron nodded back. It’s was a
terrible thing to do, but necessary. Eila moved back to her seat, gaze venomous.

Commander Wilcke placed her right hand back above the table and began, “You have already met
Major Sakamoto and I, which just leaves…” The doors to the kitchen opened with a harsh crash and
Aaron whipped around in his seat, just in time to see a diminutive figure, 4’9” at the most, holding
an obnoxiously large covered platter over their head, and clearly straining under the weight of
whatever it held, weaving back and forth like a rudderless ship. It’s going to fall. They need help.
Aaron made a move to get up and aid whoever it was, but stopped when he heard a rough throat
clear coming from Minna. He turned and saw that she was looking at him sternly, sheer force of will
demanding that he sit back down. Before reluctantly doing so, he gestured to the weebling wobbling
individual, with an imploring look. “She’s got this.” Minna simply answered. Turned out, that she
indeed had it under control as she, with the last bits of strength, placed the platter in the center of the
table, with nary an errant tip of a fork coming off a placemat. A young witch panted, her brown hair,
two large sections jutting out and downwards like the wings of a resting bird, were matted over her
sweaty brow. As she lifted herself up, Aaron could see that she wore a white coat with a blue flap
along the back that extended just below the shoulders, and with a blue neckerchief tied around her
neck. One look at her brown eyes told him that she was exhausted, but still kept a youthful vigor.

She wiped her brow with her sleeve and was about to move to the only only empty seat left when
she froze and gradually looked up at Aaron. “Hi.” she croaked softly. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Sargeant Aaron Divale, the warlock.” he relayed without ceremony, his voice echoing
throughout the mess hall. “Who are you?”

“Sargeant Yoshika Miyafuji.” she answered quietly, making a beeline for her seat, the one next to
Mio. As she rounded the table, Aaron was puzzled for she was the only other person in the room that
was unarmed. Is she one that isn’t trusted?

“And now that just leaves you Lieutenant.” Minna declared, gazing across the table. Divale followed
her eyes and immediately felt a sense of dread upon resting them on the last witch to be introduced.
Directly across from him, face half hidden behind a steaming cup of liquid that reeked of marigold,
was a pale faced woman, her fox yellow eyes, framed by wire thin glasses similar in style to his own,
glaring at him with an emotion that Aaron had never seen in his young life. That’s not fear masked
by bravery, that’s… hate. In its’ purest form. No one, be they man or woman, ever looked at me with
such vehemence. His mouth started to go dry again and he could feel the color drain from his face.
Look at something else. Doing his best to calm himself, he saw that her straw blond hair was flowing
free behind her 5’0” frame, contrasting sharply with her rich blue double breast pocketed uniform
that featured gold brocade near the sleeves, a white under shirt barely noticeable. He noticed
something odd about the pose she had.

“My name is Perrine Henriette Closterman,” she stated with a haughty air. Perrine reached into her
coat front and pulled a silver chain that was hidden among the folds. Within seconds, a cross was
exposed, a gold icon with vermillion red inlay in the form of a sword, its pommel and hilt upwards,
the blade pointed down. Aaron’s blood ran cold and he couldn’t breathe. She’s one of the Knights of
Saint Michael, the very organization that destroyed the warlocks over a century ago! Fuck. My. Life.
“and I expect you to be mindful and respectful of that.” she finished with a mirthless smile.

Not to be shown up, Aaron lowered his glasses, the sight of his true eyes making many uncomfortable around the table. “Where I’m from, respect is earned not given, Lieutenant.” he growled, letting her know where the popular winds blew. If she felt any emotion, it didn’t show on her face, but her grip around the cup tightened, skin grazing across the porcelain. Did you like that? Sit on that and rotate.

“Now let us eat.” Minna interjected, warding off complete mayhem. “And eat hardy, for even though we’re off duty for now I want everyone to spend at least four hours doing flight checks and marksman training.” Some groans and sour faces made the rounds.

“Sounds to me that they’re sad because it’s not enough time.” Mio exclaimed. “I say we should double that.” Deathly silence, to the point that Aaron could almost hear the steam puffing out from under the platter cover.

Minna chuckled. “Now now major. Let’s not get too ahead of ourselves. I’m sure that four hours will be enough.” She turned to the squadron. “Am I right?”

“Yes commander!” everyone chimed. With a flourish, Yoshika pulled the cover off the platter and revealed a cornucopia of food. A large black iron pot was filled to the brim with a steaming brown slurry of rice, pounded to a pulp, ladle sticking out like a sour thumb with a pile of bowls next to it. Around it, lay small porcelain bowls filled with fried eggs, bacon, onions, peppers, potatoes, sausage, raisins, fresh cream, brown sugar, and salted butter. Three large glass pitchers filled with water, milk, and orange juice rounded it all out. Eager hands grabbed their bowls and dug in like half starved dogs, except Aaron who simply stared at the whole spectacle wide eyed.

How did they get enough ration cards to get this type of food here? Even a full month of the damn things wouldn’t pay off a fraction of this.

A tap was felt on his shoulder and Aaron looked off to his right. Yoshika drew back a tad and asked meekly, “You’re not going to eat?”

“Oh, of course.” Divale answered, feeling like an idiot, taking his bowl, filling it up, and stuffing it with as much of everything that he could, while being mindful of everyone else. “It’s just that I’ve never seen so much food in one place before.” he admitted afterwards.

“Yeah,” Yoshika agreed. “even where I’m from this is a lot.” She watched him spoon a heaping mouthful of her cooking into his mouth, one that reminded her of a python dislocating its’ lower jaw. He chewed and swallowed, the lump of food traveling down his throat with breakneck speed. A satisfied grumble was heard, like a purring cat, coming from his person.

What is this? he asked taking another spoonful from his bowl, followed by another.

“It’s congee. Most Japanese eat this for breakfast. It’s our version of oatmeal.” Yoshika replied, happy that he like it. Aaron shoveled it all in with the alacrity of a worker who was supposed to be manning his station two minutes ago. When he finished, he took the pitcher of orange juice to fill his glass. Not like any oatmeal I ever had. Water was too scarce to waste on something like that. Had to eat the whole thing raw.

“It’s amazing.” Aaron went on, bringing the full glass of orange juice to his lips. The liquid washed down his throat and he drained the glass within four gulps. “This beats even my cooking and nobody beats my cooking.” he boasted, setting the glass down.

“That’s an awfully big assertion there sargeant.” Minna quipped. “We all can cook here.”
“Pride is never a good quality to have.” Gertrude added. “It just makes you look like an ass when you fail.”

“I don’t fail.” Aaron declared in a low voice. “Plus, it isn’t boasting if you can back it up.”

An exasperated sigh came from Perrine who looked at him with disgust. “Are we seriously having a discussion as to who has the best cuisine around here? You should be more concentrated on your training.” she scolded.

“Here-here.” Mio assented between sips of tea. Aaron saw a beaming smile from Closterman and he couldn’t help but feel repulsed by the whole thing. And she’s a brownnoser. This day keeps getting better and better.

“Say Lieutenant,” Divale began, being as civil as he could, “have you ever gone tanning in the sun?”

“No.” she flatly answered. “Why should I?” she asked as she brought the cup to her lips.

“Oh, so you could flesh out that lovely shade of brown on your nose.” Aaron explained. The reactions around the table were as swift as they were different. Yoshika went into a state of shock, Eila uttered a low whistle, Sanya ducked under the table, Gertrude blanched, Erica inhaled sharply, Lynette glanced at Minna, Minna glanced over at Mio, Mio looked at both of them, Shirley mouthed the words Oh Boy, and Lucchini’s spoon fell out of her hand, clattering to the table. Perrine, for her part, spat out some of her tea in surprise, stunned by such a insult. She coughed and wiped her mouth with a cloth napkin.

“You take that back.” she snarled through gritted teeth, aiming a murderous gaze right at Aaron.

Aaron leaned over the table towards Perrine’s face, a maneuver that got him so close, he could smell the rose scented perfume on her neck and dared, “Make me.”

In that moment, Minna sprung into action and grabbed the sargeant by the right ear, wrenching it hard. Divale yelped in agony as she pulled him backwards and out of his seat. She got out of her seat calmly and told everyone, “Please finish your meal ladies and don’t mind us. The sargeant and I have some pressing issues to discuss.” Another twist of her wrist was all that Aaron needed to dance to his superior’s tune as the pair walked towards the still open kitchen doors. Minna closed them behind her, the warlock dangling in her grasp like a fish on a hook. Dear almighty God make it stop! I’ll do anything you want, just stop ripping my ear off! As if she magically heard his pleas, Minna released her vise like grip and Aaron dropped to the floor, cradling his ear like a newborn baby.

“Get up.” she growled, clearly angry. Obediently, Aaron stood, the pain in his ear gone. Oh shit, I’m in trouble. “Forgive my language, but what the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” she screamed. Though he towered over her by a good foot, he felt smaller than a cockroach.

“I-I merely wanted to-to…” he stuttered like a scared child.

“Wanted to what!?” Minna roared, her patience wearing thin.

“Call it like I saw it.” Aaron blurted.

Minna’s face seemed to soften, but not her voice. “And what did you see, Sargeant Divale?!?” she asked.

“Brownnosing.” Aaron answered, finding his courage again. “It was plain as day. I’d even go as far to say that that’s borderline hero worship and that’s never good. Get’s people killed.”
Minna crossed her arms, eyes firmly fixed on the warlock. “That may be, but here, we handle things like this behind closed doors, not out in the open, you understand Sergeant?!” she inquired firmly. Aaron nodded vigorously. “Move your ass!” Wilcke shouted.

Without any hesitation, Aaron bolted out of the kitchen, veered around the table so fast that the curtains fluttered, and sat down hard in his seat. Unfortunately, in his haste, he misjudged the position of the chair, causing him to plant his rump firmly on the hardwood floor with a heavy thump, the vibration causing the glassware on the table to jiggle like Jello. A few of his onlookers started to laugh, but the jovial outbursts died when Minna walked out of the kitchen, closing the doors politely behind her. She walked to the head of the table, hands running through the length of her hair, and said, “Breakfast is over ladies and gentleman. To your posts.” She gave a sidelong glance at Aaron, who without his chair looked like a toddler peering over the lip of the table, and pointed at him. “As for you Sergeant Divale, you are to report to the infirmary for an in depth physical examination. Sergeant Miyafuji will accompany you. Dismissed.” Everyone got up and walked out of the messhall doors. Closterman, before departing, shot Aaron a smirk and strutted out like she won a battle without firing a shot in anger. You’ll get yours you pompous bitch. Just you wait.

Yoshika got up from her chair and offered him a hand up. “Are you alright?” she asked. Aaron dismissed her aid, with a sharp wave of his hand, and got up slowly, rubbing his backside. “I’ve taken worse lumps.” he replied. “So where’s this infirmary?”

“Follow me.” Yoshika said, and started to walk towards the messhall doors. Aaron followed, striding out so as to work out the lingering soreness on his buttocks. As he was the last to leave, he felt it necessary to close the doors, but Yoshika remarked, “You don’t have to do that. A cleaning crew will come in later to pick up the mess.” *Fine by me.* He continued to follow Yoshika, her puny form looking like a pygmy next to the colossal juggernaut. The front gate that Aaron walked through last night was open, wide open, and he felt the cool March winds against his face. Outside, the keep grounds were lush and well kept like nature intended, the black topped processional the only manmade blemish. The sun was shining and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, making the still dewy grass sparkle like diamonds. They turned left walking to the right of the keep, its’ walls strong despite its’ age, the tips of the steepled towers topped with gargoyles, stone effigies of grotesque creatures, half man, half devil, with wings unfurled, their eyes downcast, glaring at the two walkers many stories up with a malevolent hunger. Aaron stopped to regard them and Yoshika turned around puzzled. “Is something the matter?” she asked. Divale didn’t answer, his face a blank slate of emotion, looking up at the ornaments with a watchful stare. Miyafuji looked at them too and assured, “They’re just stone. Nothing to be afraid of. They can’t hurt us.” Aaron’s eyes drifted back down to Yoshika and she felt trepidation as he seemed to give off a sense that he knew something she didn’t, a look that made her think that maybe those sentinels overhead were more than met the eye.

“Let’s go.” Aaron stated, “I’m sure that the company doctor doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” Miyafuji gestured with her head and the duo continued on their way. After a few dozen feet, Divale could see the outside of the hospital, a squat one floor construction with a red shingled roof. The outer walls were painted grey and lined with bushes. A concrete slab sat in front of a white door, the sign of the Red Cross above it. White curtained windows dotted the sides at certain intervals. *Sits a decent distance away from the walls, to protect it from an artillery strike from multiple angles. Ingenious.* They stepped up to the threshold and Yoshika opened the door. A tiny brass bell hanging above the door frame rang out as the portal grazed the bottom of it.

Within moments, a response was heard, “Come on in! Everything is ready Sergeant Miyafuji!” a woman’s voice called out. Aaron’s eyes widened. *That can’t be who I think it is?* Aaron looked around the greeting area. A wooden desk with a tucked in metal chair was on the right side, an iron
holder displaying pamphlets ranging from how to spot hypothermia to CPR instructions. An open white tiled hallway just past the two pieces of furniture led down deeper into the compound. He strode forward and around the corner, his feet making nary a sound. Yoshika had to practically bound after him, down the hallway that smelled like recently applied disinfectant, lit by overhead lamps. “It will be the last door on the left!” the voice called again. “It’s open!”

Aaron got to the door way before Miyafuji did and turned the knob. Pushing it open, he saw a white tiled room with skyblue painted walls. The ceiling hardwood, an overhead fan circling lazily. The smell of clean was oppressive, but not to the point that made one gag. A tall and long cabinet with multiple glass panels lined the far right wall, filled with bandages, gauze pads, sulfur packs, antiseptic, and other standard medical supplies. A chest, laying in a deep recessed area next to the cabinet to the point where only the latch to the door could be seen, was the repository of blood packs and plasma vials. Three steel hangers on wheels were parked neatly nearby. To the left wall was an eye chart and a scale. Everything on the far wall was obscured by a long white privacy curtain which would one would presume lay the triage area and the physician. He squinted his eyes and saw a shadowy figure behind the screen, getting darker and more pronounced as it got closer. A hand grasped the white veil and drew it aside revealing a woman in her twenties, as tan as Lucchini, dressed in a white doctor’s coat, the Red Cross pin affixed above her left breast pocket, and a navy blue skirt that came down to her knees, ending in a pair of non-slip black one inch heels. Long dark hair, in a ponytail tied with a pink ribbon, carried the scent of her perfume, one of orange peel and cloves throughout the room with the aid of the ceiling fan.

His eyes widened and he couldn’t move as if transfixed by Medusa herself. “Dotter Domino. (Doctor Domino)” he struggled with disbelief, recognizing her. “Questa e una sopresa. Se avessi saputo che eri tu, mi sarei vestito meglio. (This is a surprise. If I knew it was you, I would’ve dressed better)”

The doctor nodded graciously. “Per loco, io sono Dotter Domino, ma per te, io sono Lucrezia. (To them, I’m Doctor Domino, but to you, I’m Lucretia)” She paused before uttering with her Lombardian accent, green eyes soft and alluring, “La tua Lucrezia. (Your Lucretia)”

A bright light and the world is dark, save for multiple slivers of silver light from the full moon coming through a partially shuttered window. The room is small and spartan, with nothing but a dresser, nightstand, lamp, and a large bed. A heater ticks and rattles away softly on the far wall, keeping the area warm. The air is filled with a strange collection of scents: the saltiness of sweat, the earthy effluent of passionate lovemaking, and the lingering aroma of orange peel and cloves. Vision is on the ceiling, gazing upwards at the tiles, the shoddy craftsmanship resembling a lunar landscape, long shadows casting off images of places and people that once meant something, but now are gone to dust, taken by the brutal combination of fate and the silent artillery of time. Somewhere deep within a conscious mind, the dull ache of muscle is felt along with the coolness of crisp sheets. Something stirs in the dark, its’ movement causing one to glance to the left. There, recumbent, relaxed, and satisfied is a young woman, her naked flesh revealed to the light of the moon. Her arms cover her chest, rhythmically moving up and down from deep slumber, the lower half covered by a white sheet. Again the maiden of the night stirs, and her eyes open, the fertile green illuminated by two points of light, the color of dying fire embers. She smiles a loving smile and reaches out with her hand. An unseen face feels the gentle caress of fingers, taking the memories of the pain and suffering of yesteryears away for one brief moment. “Sono tuo. (I’m yours)” she says.

Yoshika caught very little of the conversation as she finally caught up to Aaron, panting, arm braced against the door frame. “I’m here.” she wheezed.

Lucretia looked at her and gestured, “Please come in. We will start the examination now.” Yoshika took a few gulping breaths and staggered in. Aaron looked at Lucretia with a puzzled expression. “Sargeant Miyafuji’s family owns a clinic in Japan. She hails from a long line of healers and wishes
to one day become a doctor like me. The more practice she gets, the better.” she explained. Divale walked in and stood at attention while the good doctor took a clipboard hanging from a wall hook and produced a pen from her left breast pocket. Domino handed both to Aaron. “Just fill in what you can until Yoshika returns.” she instructed. As she walked away, he looked over the paper and frowned. Standard general questionnarie. This won’t take long. He took the pen in his hand and scratched down what he knew in less time than it took a child to recite their ABC’s. Looking around for a chair he was dismayed to find none, so Aaron waited until Lucretia motioned for him to go to the scales, a white towel in her hands. Without even waiting for a command, Divale placed his clipboard on the floor and took off both his shirts, giving them to the doctor for safe keeping, and was about to take the towel from Domino when the clatter of another clipboard hitting the floor caused both of them to turn. Yoshika was standing there, face white as a ghost, hands over her mouth in shock, the pen rolling across the tile until it came to a stop near the wall. “Yoshika, are you alright?” Lucretia asked with concern.

Instead of answering, Miyafuji walked up to Aaron and, standing on her tippy-toes, placed her right hand on his chest, right over the nastiest scars she’d ever seen. “How are you not dead?” she asked incredulously, looking up at him. “This wound is enough to kill a man ten times over.”

Aaron wrapped the towel around his waist and removed his pants. “I took a grievous wound a long time ago that required immediate medical attention, but there was no doctor in the immediate vicinity, so I had to operate on myself without anesthesia.” he answered, while folding the pants up before giving them to Domino. Yoshika just shook her head.

A self operation?! Without pain killers?! Impossible, but he’s here so I guess it’s not.

Remembering, she ran to both clipboard and pen and gathered them up. She took Aaron’s clipboard in her hands and recited out loud, “Let’s see here… First name: Aaron, second name: Divale, middle name: N/A. No address or number, no serial number, no next of kin listed, no information provided in regards to birth place, birthdate, or parents. Age is listed: 18 *est*. Blood type: AB.” Not as bad as I thought. She transferred the information listed, what little there was, and instructed, “Step on the scale.” Without guff, he stepped on the scale, standing straight, hands to the side. Domino pulled up the measuring bar and moved the weights. Craning her neck, Yoshika read off, “Height: 6’4” with a weight of 200 even. You can step off and sit on the bed.” Divale stepped off and strode to the bed. Domino retrieved a tray of instruments while Yoshika continued to scribble away. “Now,” she said to him as he sat down on the bed, “I’m going to ask you about your medical history. Any information you provide is welcome, because even the most minor issue could end up saving your life, okay?” Aaron nodded. Let the interrogation begin. “Have you ever had a concussion or experienced concussion-like symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, memory loss, slurred speech, impaired movement, inability to focus, loss of sight, or blurred vision?” she asked.

“I’ve taken a few hard hits to the head in the past.” Aaron admitted, blinking his eyes after Domino waved a tiny flashlight in front of his eyes, covering one then the other. “All told, I’ve had six of those with my last occurring six months ago.”

“Dialation normal.” Lucretia reported.

“Have you had any major illnesses or infections requiring hospitalization such as whooping cough, smallpox, measles, mumps, rubella, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, malaria, sepsis, gangrene, abscesses, or influenza?” Yoshika queried.

“No.” Aaron answered, his right knee spasming as Domino tapped the plexor on his tendon. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I ever had a cold.”

“Reflexes are normal.” Domino rattled off.
“Any unexplained internal pains at or near the region of the chest, stomach, bowels, or groin?” Yoshika inquired.

“Uh-uh.” Aaron uttered as best as he could while opening his mouth wide enough for Lucretia to examine his teeth, front and back.

“Perfect dental health.” Domino relayed. “Not so much as a soft spot anywhere.”

“Any difficulty sleeping?” Yoshika asked.

“Yes actually.” Aaron replied. Lucretia was about to conduct a ear search with her otoscope, but Miyafuji waved her off and waited patiently for him to explain. “Ever since I was young I’ve been suffering from horrible night terrors that make restful sleep impossible. At best I get maybe three or four hours a night.”

“Stress related or simply the result of insomnia?” Yoshika pressed.

“I personally think it’s from trauma, mental trauma,” Divale clarified, “because in addition to this, I have rather vivid flashbacks. When the Russian witch, Lieutenant Litvyak, spoke up, I had one then.”

Post traumatic stress. This isn’t going to be an easy patient to treat if he has a particularly nasty one.

“What was that particular flashback about?” Yoshika continued on.

Aaron shook his head. “I’d rather not talk about it. Some things are best left unsaid.” he answered.

Nodding, Yoshika bade Domino to continue. “Any strange quirks or traits?” she pondered aloud.

“Well, I’m double jointed, ambidextrous, and tomatoes give me bad flatulence. That’s about it.”

Aaron rattled off on his hand as Domino conducted the nasal exam, inspected his throat, and took his blood pressure.

“Clean passes and 123/81.” she said.

“Do you smoke or drink?” Yoshika pursued.

“Yes for the first, but only socially, and as for the second, most definitely.” Aaron replied, breathing in and out as the cold metal of the stethoscope was pressed to his chest.

“How much do you consume in a week?” Yoshika pressed.

“As much as I can get my hands on. When I can’t, it’s usually seven or eight a day. I can safely say that I haven’t gone through a single day in the past four plus years sober.” Aaron explained while nodding, none too proud of his statement. Both women looked at each other with concern.

“That’s certainly not healthy, Aaron.” Yoshika indicated, “You are in danger of not only becoming an alcoholic, but essentially pickling your liver. Keep this up, you’ll have cirrhosis by the time you’re twenty.”

If I live that long. “Anything else you want to ask me?” Divale asked, trying to change the subject.

“Stand up and head to the eye chart.” Yoshika instructed. As he got up, Lucretia gathered up the instruments and deposited them on top of the table with the intent of cleaning and sanitizing them later.

Aaron stood ten feet away and took off his glasses, asking. “Which section do you want me to look
“Try to read the very bottom.” Yoshika requested.

Aaron put a hand over his left eye, his dominant eye, and said “SQEJKBXZPY.”

Yoshika turned and walked to the chart, squinting as she leaned in close to read the bottom. Wow, he got them all right! Impressed, she flipped over the sheet and handed it to Aaron along with the pen. It was a a composite image of a body, taken and illustrated at different angles, with a long blank area on the right side. “Please indicate as best as you can any injuries.” she instructed.

“I might need another pen.” Aaron suggested, deadly serious, “because this one might run out of ink.” A sharp snap echoed throughout the room behind him and he whipped around. Lucretia had just finished putting on a green glove, pulled taut over her right hand up to her elbow. She smiled and waved at him. Oh hell no!

“Relax,” Miyafuji said, trying to assuage his anxiety, “she’s only going to take a testicular exam from behind so you can concentrate on getting that filled out.” Aaron wasn’t too happy about it, but allowed himself to ease up and filled out the form, providing illustrations and information. In time, he felt Lucretia’s presence close behind him, followed quickly by the sensation of his balls being fondled, the thumb and forefinger rubbing the glands with care. This is most disconcerting. Thank God I’m not one of those guys that enjoy that.

“All clear.” Domino said moving away from him. He had finished the two side shots and was about to go start on the back when he felt a cold shaft of ice shoot up his rectum, causing him to breathe in sharply.

He glared at Yoshika who shrugged her shoulders and said with a grin, “I may have forgot to mention the colorectal exam.” The torment continued for several more seconds, seconds that felt like hours, as Aaron suffered the indignity of having a finger probing his asshole, grinding against his intestinal walls like a dental pick, while trying to complete the form. I’m not going to be able to shit right for a week. Finally, the digit was pulled out slowly as not to illicit an involuntary bowel movement.

“Clean pass down low.” Domino reported with pride, taking off the glove and placing it in the wastebasket. She turned to Yoshika and said, “I’m going to wash up and go. The examination is over.” Lucretia looked at Aaron, fidgeting gingerly, and chuckled. “Take care of yourself Sargeant Divale.” she said smiling.

“You as well Doctor Domino.” Aaron returned with an embarrassed look. He watched her go and continued to stand there until he finished the form, handing it back to Yoshika. “Where are my clothes?” he asked.

“Right behind the screen.” she informed, gazing intently at the sheet of paper. While Aaron sauntered behind the curtain and pulled it across, Yoshika started counting. Forty nine wounds, thirty seven bone fractures, cracks, or sprains, twenty one instances of pulled muscles, sixteen instances of impalement causing deep tissue and organ damage, and six concussions. What is keeping this man going? The curtain opened and Aaron stepped out and was about to ask if there was anything else when Miyafuji tilted her head, the tell tale sign that she was getting a message. “Commander Wilcke says to report to the parking lot just north of the infirmary where you will be shuttled to the firing range.” she reported. Aaron nodded in thanks and walked out the door as quick as a flash. Yoshika waited patiently until she heard the door bell ring twice before placing a finger on her ear piece and saying into her sargeant collar studs, “I’m alone.”
“What did you find out?” Minna’s voice asked, crackling with minimal static.

“I don’t know how he’s standing. His body has taken some major abuse, he has post traumatic stress, night terrors, and will become an alcoholic if we don’t put the kibosh on his drinking. Other than that, he’s in perfect health.” she replied. Remembering something she added, “I also think that he and Doctor Domino know each other, because I heard them talking as I got to the examination room.”

“What did you hear?” Wilcke pressed.

“I don’t know. It was in another language, Italian I think. I’m sorry.” Yoshika apologized.

“Don’t be,” Minna relayed. “These communicators have a built in memory coil that can be played back. Get the medical forms to me and your ear comm. I’ll have Lucchini take a crack at translating it. Do your flight checks and marksman training sargeant and thank you for this information. Minna out.”

Aaron walked down the path upon exiting the infirmary and took lunging steps in order to get the feeling of being violated out of his system, his rectum in particular. He resisted the urge to itch his ass out of cleanliness and fear. It may have been only a finger, but it felt like a lead pipe was going up my down staircase. Don’t even want to know how wide my asshole is right now. The sounds of gunfire made him stop in his tracks and whip his head around wildly like a meerkat watching for predators. Divale listened patiently as he started ascertaining what was going on, the discharge of live ammunition not far off outside of the castle walls. Heavy weapons for sure. There’s definitely MG42s out there judging by the noise, that distinctive sawing burp, least four, maybe five. Plus, there’s cannon fire, something in the range of 20mm. Hold up; a BAR! Really! And a Bren! Explosions could be heard now and Aaron quickened his pace. What could that weapon be? Sounds like their fighting a war outside the gates.

A brown figure stood out on the edges of his vision and he turned to see another man, one shorter than himself by a foot of Asian decent, dressed in the dark tan of the Imperial Japanese Army, standing by a green jeep. The pose of the soldier was straight as an arrow, and his hawkish nose and brown eyes regarded Aaron with a mixture of expectation and relief, two things that were not too common when it came to being regarded for the first time. It’s usually fear and awe, but this one is holding his composure. Why is he here if there is no mingling between the sexes? I need to get to the bottom of this. Aaron approached this suspicious character carefully, unsure with how to proceed. As he drew near, the man, probably not much older than him, bowed politely and greeted, “Good morning Sargeant Divale. I’ve been expecting you.” His accent was pronounced, but not a hindrance.

“Good morning.” Aaron replied, still a touch on the back foot. He regarded the jeep and asked, “I take it you’re the one who’s escorting me to the firing range?”

The man nodded and gestured to the passenger side. “Please be seated; the commander doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” he advised.

I’ll bet. Aaron slowly got in the jeep and sat down. The escort sat down in the drivers seat and produced a key from his front pants pocket. He placed it in the ignition and turned the key, a maneuver that elicited a robust engine turn followed by the roar of life as it purred in idle. A quick shifting of the gears with the stick shift later and the pair were off to the races, going north. Soon, an open gate was seen and passed. Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron saw to his left a large vehicle depot door wide open, packed with vehicles that he had no time to look at due to the speed of his driver. That’s a big door, tall and wide enough for a medium tank to drive through. This place is
armed to the teeth! Now within the inner ring he decided that it would be best to know his new companion more for future reference or avoidance.

“I don’t believe I caught your name my friend.” Aaron quipped.

“Warrant Officer Hajikata Keisuke, personal attache to Major Sakamoto.” he replied with pride. “She tasked me with taking you to the firing range personally.”

Guess that answers that question. “I take it you have special dispensation to be within the presence of the 501st for longer than the rest of the personnel attached here?” Aaron asked, as they moved out of the inner ring to the castle grounds proper.

“Yes.” Hajikata answered, “In Japan, an officer of Major Sakamoto’s rank is required to have an aide that assists in the execution of certain tasks on a day to day basis.”

“What do you think of her?” Aaron pressed.

“She’s a great officer and leader,” Hajikata expounded, “No doubt hard as a trainer, but more than fair. Major Sakamoto is highly revered in Japan and among those she calls friends in Europe.”

Aaron turned in his seat and queried, “And what do you think of me? Surely, you’ve heard of the rumors and legends concerning me?”

Hajikata gave him a quick look that was as blank as a doll’s. “In my country, it is rude and dishonorable to pass judgment on someone without first knowing and talking to them face to face. I have no one feeling about or towards you Sargeant Divale. I suggest you do the same.” he explained.

Aaron turned away and thought about his answer. With the exception of one other, he, a complete stranger who knows nothing at all about me, is the only one that not only talks sense, but makes sense. The Lord works in mysterious ways doesn’t it? Nodding, he turned back to Hajikata and replied with admiration, “You make a great deal of sense Warrant Officer Keisuke. Maybe I should do what you say, and talk more.”

Hajikata came to a slow stop at the base of a small hill and put the jeep in park. “It is not easy for someone to do on a consistant basis.” he warned. “There will be times that you will fall into that trap without even knowing it. Just be patient and all will take care of itself.” He reached in the back of the jeep and handed to Aaron a pair of rather large German made jackboots, the ones he had left in his room. “You might need these.”

Aaron took them from the Warrant Officer graciously and nodded in thanks. He got out of the jeep and waved goodbye as Hajikata wasted no time in gunning the engine and veering away from the scene, the smell of exhaust the only sign that he was ever there. Rather than watching his newfound friend go, he put on his shoes and tied them, double knot style. Within twenty five seconds, the process was completed and he began his trek up the small hill. He was outside of Dover Castle, beyond the first wall by a good few hundred feet. The area was grassy and the wind was blowing lazily, carrying the scent of grass and ocean far and wide. The sun was still shining and the cawing of seagulls could be heard a ways off. Oh, those things. Pesky, loud, and obnoxious. Could even sleep in a wink without those bastards squawking up a storm. Hang on a second… I don’t hear gunfire anymore.

He was about to crest the hill when he felt a sense of insecurity. Instinct took over as he got down on his belly and crawled the remaining few feet to get a better look. Aaron gently parted the grass in front of him and laid his eyes upon a long shooting range, easily a mile and a half long with multiple wooden firing stalls painted white with the characteristic counter top in front of the shooter, a gun
rack to the left side, and a series of levels that activated the target pulley system on the right, taking a paper cutout along a guidewire, stopping when the shooter wished it. Along the range length, he could see holes in the ground where targets would pop out of the ground. One of the stalls had a large wooden crate and next to that position, the far left of this shooting gallery, arranged in a neat line that was slanted away from the stall, was the entire squadron of the 501st, fully armed. Inwardly, Aaron uttered a low whistle as he saw the weapons prominently displayed. That's a lot of firepower for eleven people. His eyes drifted to Lieutenant Litvyak, Eila holding the white parasol in one hand over the tiny Russian, holding a boxy weapon with six barrels, all full of rockets, each one four inches wide in diameter. That’s a hell of a lot of firepower for eleven people. Major Mio Sakamoto, at this distance of three hundred feet looking like a white stick figure, flipped up her eye patch. Oh great, now I'm found.

No sooner did he complete that thought than her voice rang through the air like a church bell. “Sargeant Divale, get your ass off the ground and move, pronto!” she screamed. Aaron immediately jumped up his back end, resembling a triangle, and pushed off with his feet, forward rolling down the hill. He tucked in for a full revolution and sprung out at its completion, his feet hitting the ground, the right foot propelling himself forward. His long stride carried him down the slope and onto the relatively flat land leading to the firing range. Aaron kept his eyes focused on the crate, using it as a guiding light and relying on his peripheral to locate any rocks or divots in the earth. Mio Sakamoto watched him run like a man who had the Devil on his ass, seeing him go hard and fast. Very good form. He clearly has been training. Aaron came to a halt right at the wooden box and looked at Major Sakamoto, his breathing slow and calm, his brow unadorned with so much as a bead of sweat. He watched her look at her timepiece, hefting her Type 99 20mm cannon with the other hand, her third eye glowing like a fortune teller's crystal ball, and cocked an eyebrow. “Three hundred feet in less than ten seconds. Impressive.” Mio commented. “Next time, do it faster.”

Divale was about to make a comment of his own when he realized that the line was arranged so that every member, if they so wished, could aim and fire their weapons at him with an unobstructed field of fire. It’s like a firing squad, easily fifteen feet away. If something goes down, who do I go for? Let’s see… Commander Wilcke saw his revelation dawn and hastily clarified, “We are lined up like this so that every member can see your loadout and capabilities as a shooter. It’s vital for us to know, especially as you are a new member with veteran experience. Any knowledge gleaned may be of benefit to us.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Aaron nodded, not at all buying the explanation.

Well that didn’t work out. Minna pointed to the crate with her MG42 and demanded, “ Alright; let’s see what you got. Be sure to detail what your weapons are and what modification.”

Fuck me woman, do you want to know their names too? Aaron gazed down at the crate and saw a crowbar lying next to it. Instead of being a logical person and using said crowbar, he opted to use his hands. Securing his grip near the top and anchoring the box down with sides of his feet, he pulled with a mighty stroke. Nails groaned in resistance as they were pulled up. The whole top came off within a second, the panel falling to the earth with a dull thump. On the other side of things, Minna looked on, interpreting every movement. She saw him look down into the crate and smile like a child being inside a candy store. Then he placed his hands along the sides where they could be seen and called out, “Huddle up on me folks. If you’re going to see what I got and what I can do with it, it’s best to do so up close rather than a million miles away…” Minna gazed Mio a glance who paused for a few seconds to think it over, and eventually nodded. With a gesture, the entire squadron advanced as one unit, stomping the grass flat with every step. Aaron surveyed this parade with a clinical eye. Well trained and disciplined group. Bishop and Miyafuji are out of step a tad due to being new. Good to know.
They stopped within five feet on him, laid out in a half moon around him. With a captive audience, Aaron began, “Alright people, listen up because I don’t like repeating myself. When I came to Great Britain, I was ordered to do so unarmed. These weapons that I’m about to show you have been modified for, and in some cases by me, so that I may use them optimally. So without further ado, let’s begin.” He reached into the crate and pulled out a pair of pistols, stamped black metal brutes with a Soviet star on the sides. “These are TT-33 pistols, Russian made side arms. They’re big and heavy, but are reliable and durable. The original configuration had them chambered for a 7.62x22mm cartridge, roughly similar to the 7.63x22mm rounds fired by the Mauser C96 pistol that I see carried by some German officers. I opted for my pistols to fire the .38 Special rounds from the US based Winchester company. The dropoff in muzzle velocity, weight, and accuracy is negligible and the recoil is reduced by a fair amount, making it easier to wield. They have an eight round magazine.” He placed them on the shooting range counter top and reached into the crate again, pulling out another weapon, this one a shotgun, yet it was lacking the trademark wooden stock and long barrel, instead featuring a metal pistol grip and a barrel barely longer than both his feet. “This beauty is an Ithaca 37 12 gauge pump action shotgun from our friends in the United States.” Aaron continued. “As you can see, this is not your average shotgun as there is no large blocky stock or stupidly long barrel. I wanted a close combat weapon and had this modified according to my specifications. The stock has been replaced by a pistol grip made from aluminum and the barrel has been shortened to only thirteen inches. While this has hampered shell capacity to only five chambered rounds, it has made this weapon easy to wield and lightweight. The rounds that this monster fires are 12 gauge 00 buck which you insert into the receiver on the bottom. This receiver also functions as the ejector port which makes this gun easy for left handed users to pick up and use effectively. An interesting feature about this gun is it’s ability to ‘slam fire.’ What is that you ask? Well, when you fire the first round and keep the trigger depressed, the firing pin doesn’t revert to it’s starting position. If you pump the next shot into the barrel, it will push the round into the firing pin, setting it off. You can clear the entire magazine as fast as you can pump as long as the trigger is held down. Very useful in clearing out a room.” He placed the shotgun next to his pistols on the counter top and placed his hands on his hips.

He took a deep breath and pressed on. “Now, what I’m about to show you has never been seen on the battlefield before. You are the first people to ever see this outside of R&D.” He reached into the crate one last time and pulled out a large, heavy, and serious weapon: a machine gun. The barrel and body were wide and blocky like an M2 .50 caliber machine gun with the perforated barrel, square frame, and the pull back bolt, yet the receiver and ejector ports were nowhere to be seen. The firing mechanism was altered to what looked similar to an MG42 grip along with the stock, the trigger looking like a lazy 3 than a half moon however. A wooden off hand grip was present a small ways past the main body. The whole thing was completed by a sight, slid into place along a grooved rail in the top of the gun. “When searching for a primary weapon, I wanted one that was accurate but efficient. I narrowed it down to two candidates: the MG42 and the Browning .50 Machine Gun. Both had what I wanted, but in limited amounts. The MG42 had great reliability, rpm, and weight, but it was too wasteful. You so much as blow on the trigger and twenty shots are sent downwind when only five are needed to bring down your target. When it came to the Browning .50 Machine Gun, the accuracy and range were excellent, yet the rpm and weight were an issue. In the end I decided, why not combine the best of both worlds into one weapon. After five months of conception drawing, machining, testing, redrawing, refashioning, and retesting, I finally got what I was looking for. I kept the stock and rear firing assembly of the MG42 due to stability and ease of use, yet I modified the trigger to be a lazy 3. Why? Ammo conservation. This isn’t an automatic machine gun; it’s a semi automatic. Since I kept the MG42 firing assembly, the rounds are still coming out at or near the original muzzle velocity of an MG42. I really didn’t want to use the lighter .3 inch MG42 caliber because, though it weighed more, the .5 inch caliber had better stopping power. So I had to use the M2 body and barrel in order for the weapon to adequately absorb the recoil and heat generated from expelling such a large round. The tripod was simply taken off to conserve weight.
The sight, a German Zeiss model, is mounted or removed by sliding it along this grooved rail on the top and is secured by a bolt fastener. Though this is considered heavy ordinance, I can accurately down targets that are over a mile away, with a fairly high degree of precision. Finally, and I know you are all thinking this, where does the ammunition go? In a break with convention machine guns, the receiver is located on the bottom with the ejector port along the side, yet still underneath and away from the trigger.”

Upon stating that, Aaron turned the gun over to show everyone. “If that’s the case,” Lynette observed, “the clips would have to be specially made to hold the ammunition.”

Aaron nodded. “Indeed. The clips are custom made, my own design, in the shape of a blocky pyramid.” He reached into the crate and pulled up a pressed steel clip, the size of a melon, with an elongated tip with a hole bored through it. “These holes here, upon insertion, will be secured by grooved lugs.” He aligned the clip and rammed it home slowly, allowing everyone to hear a distinct click. “Those are the lugs securing the clip.” Divale explained. “You pull the bolt back, and your ready to ruin someone’s day. The metal belt clamps are sheared off and discharged here at the butt end of the trigger. When empty, the grooved lugs pull back, ejecting the spent magazine. Fully loaded, this beast weighs fifty five pounds, double that of a MG42, but over forty percent lighter than a M2. Any questions?”

“What does it sound like?” Erica asked.

Aaron took a quick look at Minna who nodded after a seconds thought. With permission, he pulled the bolt back, the chambering of the first round sounding similar to a shotgun pump, and shouldered the weapon. “Give me a target.” he said. Minna nodded to Mio who then walked up and pulled down all four levers, causing all the targets that Aaron’s stall had to pop up out of the ground and disappear back down at irregular intervals. Cheeky. I like it. Disregarding proper protocol, he pulled the trigger at the first opportunity, rhythmically cycling his fingers back and forth, the discharge of heavy munitions as loud and comparable as a pneumatic jackhammer. Targets starting eating lead at an alarming rate. Paper cutouts were shredded into ticker tape, wooden planks exploded into clouds of light brown flak, and metal plates sounded like wind chimes as .50 bullets struck home, with many having their steel bolt moorings ripped apart, sending them flying backwards down the range like a discus. Some of the guide wires couldn’t withstand the metal storm and snapped like brittle twigs from ricochets, falling down into the field of fire. As the symphony of destruction played on, Minna shifted her pose to get a better angle. He’s a damn good shot with that thing and very quick at acquiring and eliminating targets. Ammo waste is very negligible. Maybe he could be the one. The last bullet slammed into the last intact segment of a wooden plank and the clip fell into a pile of brass casings, sounding like a money bag being dropped on a pile of coins. Smoke wafted from the barrel, the smell of powder heavy in the air for a brief moment before being whisked away by the winds.

“Impressive.” Minna commented. “Most impressive. Good shooting.” She took the lead and everyone soon joined in the chorus of claps, some begrudgingly and others enthusiastically. Aaron simply smiled and bowed his head, returning the gesture. He placed his gun on the countertop and Minna stopped clapping, the applause dying out immediately. “Now the only question left for you to answer is how do you intend to help us deal with the Neuroi?”

Aaron at first didn’t know what she meant by that question and was about to ask for clarification when his eyes widened in revelation and he hastily nodded in his shortsightedness. He advised, “You all might want to stand back.” Like a pack of rats seeing a cat stir in its’ sleep, they backed away quickly, lest they be caught in whatever was about to happen. Aaron closed his eyes for the briefest of moments before Minna saw something stir and bulge up from his upper back like a group of squids emerging from a crevass. She could almost her the flesh being stretched out like a rubber band, muscles being repositioned and repurposed, before suddenly, with a mighty wet tearing sound,
Two large wings shot out from Aaron’s upper back and uniform and unfurled, streaks of blood evident, small drops coming off like crimson rain. They were ivory white with a pearlescent shine that dazzled everybody present. Divale heard many hushed comments, but the one word he heard the most was ‘beautiful.’ “Looks can be deceiving.” he said, addressing the throng like a teacher in front of his class, “They may look like the stuff of angels, but each individual segment is as sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel and hard as a diamond, capable of deflecting bullets and beams alike.” Wilcke walked forwards cautiously, looking at the wings with interest. She reached out and ran her fingertips down the left wing, going with the grain, each feather feeling a fine polished gem. She took her hands away and looked at the still wet sticky blood, Aaron’s own vital essence.

“Do they hurt when they come out?” she asked.

“Everytime commader.” Aaron answered. His ears picked up a putting sound that drew his attention away from his superior officer. That’s a car engine, a jeep. Soon, going around the small hill was a green jeep driven by Hajikata, his only passenger a large wicker picnic basket. He pulled up right to the group and idled the engine. Getting out of the car, she scooped up the basket and placed it with care on one of the firing range countertops with great haste. Before leaving, he bowed deeply and hopped into the drivers seat. Gears shifted and he was off once more, going back where he came.

“A bit of light refreshment before the next exercise ladies and gentleman.” Minna announced. “Have at.” The rear elements of the squadron opened the picnic basket and extracted a platter of sandwiches filled with something that Aaron had never seen before. The bread was dark, probably wheat, and between the two slices was a yellow white mixture with green spots. Curious, he walked over after everyone had a treat and picked one up. “What is this?” he asked Shirley, the last one to go before him.

“Egg salad with green olive. Made them myself. Try it. You’ll like it.” Yeager explained, urging him to take a bite. Alright. Let’s see what this ‘egg salad’ is all about. The squadron watched his take a small bite and chew. Within moments, Aaron closed his eyes and smiled, frame teetering backwards until hitting the shooting stall wall softly, purring his approval as he did with Yoshika’s congee.

“Oh my God.” Aaron uttered, his mouth full, his mind barely able to process how wonderful the taste was. “This is amazing.” He ate the rest of the sandwich and pulled out another. “I think I owe you an apology commander.” Divale admitted, gesturing with one of his wings, “Everyone here can cook. May have just bitten off more than I can chew.” Minna nodded with a faint smile. Indeed Sargeant Divale, indeed, and soon you will find out just how much.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It’s training day and Aaron Divale finds himself pitted against the best that the 501st has to offer.

Chapter III: The War In The Heavens

The name warlock carries with it a heavy burden, a stigma that is impossible to shake off. We didn’t ask to be who we are, it wasn’t our fault that we were born different, and yet, we are still damned for it, doomed for all time, condemned to death for our tainted blood. I find it ironic that those who succeeded in our ancestor’s destruction have souls just as dark as ours. Just goes to show that the worst monsters out there are the ones with a human face.

Diary Entry April 16th 1940

Twenty four feet on grass propelled twelve bodies forward up and over a hill, towards what Aaron hoped was a finish line of some sort. After the egg salad sandwich basket was devoured to the last crumb, Major Sakamoto ordered everyone to sprint to the hanger. The squadron as a whole had been running for at least three full minutes now. He was in the upper echelons of the pack, behind only Gertrude and Shirley. “We are the front line ladies and gentleman! We are what separates the free world from destruction! We will hold the line at all costs! We will be ready, regardless of what the enemy throws at us, for we are stronger, tougher, and meaner! Let me hear that warcry!” Mio shouted, backpedaling just behind Aaron and gaining. Twelve throats roared in reply, or at least tried to due to the exertion involved. A quick glance at her gave Aaron all the information he needed to answer the question as to why the major was maintaining such speed. Cleats! The woman’s wearing cleats on those shoes! She glared at him and barked, “Are you eyeballing me sargeant?!”

Aaron immediately faced forward, “No major!” he shouted back.

“Then start acting like it!” she yelled, moving in closer. “Do that again, and you’ll run another relay, you got me?!”

“Yes major!” Aaron replied with force, putting more effort to outpace his superior officer. Craning his neck, he could see a building made of steel that was painted green with a domed roof. A windsock was high aloft on a flagpole, just to the left of the compound. There was no hanger door in the front, just a standard entryway, a white double door with a small window, now closed. Thank God. The distance closed rapidly and soon, he was the third one to reach the walls, bracing himself against them. As each pilot came up, he moved down the way, just so that there was room for them. As to be expected, Lynette and Yoshika were last, huffing and puffing long after they got to the finish line. Some of the others were panting heavily or lightly depending on fitness. For his part, Aaron slowed his breathing slightly to let his muscles cool down and lower his heart rate.
Mio walked down the line observing them all, smiling with pride. “Alright folks, that’s how we do it!” she exclaimed. “In we go, on the double!” Minna opened the doors and they moved single file through them. Aaron’s view of a March morning in Dover was soon replaced by an interior that could’ve been any car dealership garage, the air thick with the smell of grease, oil, and metal. The floor was concrete and tool boxes, benches, and padded dollies lined vast swathes of the four walls. Pneumatic jacks with chains suspended overhead were spaced out at even intervals. In the center was a landing and launching pad, a raised octagonal dias with yellow and white lines, small steps leading up to it from any direction. Above it was a large circle, completely open to the elements, at least that was what Aaron thought until he squinted his eyes, making an otherwise imperceptible shimmer appear. A shield, probably designed to keep the weather out, yet allow a pilot in or out. Very clever, until a mortar round drops in on us.

A small office was in the upper right corner of the room with one wall having a long pneumatic tube made of copper coming out of the wall along the wall and then down into the floor. One sight in particular drew Aaron’s attention. Arranged in a circle, like practitioners of some pagan ceremony, were eleven pairs of Strikers, held firm and upright by two metal clamps. In front of them, in white lettering were the names of the pilots that they belonged to. He found Major Sakamoto’s pair, the closest to the office and walked up to them, looking them over. They closely resembled a human leg, complete with bendable joints at the knees and ankles. The metal was thick rolled aluminum plate, rivets and screws unneeded except in areas where vital systems were kept. Along the tibia, the leg began to resemble that of a ancient suit of armor with a long series of plates, each one jutting out a bit further than the one above which would undoubtedly retract or extend depending on the leg length of the pilot. Looking inside them, he was surprised that they were padded with cloth and featured metal clamps that would act as a locking mechanisms at the upper thigh and midway down the shin should they ever be worn. A truly remarkable piece of technical engineering. If they had these at the beginning, we might’ve nipped the war in the bud before it really got out of control.

“Ever see a pair before?” Mio asked as she came up behind him.

Aaron turned to her and replied, “Yes, just never this close.” He regarded them again adding with dismay, “And never this intact.”

Sakamoto cocked an eyebrow, “How come?” she inquired.

“Long story,” Aaron explained, “regardless of whether you get the abridged version or not.”

“Speaking of the long and short,” Minna began, “I need you, the major, and Lucchini in my office, right now.” The pair turned around and saw Wilcke standing behind them, arms crossed. Francesca, at the mention of her name and the words my office, grew pale and looked at Shirley with a confused fear. Mio motioned for her to follow them and the quartet walked to the office door, one that was wide open. Inside was a table, chair, a few filing cabinets, and a large map of the surrounding Channel area on a board. The floor was concrete, the walls green, and had no ceiling. Not good for secrets. Mio closed the door behind them and moved alongside the commander, who took her seat at the desk. Aaron looked down at Lucchini who was faintly quaking with fright.

“Commander?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, “Is everything alright?”

Minna looked at Francesca and nodded assuringly, her face going soft like a mother’s just before telling a frightened child that everything’s ok. “You’re fine. I brought you in hear to translate something for me.” She opened a drawer on the left side of her desk and pulled out an envelope. Lucchini, after breathing a deep sign of relief, opened it and pulled out a pencil and an ear
communicator. Aaron’s blood froze. *Don’t tell me that those things have a playback function! Oh shit, what do I do now?* She listened to whatever she was supposed to translate and wrote it down on the envelope, covering it up with her off hand so Aaron couldn’t see. Lucchini flipped over the envelope and slid it over to Minna, who gathered it up and nodded in thanks. “You’re free to go, but not a word of this to anyone.” Minna advised. Lucchini saluted and walked right out. Aaron watched her go out the door, but before she closed it behind her, Francesca mouthed the words *Good luck. Well that’s reassuring.* Then he heard a rhythmic rapping every three seconds. Turning around, he saw Minna tapping the fingers of her right hand on the desk top, the left hand holding the translated message, giving him a look that could curdle blood. Mio, on her left, had her arms crossed, disgust on her face. “You have something to tell me Sargeant Divale.” Wilcke coldly said, her anger bubbling just under the surface.

Aaron nodded slowly and replied even slower, “Yes, I do.”

She leaned forward, turning the envelope around. He read the words and breathed in deep. “*Fraternization with military personnel is something that I deeply frown upon.*” Minna seethed quietly. “I can have you court-martialed for this. You have anything to say for yourself before I pass judgment?” *Tell the truth, even if your voice shakes.* “A week after the evacuations out of France were called off in late September of ‘43, I moved out of my bivouac near Calais and moved along the coastline looking for supplies that may have washed up on shore. During my journey, I came across a beached patrol boat, the back end all crushed in, most of the top blackened and slagged from enemy fire. Even without looking inside I knew the engine was destroyed. I paid it no mind and started to leave, when, all of a sudden, I heard shouting. I turn around and see a woman get out of the boat, her wool sweater and coat caked with mud and sand, screaming ‘Please help us! There are children!’ Though I was surprised at finding survivors this close to the shoreline, I held my gun out in front of her. Desperate times make people do desperate things, and even a man of the cloth isn’t above giving others the shaft if it meant that his survival was prolonged by an another hour. She was intimidated by me, but continued to plead with me that children were in the boat and needed help. I go to the boat and get in. Sure enough, there were six children, all probably no more than seven, covered in blankets and whatever else that could keep the cold out of their bones, shivering, starving, and if no help was forthcoming, would soon die of hypothermia. She looked at me and asked, ‘Is there anything that you can do for them?’ I was faced with a choice, one that even now I’m unsure was the right one.”

Both officers listened intently. “Go on.” Minna ordered, eyes darting this way and that, gauging his body language.

“I took her outside of the boat and revealed who I truly was.” Aaron answered.

The room went as silent as a mausoleum. The commander and major looked at each other wide eyed, shocked, flabbergasted, dumbfounded. Minna regarded Aaron and furrowed her brow, searching for any evidence that he was lying. “Why do that? Why expose yourself? Weren’t you the least bit concerned that she could’ve notified others as to your identity?” she fired back.

“I had nothing else to lose Commander Wilcke. We had failed to do our duty.” Aaron admitted, his head hung in deep shame. “I figured, if I am going to die, at least die trying to do the right thing and save others who can’t save themselves. Besides, who would believe her? Coming out of a war zone, experiencing firsthand the defeat of the continent and the devastation that followed, they would think that she was suffering from hysterics or delusions.”

Mio, her eyebrow cocked, asked hesitantly, “What do you mean by we?”

Aaron looked at her and stated with pride, “I didn’t fight this war alone. I had others like me that
fought, bled, and died so that people like you could live another day.”

Again stunned stillness. “How ma-” Mio started to blurt out, but a raised hand from Minna killed the rest of the sentence dead in her throat.

She leaned back slowly, heart racing and mind churning. “I take it that was Lucretia Domino.” she supposed.

Aaron nodded. “I will admit that I was very scared when I did that. I personally thought that she was going to run away screaming, but she didn’t. Guess, she figured that I was an angel of some kind or some rot like that. Gathered every child up in my arms, got her on my back, and I flew them all over the Channel under the cover of darkness to Southhampton. When we landed on the beach, she asked me what my name was and I told her, ‘Aaron Divale; The Saint of Calais’ and gave her a cloth with three stitched black triangles that formed a pyramid as a parting gift.”

*That name, The Saint of Calais! I know of it!* Minna shot out of her seat and within two strides reached a file cabinet, ripping open the first drawer, the one nearest the top, with the fury of a woman possessed. Her fingers worked feverishly, thumbing through file after file in search of the one that she needed to see. *Come on, come on, I know it’s here... Ah ha!* It was a green folder, bound tight with a red string tie with the words *EYES ONLY* written in blocky black lettering on the front. She sat back down and untied the string. Inside was a sheaf of papers that she scanned over one by one before moving on to the next. Mio looked on over her shoulder, reading away, brain digesting the words. This went on for only a minute, yet it seemed like an eternity. Finally, she put the papers back in the folder, tied it back up, and slid it away from her. Minna then placed her hands against her face, both palms touching each other like a churchgoer at prayer, breathing steady and deep. “*Mein Gott, er war ganze zeit unter unseren nasen. (My God, he was under our noses the whole time)*” she muttered with shocked softness.

“*Ist es mit respekt Kommandant, schwer vorstellbar wenn man mich anschaut? (With respect commander, is it that hard to imagine when you look at me)*” Aaron replied, with more than a hint of Pomeranian in his accent.

Minna shot him a glance. *First Italian now German. You’re just full of surprises aren’t you? Could this really be the man who did all this? “After you got Domino and the children to safety, did you maintain any contact with her?”* she asked, regaining her composure.

Aaron shook his head no. “I had no inclination of keeping tabs on the rescued because there were far more pressing issues that demanded my attention, above all, establishing contact and intelligence networks with and within the French Resistance. People tend to overlook the fact that human beings are only civil to each other when there is an enforcement mechanism that establishes consequences for socially unacceptable behavior.”

“Law and order.” Mio deduced.

“When that breaks down and the environment becomes, more or less, consequence free, people tend to revert to basic instincts, not all of them good. If the survivors, and there were quite a few, were to survive this new world that they were stranded in, they had to band together to combat the worst deviancy.” Divale finished.

“From what she said to you today, it’s clear that the link between you two was reestablished. When did that happen?” Minna asked.

“It was two days after I came over in early December last year. I was holed up just down the street from where Prime Minister Churchill held his meetings, in a bunker underneath the streets. They
called it ‘rehabilitation’, when in effect, it was nothing short of quarantine. I was having lunch in the mess, lost in my thoughts when I heard someone sit across from me. Look up and there she was in her nurse whites and skirt and said, ’Nice to see you again Aaron’. I couldn’t believe my eyes, I personally thought she had forgotten all about me. We talked at length about her life after evacuation. She enlisted and, with her clinical psychology degree, rose up through the ranks quickly. Couldn’t get into any particulars, but Domino did say that I was to be assigned to her for medical treatment and psychological screening.”

“Sounds like this relationship started out platonic.” Mio noted, right hand on her chin.

“And it was.” Aaron stated, “Honest it was. We met at least twice a week talking about my past and the trauma associated with it. Helped me a great deal when it came to finding closure for events that I wouldn’t have been able to come to grips with otherwise. Couldn’t do anything for my night terrors. We tried medicine, but it only caused me to get crippling migraines.” He paused, putting on a hurt expression and swallowed hard, looking like he was almost on the verge of tears before continuing, “Lucretia has done things for me that no one has ever done before. When I came here, no one talked to me, no one trusted me, or even got within twenty feet of me. I was a pariah, commander, a leper. It was twenty four seven solitary confinement everyday for three months. That woman not only kept me sane, not only convinced me that I was still worth a god damn to someone or something, but gave me hope that people can see me for me rather than this, and that I could be cured.”


“What happened to me wasn’t natural commander. Domino deeply thinks that what is made by man can be unmade by man; there is always a way. Though the possibility is remote, she’s dead set on finding one.” Aaron explained.

Minna wove her hands through her hair and looked at him. “When did this situation start getting more than professional?” she asked.

“The night that I found out that I was to be transferred here, she received news that she was going to be sent off as well. Our last meeting was one of mixed feelings, very somber feelings. I was allowed to go outside by orders of Churchill himself, under supervision of course, and lodge wherever I chose, a gesture that I think was meant to act as an apology for the way that they caged me up like an animal. She, acting as my supervisor, suggested her place and I agreed as it seemed only fair that the one person who treated me like a person deserved my company. We ate dinner early because we were both hungry. Helped her cook pasta primavera. After the meal, I felt tired and got a shower before bed. When I was ready to come out, I hear her come into the bathroom and walk towards the tub. She gently pulled the curtain aside and I saw her standing there unclothed. ‘Can I join you?’ she asked. I say yes and she proceeds to wash her hair and body in front of me. Didn’t take her long to finish and I made a move to turn the water off when she took me in her arms. Despite the water coming down, I could tell she was emotionally upset. She said, ‘I never thanked you for everything you have done for me and those that you saved. You don’t deserve, at all, going through life without someone who understands your pain.’ In that moment, I realized that she had feelings for me, legitimate feelings, and I kissed her. She turns the water off and takes me to her bedroom where we said our goodbyes.” Aaron haltingly expounded. Minna ran her hands through her hair again and looked at Aaron without saying a word, Mio standing next to her put on a hard face, betraying no emotion.

Oh no, please. “Commander Wilcke, I beg of you, don’t-” Aaron pleaded, but Minna raised her right hand, and he immediately went silent.

“I will make a decision on this situation at the end of the day, not before nor after.” Wilcke informed.
in a level tone. “Until then, I need you to depart with Lieutenant Juutilainen. There an exercise that I
need you to do, one of two that are on the agenda for today. Dismissed.”

Aaron got up and saluted both his superior officers. Upon having it returned, he about faced and
proceeded to exit the office. When he got his fingers wrapped around the cool brass of the door
knob, Minna asked, “Whatever did become of the children sargeant?”

He turned and replied, “They’re fine. All got transferred to the Proudmore Orphanage in
Portsmouth.” Wilcke nodded and bade him to leave. Divale opened the door and closed it behind
him. Mio gathered up the folder from the desk and placed it back into the file cabinet. She closed it
firmly and turned to face Minna, who had her hands on her hips, head downcast.

“I didn’t see any evidence.” Sakamoto stated, knowing what her friend was thinking. “Did you?”

Minna shook her head no and turned around, her face looking tired and concerned. “Even if he was,
there’s more than enough evidence to suggest that he is who he says he is. All the eyewitness reports
collaborate with each other, descriptions are all the same: a giant of a man with glowing yellow eyes
and angel wings. Just can’t believe that I couldn’t connect the dots earlier. Right under our fucking
noses for over six months.” she admitted, shaking her head in disbelief.

“All idea how we’re going to play the situation with the doctor?” Mio inquired.

Minna came up to Mio and put her left hand on her shoulder. “Leave that to me old friend. I need
you to help me deliver some bad news.” she instructed.

Mio put on a wistful face. “She’s not going to like it.” she warned.

“I know,” Wilcke replied, “and that’s why I’m having you do it and not me.”

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Aaron walked away from the office door and deep into the hanger, bypassing the pilots who looked
at him, expecting to divulge what was going on. *None of your damned business.* He ran his right
hand down his face, trying to clear his downtrodden mind. It failed miserably, *Guess that’s it then,
just like that. I finally find something to latch onto again and, poof, it’s ripped from my hands just
like everything else that meant something to me. My lifeline will be sundered yet again and I’ll be
like I was before, adrift on tumultuous seas. Oh Lucretia, what have I done? Forgive me. “Sargeant
Divale?” a voice piped up. Mildly surprised, he turned and saw Eila standing near his locker, holding
a small pine box in one hand, and waving with the other. Eila watched the giant trudge towards her
with a look that belonged to a pallbearer rather than a fighter pilot.

Whatever was said in that room has got him in a funk. He’s sad, broken, resigned to fate. Not good.
When he got within a few feet, she asked politely, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Aaron snapped “If I feel you’re in the need to know, you’ll know.”
Eila recoiled sharply from the verbal outburst. He cursed under his breath and hastily added, “I’m
sorry Lieutenant. It’s just that I have a lot on my mind right now.”

“Well whatever’s on your mind, I hope it clears up,” Eila counseled, “or else no one’s going to want
to be around you.” She opened the box and pulled out three small objects. “These are your collar
pins.” she informed and placed them in his hand, looking like specks of copper dust in such a large
paw. Aaron, with practiced ease attached both studs, the triangle bars of a sargeant, on each collar
point. “And this,” Eila continued, “is you ear communicator.” Divale scrutinized the device. It was
half the size of a dime, all black metal, with a receiver on on side and a silver button on the other. A
tiny dial could be seen with numbers ranging from zero to twelve, a red arrowhead shaped point on
the zero.

“How do you put it in?” he asked, obviously puzzled.

“I’ll help you.” Eila offered and turned with the object of finding a chair with which to stand on, but she heard a strange noise behind her that sounded like a foot on carpet. Turning, she was amazed to see Aaron on bended knee. The scene was quickly remarked upon by a bevy of mischievous onlookers.

“You move in fast Eila.” Erica commented with a smirk from across the room while rubbing out a small patch of mud on her left Striker. “So when’s the date?”

Juutilainen circled around and yelled, face red with embarrassment, “Shut up!”

Shirley tamped a wrench on the concrete, the impact sounding like spent casings. “You hear that?” she asked, pantomiming, holding her right hand to her ear as if listening to a distant sound. “Those sound like wedding bells to me.”

Eila was getting flustered and Aaron decided to add his two cents. “Ladies, I’m expected to get to an exercise within a short time frame and I’d really wouldn’t want to keep Commander Wilcke waiting.” he stated.

Shirley stuck out her tongue. “You’re no fun.” she grumbled with a smile.

“I’m loads of fun.” Aaron sarcastically replied.

“Oh I’ll bet your fun,” Erica called out, making a rather obscene gesture near her groin, “when you’re hilt deep in-”

“People,” Major Sakamoto’s voice boomed from the office, bringing everyone to attention, “that’s enough. Sargeant Divale is correct. He has a lot on his plate today and not a whole lot of time to finish it.” Erica went back to cleaning her Striker and Eila, much relieved to be rescued, placed the ear communicator in Aaron’s right ear and hooked up a thin wire to his right collar stud, wrapping it around the copper insignia.

“Okay,” Juutilainen began, less stressed. “to deliever a message you pull the dial out and turn clockwise. Every number passed will beep in morse code. The numbers correspond to rank so if you want to talk to Commander Wilcke, go to one, Major Sakamoto is two, so on and so forth. To begin talking, just push the dial back in and press the silver button here. If you need to keep it quiet, pull your insignia closer to your mouth. Nothing to it.”

“If I want radio silence or to communicate in morse what do I do?.” Aaron asked.

“Radio silence is done by having the dial over zero and pushed in. It’s not recommended however, because it can pick up interference and give you some nasty feedback. Best option is to take it out completely. The whole thing won’t work unless it’s in your ear and hooked up. If you want plain morse, just tap the silver button.” Eila answered. “Any more questions?” Aaron shook his head no and Eila made for a pair of Strikers that were kittycorner to Sanya’s. She pulled a small lever that made the ground underneath the machines recede like a flood that ran out of momentum. Watching her place her legs into the Strikers, Aaron could hear two pairs of hard clangs, the safety latches engaging properly. The clamps holding them in place opened and the Eila’s new legs glowed with blue and green lines along machined forms of muscles and joints, adding four inches to her height. Then, Eila walked up to the launching pad, her steps making a metallic clacking like a worksmans boot on a steel girder. When she stood under the opened roof she asked, “Are you ready?”
Aaron unfurled his wings and walked to the launch dias. “Bring it on.” he replied. Two green propeller blades entered the realm of reality along Eila’s ankles with a mighty thrum and roar. A gust of wind emanated from her person, sending her hair into a dance.

“Take off in three, two, one, lift off!” she announced. At the conclusion of one, both Eila and Aaron shot off into the air, past the hole in the roof, swirling around each other vortically, close enough for support, but not in each others air wash. The wind whistled as they climbed into the blue March sky, sun shining down. A bright light and nothing but pain is felt. All is blurry, blinking in and out of existence, as eyes that had never seen the light of day before try to adjust to the searing brightness. The sun beats down mercilessly on pale skin, stinging every square inch like a hive of angry bees. Wind is whistling through hair, bone chilling cold, finding every ember of warmth and extinguishing it. A body stands on a flat surface, breathing slow, thoughts trying to calm a fast beating heart. This is the world. This is your new home. The mantra works wonders and the eyes open again, this time more determined to see this place, to know what it is. Obscurity, painful and tear inducing, gives way in time to detail and all becomes known. Eyes that had only known darkness gaze upon vast fields of green, tall trees, and far above, an endless sky of blue. More tears come, but not from agony. They come from happiness, from joy, from exhilaration. Lungs breath in air that isn’t dank or fetid, stinking of soul crushing anguish. It is clean and pure, the effect of it’s consumption similar to feeling ecstasy. Something else, something so insignificant, yet more powerful than any sensation, stirs deep in an unseen heart. Something that all mortals cherish, yet never truly appreciate until they cease having it: freedom.

“Level off at twenty five thousand!” Eila’s voice crackled on the communicator.

“Roger that Lieutenant!” Aaron relayed back. “Leveling off now!” With a slight adjustment to his wings in mid flight, he reduced speed and gradually brought himself at the aforementioned altitude. Eila circled around him, bleeding off some excess speed.

“Splendid flying sargeant.” Eila remarked, thoroughly impressed. “if the commander were here, you’d get a congratulations.”

“There was really nothing special about that Lieutenant.” Aaron humbly replied. “It was just a standard take off, nothing more.”

Eila pointed below Aaron and he looked down. Far below was a long white vapor trail that was slowly dissipating into the air. “We may be trained to a fever pitch by Major Sakamoto, but very few of us manage contrails during practice much less a take off.” she explained. “You should be proud of yourself.” Aaron nodded, not out of pride, but as means to sate Eila, and regarded the world far below. Dover Castle was a smudge of grey against a backdrop of green and yellow. Furthest from was the Channel, a thumb thick line of blue, and beyond that, shrouded by clouds the color of abyssal night, the continent. It would be a beautiful painting. A pity that I can’t hold an easel, paintbrush, and palette at the same time.

“So what is this exercise?” Aaron asked.

“You’ll see.” Eila replied and fiddled with her ear piece before saying, “We are in position. Start the defense matrix exercise now.” For a few seconds, nothing happened of note, until Aaron’s ears picked up the sound of thunder and a lot of it. He looked down in time to see long streams of purple rise up from the ground crossing into one center point before creating a solid platform, like pouring water over a stone except from the reverse. What the hell is this? “This is a type of magic called metamorphosis, it helps us create structures that aid us in training new recruits.” Eila answered seeing that he was at a loss for words. Divale watched spellbound as the base level, miles below him, started to project pillars of purple into the sky with bulbous points. Up and up they climbed until stopping at
different altitudes. Their tops, upon reaching the acme, opened up like flowers in bloom, yet these petals were laced with death. Even from this height, Aaron could see quad linked M2s, twin linked 30mm Bofors, French 75s, and a host of 88mm antiaircraft cannons. He uttered a low whistle. *Lots of firepower concentrated at one point. Maybe a base assault?* “The exercise will be a base a-” Eila began before being rudely cut off by Aaron.

“Are you reading my mind?” he asked with worry.

“Only partially.” Eila replied, unsure why he was concerned.

“Don’t do that.” Aaron warned. “My mind is not a safe place to be, especially when you haven’t dealt with her.”

“What do you mean by that?” Juutilainen asked.

“Something I hope you never find out.” Aaron answered. “So this is a base assault. Objectives?”

“The objective is to execute evasive maneuvers while causing as much damage as you can to the base. You must stay within the perimeters once you cross the demarcation lines.” Eila explained. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a bluish ball and a bronze torc. “The defense emplacements fire these blue balls of force that we call, pain balls. They simulate either a bullet or a Neuroi beam. They’re harmless, but can induce unconsciousness if you are struck in a vital area. This torque here will act as a visual indicator of whether you have been knocked unconscious or not. If that is the case, we have rescue crews on patrol below the hard deck ready to pick you out of the air. This exercise will end in failure if you are knocked unconscious. A successful run will entail two stoppage conditions: the defense matrix shutting down and the defenders running out of ammunition.”

“Bogeys?” Aaron asked. “What bogeys?”

“The ones that are coming up from the hanger right about-” Eila started, but Aaron didn’t let her finish. He veered without tilting his wings, aligning himself between below and himself with Eila acting as a shield. Looking down, he saw them, Gertrude and Erica, rising up like sharks from the deepest ocean, engines whining as they sped towards them, armed with three purple MG42s, one for Erica and two for Gertrude. They also carried two MP40s as sidearms.

Whizzing past them, the duo circled around, staring them down. After a bit, they settled to a hovering stop. “Scared Aaron?” Erica mocked.

“Can it you devil,” Aaron retorted, “or I’m going to make you eat that machine gun.” Eila stood still, letting events play out.

“Over my dead body you will.” Gertrude growled, hefting both her weapons, glaring at Aaron. *Ah the alpha.* “Don’t make checks your body can’t cash sargeant.”

“I don’t know, I’ve cashed quite a few in my time.” Aaron boasted. “So you’re both gonna to try to take me down huh?”

“We don’t try, we do.” Erica replied, this time with force. “No one has ever gotten through this exercise conscious.” She pointed at Eila and added, “Not even yours truly.”

“If you think you’re hoping to win by time out, you’ve got another thing coming.” Gertrude stated. “So come on out Aaron, let’s party. Nothing good ever comes from hiding behind a woman.”

Nodding sheepishly, Aaron walked, not flew nor angled, but walked with two feet on the air around Eila who, along with the German pilots, looked on in wonder. “You’re right.” he agreed. “Nothing
good comes from hiding.” He stopped and gave them both a sneer. “After all, the failure at the Siegfried Line taught you that.” Eila, the sole buoy of stoic neutrality between the two parties, couldn’t help but gasp, placing her hands over her mouth and turning around to face Aaron. Erica kept her composure yet the knuckles went shock white from gripping the MG42 hard. Gertrude became an avatar of rage, face going several shades of purple, teeth gnashing so hard that one would think that they would shatter.

“What did you say you gutless pathetic son of a bitch?!” she screamed. “How dare you insult my countrymen that way! Where the hell were you when Berlin fell?!”

“A lot closer than you think.” Aaron replied, unafraid. Gertrude made a move to dive right in, but Erica grabbed her arm and shook her head. At first, Divale thought that she was going to push her wingman away and continue on her warpath, but the gesture did something to curb the ire.

“Cross that line Sargeant Divale and your mine!” Gertrude roared. With a sudden revving of her engines, she sped away, leaving Erica surprised and in the dust before tailing after her.

Eila let loose a sigh that her body unknowingly saved. She watched Aaron move around her and regard the defensive formations, stroking his chin. “You’ve really pissed them off now.” Eila mentioned. “If they get their hands on you, being knocked out will be the least of your worries.”

“That was my intention.” Aaron explained, eyes still trained on the defense matrix. “Part of winning a war is getting into your opponent’s head. Riling them up, while dangerous in of itself, normally overwhells their judgment, causing them to make mistakes. When your opponent makes mistakes, you have them right where you want them.”

“If it were just one, I’d be inclined to agree with you.” Eila countered. “However, there are two.”

“Which means I need to take care of the lynchpin.” Aaron deduced. “Can I use my magic to help me evade them?”

“Magic is permitted, but only defensive and nonlethal. You violate any of those rules, the exercise ends in failure. Weapons are permissible, though I doubt you’d get close enough to grab one of those M2s. ” Eila answered.

“Then there is a chance.” Aaron mused out loud. “I’ve seen this formation before lieutenant, and I know how it can be broken.” He hovered away looking out towards Channel side. Eila looked at the array of firepower on display. Chance? What chance? If I couldn’t get through that, what make you think you can?

“How do you intend to do that Sargeant Divale?” she asked, clearly confused.

Aaron turned and took off his glasses, placing them into his pocket for safe keeping before saying, “Two words: shock and awe.”

Erica flew a small distance away from her friend who was still seething, her anger so hot that an egg would fry. She knew from personal experience to let Gertrude stew a while, to calm down. Though she too was mad at what Aaron said, even Hartmann had to agree that it was a bold move, a tactical one. Getting under our skin, riling us up so as to make a mistake. He didn’t mean what he said, it was just to gain an advantage. What the hell did he mean by ‘a lot closer than you think’? Was he at Berlin? “You’re awfully quiet back there Erica,” Gertrude called over her shoulder, her tone of voice straining to be civil, “what are you thinking about?”
“He’s a lot smarter than he looks.” Erica replied, steeling herself for the confrontation that was sure to follow.

Gertrude put on the brakes and pulled alongside her wingman, looking at her with a burning stare, jaw clenched. “You can’t be serious!” she yelled. “He insulted us, our people, our pride! How smart can he possibly be?!”

“I know, I was there,” Erica assured, “however, Sergeant Divale did it to throw us off. We need to refocus, concentrate on the task at hand.”

“Oh I’m concentrating alright,” Gertrude retorted, “I’m concentrating on how great it’s going to feel when I kick the smugness out of his teeth with my Strikers.” She let the remark hang in the air before awaiting the word from Eila that the exercise had started. Bet he’s scared, thinking that he made a mistake. Boy did he ever. I fight better angry. Where are you you little sh*t? I’ve got over a thousand rounds with your name on them. Wait! What was that? An infinitesimally brief darkening of the sun occurred, lasting only a tenth of a second. To any other individual, they would’ve paid it no mind, thinking that it was a figment of their imagination, but Gertrude Barkhorn was not any other individual. Instinctively, she looked up in the direction of the sun and was pleased as she saw Erica do the same. Standard sundive. Moved very fast in an attempt to get the drop on us, but not fast enough. There you- Her thoughts ceased to form as she blinked once then twice, her brain trying to process what her eyes were seeing. Barkhorn saw Aaron falling straight down head first, just outside of the boundary line, without his wings. What the fuck? “Intercept course, full throttle!” Gertrude ordered, and the pair sped off. She watched as Divale, obvious to his situation, continue to look at the water, the waves and spray getting closer with every passing second. Twenty thousand in the air, then fifteen, now ten, and still he plunged down and down, with an unnerving still look to his face. Suddenly, he righted himself, feet pointed down just before he struck the water with a mighty crash. A large wave was created, one ten feet high, emanating from the impact zone. At that point, the German pilots finally got to the furthest edge of the exercise area, confused and alert.

When the wave died, both gasped as there was Aaron, standing on top of the waters surface, walking calmly towards them, glowing eyes regarding them with a clinical coldness. Erica and Gertrude retreated a few dozen feet and racked the bolts to their weapons, pointing them right at the incoming intruder. He stopped before the threshold, looking over the gossamer thin purple boundary. Making his hand into a fist, he rapped the magic with his knuckles, the sound unnatural and eerie. “Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in.” Divale demanded in a sing song voice. Neither Barkhorn or Hartmann gave him a response. “Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin?” he exclaimed in mocked shock. Aaron cracked his neck, the snap of bone loud and wince inducing. “Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I blow your house in.” he warned with ice in his voice. “Obscurum.” Upon uttering that one word, Aaron disappeared, vanished without a trace. The hairs stood up on the necks of the witches as they scanned the water and air for any sign of him entering. Sweat, cold as a Siberian winter, ran down their faces as they quickly grouped closer together, eyes peeled.

“Torque is active.” Eila’s voice chimed, causing Gertrude to inadvertently squeeze off a few rounds from her MG42 in surprise. “Exercise has now commenced.”

Barkhorn shook her head, trying to refocus, to calm herself down. “You see him?” she asked anxiously.

Erica hunched, swallowing deep, keeping her breathing steady. “No, not a goddamn thing.” she answered. Suddenly, movement drew her attention, ripples coming up from under the water. She flew up and fired down into the center of the disturbance. Shots impacted the water, Channel liquid vomiting upwards like geysers. Seconds go by until three shapes come up from the depths. With nary a sound to mark their arrival, are three dead fish, mouths agape, scales and fins blown off by the
sheer concussive impact of the pain balls. Marine blood commingled with the sea and faded away. “Pull back.” she suggested. “He might be trying to flank. Stay close.” They both hovered up and away from the water, removing that area as a possible ambush point and waited, like patient hunters on a safari, stalking their prize.

“Over here ladies.” Aaron called out from overhead. Gertrude and Erica raised their guns into the air and fired off a salvo of shots, shots that hit nothing but thin air as Aaron, yet again, was nowhere to be seen.

“Coward!” Gertrude called out. “Sissy! Come out and fight like a man!” A gust of wind came out of nowhere, sending a wave towards the pilots. It came in too fast to escape by flying straight up, so they backed away, right into an unseen mass.

“Thanks.” Divale acknowledged and grabbed the belts of both pilots, specifically, their ammo belts that in addition to containing their MP40s and their ammo, also carried their MG42 ammo. With a rough tug, Aaron severed the leather straps, taking only what he could get and letting the rest fall into the sea. The maneuver also ended the enchantment, putting him back into the realm of the here and now. Moving faster than they could react, Aaron sprouted his wings and flew up, spraying their immediate vicinity with dozens of 9mm bullets. “This is how a man fights.” he proclaimed preparing to turn and run deeper into the exercise area. Though they were given the drop, both pilots reacted the way they should, raising their shields, deflecting or stopping the incoming fire, but not all of it. Two shots made it through the barriers and collided, sending one up and away and the other slamming into Gertrude’s left hand. The impact caused her to cry out in pain, releasing her grip on the MG42, which fell into the water and sunk faster than a stone. Despite that, she and Erica squeezed off a few aimed rounds. Aaron swerved this way and that, contorting his body to maneuver in angles that were rarely if ever seen. One of the .3 inch bullets struck the pit of his right knee, sending him into a brief spin. Oh fuck me I’m hit! It’s all ok Aaron. Mind over matter. It’s not real. There’s no hole in your knee wide enough to shove the bottom of a baseball bat through, your kneecap isn’t shattered, and your leg isn’t being held on by threads of sinew with you bleeding out from a severed artery. Get out and get low. Find cover. Get them to waste their shots.

“Damn it!” Gertrude swore, the loss of her other gun less important than her ammunition. “I have two clips. How many have you got?” she asked as she sped off after Aaron.

“Just what’s in the clip.” Erica replied, moving right behind her. Gertrude unhooked the second to last clip and causally tossed it to Erica, who caught it and shoved it into her coat pocket, the belt now a liability. As they sped after him, Barkhorn began to think. Smart move. Lured us into his trap and we fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Only four clips, two in our weapons, grand total of one thousand rounds or thereabouts, to bring him down. Have to be efficient.

“Thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked hastily.

Erica nodded. “We have to go wide, push him into the outer reaches of the base, and put him into a crossfire.” she answered. “Taking left.”

Aaron chanced another look behind him as he sped off towards Dover Castle, the white cliffs going and gone behind him. He saw Erica move far left and Gertrude right, both gaining hard and fast. Fuck. They’re going far out, getting the best perspective and angle on me. Guess that limits what I can do at the castle. Wait a minute... Right over the tallest tower, the twin figures of Lynette and Yoshika could be seen. With a plan in mind, he keyed into Yoshika’s frequency. “You read me Sargeant Miyafuji?” he asked.

“Loud and clear, what’s wrong?” Yoshika’s voice relayed back.
“Are the battlements in both the inner and outer wall clear?” Aaron inquired.

“Yes, they’re only manned if the alarm is sounded. Why?” Miyafuji queried.

“You’ll see.” Divale explained.

Yoshika tried to get in another message, but Aaron was coming in, Gertrude and Erica in hot pursuit. Oh boy. “Get ready for anything Lynn.” she called to her wingman.

Bishop readied herself and kept a close eye on Divale who upon entering the outer walls dove hard and pulled up a few inches above the ground, the dust from the paved road coming off in thick clouds. He didn’t move from the ring, but kept on making a hard left turn, the g-force increasing in intensity. Preoccupied as such, it didn’t take long for Erica and Gertrude to aquire firing solutions, bringing down a rain of blue shots. The speed threw off their aim, but quite a few connected, grazing Aaron’s legs and arms, despite him angling his wings as best he could. A nasty stream hit him in the stomach, triggering him to vomit uncontrollably, the egg salad sandwiches coming up in a white yellow river with a healthy amount of acid and bile, hitting the ground with a splash. Can’t bleed off speed. Need to keep moving. Soon, the dust was too much and the German witches regrouped.

“Cover the exit with me, but be ready to jet off in another direction. He’s a slippery one.” Gertrude ordered. They descended to a decent height above the outer wall gate heading to the firing range and hanger and primed their weapons. “Count?” she asked.

“Roughly half and you’re not that far behind.” Erica answered.

Gertrude turned her attention to the maelstrom of earth circling and circling. Come on out Sargeant Divale, I’ve got a little surprise for you.

As if answering her summons, shapes emerged from the debris field and sped towards them. The duo fired in unison, taking care not to waste precious ammunition. Shots hit home, a home that was unexpected as over two dozen brown effigies of Aaron disintegrated into shards, except one. Caked in brown dust and mud, Divale whipped out his MP40s, drawing a bead on Erica who was caught flat footed. Say goodnight you black devil you. However, Aaron made a grave error, he tunnel visioned and neglected to account for Gertrude’s reaction time. She fired off a few rounds and extended her right arm. The bullets struck the MP40s, rendering them into purple rain, while the arm was like a clothesline from Hell, causing Aaron to somersault through the air and land hard into the ground, plowing up sod. Gertrude flopped her right arm around, trying to get the sting of impact out of it and grinned. Gotcha.

Refusing to give up, Aaron scrambled up, moving his jaw side to side, and arranged his wings away from him, just in time as bullets pinged against his pearly appendages. “That all you got Captain Barkhorn?” he cried, the impacts forcing him backwards up a rise. “Where I’m from that’s a love tap.”

“Speaking of tap,” Gertrude remarked, trying to place her shots in areas that weren’t adequately defended, “you could always surrender. There’s no shame in it.” The pair kept up fire, moving in lockstep up the hill, until Erica ran out of ammunition and slammed home another full clip.

Gertrude made a move to do so as well, but Aaron leapt up in the air, wings to his side, exposing himself to incoming fire and yelled, slapping his palms together away from him, “De vi murum!” A shockwave of force rushed towards the witches who had no time to get out of the way. It hit them with the force of a tidal wave, pushing them back, sending them head over heels, down the slope of the hill. Aaron wheeled around and flew away zigzagging, avoiding any return fire. There was none, and Barkhorn cursed as she fumbled with her MG42.
“Go on ahead,” she ordered to Erica, “I need to clear this jam. Squeeze him between yourself and the defense matrix and take pot shots of opportunity.” Hartmann nodded and sped off after Divale. Aaron continued to fly towards the matrix and he looked at it with respect. *Will have to get in close, hit the big targets, the 88s. Maybe I can get my hands on a .50 cal or even a 30mm and use that to even the odds, or knock those bogeys out of the sky. There will be flak, so vary your speed and don’t be predictable.* He gazed upwards for a brief moment and saw the forms of Shirley and Lucchini, minding the hard deck, and Minna and Mio each surveying the scene. Minna held her hand up, looking towards the field of guns. *Oh you dirty rotten bit- Her hand went down and all hell was unleashed, a veritable fire in the sky, a hail of lead and explosives screaming through the air.*

Erica saw the discharge and pulled up hard. She hated to bleed off speed, but it was that or get accidentally struck by a stray munition. Hartmann watched with patient eyes as Aaron continued to progress into the field of fire, dodging this way and that, braking, accelerating, flipping, veering, hovering, bobbing his way deeper into the defense. He avoided most of the shots, others struck his wings. Three however nailed his right foot, left hand, and a 30mm shell bounced off a 75mm artillery round and burrowed into the left side of his jaw. The concussive blast ripped the flesh, blood misting into the air. Aaron cried out in pain and anger, in a voice so loud that Gertrude, coming up behind Erica after having dealt with the jam, heard him loud and clear. “Take him down before he gets close!” Gertrude demanded, aiming and firing. Erica was about to do the same when suddenly, Aaron moved his wings forward, protecting his upper body, spinning like a drill head towards one of the 88mm towers. Most of the guns couldn’t depress enough to draw an accurate bead on him, and his pursuers couldn’t waste precious rounds. Like a torpedo to a ship’s bow, he collided with the sound of thunder, as his body went into and through the pillar holding the emplacement aloft. His exit ruptured the ammo feed system, and the entire support ruptured as the munitions cooked off from within. It started to fall, but Aaron wasn’t done. He grabbed the barrel of the antiaircraft cannon and with Herculean strength, threw the gun and column that it was still attached to right at Erica.

Rather than dodge, Erica put out her hand and yelled, “Sturm!” Gusts of high velocity wind propelled the mass of severed magic into the air to Gertrude who in turn grabbed the debris and, with two hands, hurled it back whence it came. The world dimmed as Aaron moved quick, circling around a 30mm in an attempt to grab a weapon. He closed in, ripping and tearing the joints and feeder systems frantically as his eyes saw the incoming projectile, one as big as a barn. *Come on you bitch, come on!* With frustration, he shifted his body to the left and the cannon came off it’s foundation, just before an M2 rattled off shots in his direction. The meteor of death struck the empty space, causing a catastrophic explosion, sending pain balls in all directions like a bouncing betty. They fouled up a 75mm, the offending M2, and another 88mm. Both Bertrude and Erica saw him dive and fired. Divale veered around the pillar, his 30mm sticking out like a sore thumb. Gertrude, sensing the opportunity, circled around and fired at where Aaron would be. The shots rang out and hit pillar as the 30mm was shoved into the magicized structure, mimicking being held. Thwarted of her kill, she was about to return to scan for his whereabouts when she noticed something odd about the weapon. *The ammo belt isn’t there.* That thinking saved her as Aaron popped up from across the way and hurled the ammunition, all five rounds of it, like throwing knives at Gertrude. She parried them all with the flat of her hand, firing her machine gun. Aaron ducked behind another pillar, bullets the size of cigars smacking into the face opposite him. Using his wings, he sliced the structure in front of him, the appendage going through like a blowtorch through butter.

Like a severed head that continues to make faces long after it is separated from the body, the gun emplacement, a French 75, continued to rotate, scanning for targets, indifferent to the fact that it had been removed from the chessboard. He ran up the slope, one that was tilting toward him, making his angle of approach that much smaller. Rounds from a ruptured ammo crate poured out like rain from a cloud. He grabbed a shell and a piece of the pillar that was loose, the shard like a toothpick in his hands. Hovering, he waited, aligning the sliver of magic with the firing ring of the bullet. Aaron
breathed deep. *Where are you all?* Movement caught his eye, the dark outlines of a black uniform. Without hesitation, he rammed the magic chip into the back end of the shell, igniting the propellent. It exploded forward towards the target. *These are canister rounds, brass shells filled to the brim with steel ball bearings, designed to wipe out huge gaps in infantry lines. At this range against an airborne target, it's as good as dead.* He smiled at the thought, but as soon as it creased his lips, it ceased, as the target that he hoped was Erica Hartmann was just an empty uniform. *Shit.* Aaron managed only one word as the real Erica Hartmann, sans overcoat, swung her MG42 like a baseball bat and hit Divale’s skull, sending him upwards, the machine gun coming apart. Gertrude, with built up speed, rammed her shoulder into his gut, propelling him into an 88mm gun, ruining the barrel, breach, and turret ring axis.

The pair soared into the air and shook hands. Shirley came up behind them, carrying Erica’s slightly pockmarked uniform. “The streak lives.” she boasted, smiling, handing it off.

“Call it Eila.” Erica ordered, seeing nothing stirring from the broken antiaircraft cannon emplacement while putting her black uniform back on.

“The torque is still active. Repeat, the torque is still active. Exercise is still on.” Eila relayed, shock evident in her voice.

“What the hell are you talking about Lieutenant?” Gertrude retorted. “There’s no way that he-” Her sentence died as she saw the remaining emplacements that were in range of Aaron’s last known location, draw a bead on the ruined hunk of metal. Realizing what was about to happen, she screamed, “Eila shut it!” The guns fire simultaneously and the area that was once occupied by the destroyed 88mm and Aaron’s body became engulfed in flame, smoke and debris flying in all directions. Gertrude went numb. *At this range with that amount of firepower…*

“Oh my God,” Erica remarked hand over her mouth in shock, “oh my god we killed him.”

“Eila, I say again, turn off the defense matrix! Get Yoshika here on the double with triage help! Can you get a fix on Divale’s signal!” Gertrude called into her ear communicator.

“Defense matrix powering down now.” Eila fired back, knowing the situation. A few seconds ticked by and her voice came back, “Sergeant Miyafuji is on her way now. I can’t get an accurate signal, too much interference. The torque is active, but it’s blinking in and out. I’m flying to you now.”

“Stay above the site and keep a look out! If there are any fires, put them out!” Barkhorn ordered as she dove onto the furthest edge of the crater. The smell of powder, power lubricant, and rent auras of magic pervaded the area like a haze of death. Small aetheric fire plumes danced over piles of metal and column, pain balls scattered around like a disturbed game of marbles. She put herself in a hover, taking great care not to step down, lest Aaron be underneath it, or worse, cause the entire pillar top to collapse. “What’s Yoshika’s eta?” she called out above her as Eila came to a halt.

“Three minutes, not much more.” Eila shouted down, looking over the scene, aiming and revving her Strikers at the fires, using gusts of wind to kill them. The torque in her hand continued to blink rapidly. Gertrude saw it too and darted around.

“He may have been asking for an ass whooping and he may be a warlock, but no one deserves this.”

“Sergeant Divale!” she cried out over the scene. “Can you hear me?!” She turned and looked up at Mio. “Can you see him Major Sakamoto?!”

“That’s a negative Captain,” Mio returned gloomily, “The auras are causing too much-” Her sentence was cut short as, out of the corner of her eye, movement was seen. “Twenty feet, eleven o’clock!” she rattled off. Nodding in thanks, Gertrude made a move to get to Divale’s position, but
suddenly, a large metal plate, as big as the messhall door was struck hard, sending it over the side of the debris field, tumbling several thousand feet below. She stopped as a lone figure emerged from the rubble slowly, looking out away from her with it’s back turned, towards the Channel, wings stained with oil and soot, the uniform torn or burned off in parts. He looked rough and worn yet there he was, Sargeant Aaron Divale, alive, in one piece, and still standing.

As he rose from the ashes like a phoenix, Aaron’s world came in spurts and sputters of vivid whites and grays. He felt nauseous as the shoulder barge from Gertrude still stung. He didn’t even need to lift up his shirt to know that his midsection was heavily bruised, some parts of his flesh feeling strangely warmer than the rest. *That’s the psycho stigmatic sensation of the pain balls making you think that you have internal bleeding. You’re fine. Speaking of fine, it would be a fine time to end this little game. I’m getting very sick and tired of this shit.*

Barkhorn couldn’t believe it. She rubbed her eyes, thinking that this had to be a mirage, a trick of smoke or the over concentration of adrenaline, but no matter what she did, there he was. Impossible. Fucking impossible. *A hit to the midsection at high speeds, plus the impact, plus the other guns shooting at him, plus the explosion, and he’s still fucking standing. What the hell does it take to put him down?* Then Aaron turned to face her, his glowing eyes locking to hers, with a contemptible look to his face. Bruises could be seen on his hands and face, a large one on his right eye, the cut to his left jaw clotted and deep apple red. He held up his right hand, extending the index finger and wagging it back and forth, the clear sign for ‘not today’, “Oh Captain,” he bragged in a low voice, advancing towards her with bad intentions, “I heard no bell.” Gertrude’s mind shot back to the exercise, the practical. *How many rounds do I have? Wait, calm down. Do the math. Roughly ten rounds. Not even close to enough. He’ll just dodge at this distance. What do I do. How do I bring him down?* “You can’t have that much ammo left.” Aaron observed, gesturing to the machine gun. “I can tell you right now that it isn’t enough to finish the job. If I were you, I’d surrender now.”

“Sargeant Divale!” Yoshika called out, having now arrived at the scene with a black doctors bag, Lynette in tow. “Do you need medical attention?!”

“He will soon.” Barkhorn growled. Aaron regarded her as she threw the MG42 to the side, the frame clattering on the rubble. Then, she started to unbutton the top two clasps to her uniform, before grabbing the collar with her left hand and pulling it sharply over her head, casting it away. Revealed to all was her upper body, arms toned, abdominal muscles tight and defined, shoulders limber. Her chest was covered by a white T-shirt, the fainest lines of her black bra visible through the fabric. She cracked her knuckles loudly. “You can trust me on that.”

Major Sakamoto saw all of this and gasped. *She can’t possibly do doing what I think she’s doing?* She made a move to say something to the effect of imploring Captain Barkhorn that it was against the rules, but Commander Wilcke ended that avenue of attack with a wave of her hand in front of Mio’s face. “You can’t be serious in letting this happen?” Mio entreated with respect, despite the current flow of events. “What if he hurts her?”

“He won’t Mio.” Minna assured with a hard look. “Divale might be cocky, but he’s not stupid. He knows better than to use overwhelming force.”

“Do you really want to fight me?” Aaron asked taking off his uniform top in the same way Gertrude did, except he took off both shirts, showing everyone his heavily scarred and bruised flesh. Gasp of awe and mouth gaping stares ensued. In an instant, after he threw his garments to the side, his wings ignited in brilliant yellow flame and the molten bronze eyes deepened into an orange red, the pupil elongating like a reptile. “Think awfully carefully, or I will humiliate you in ways you can’t even imagine.”
“Sargeant Divale and Captain Barkhorn!” Minna shouted, watching the posturing from far above. Both would be combatants looked up and waited for her statement. “If you are going to have this bout, it will be done on even footing. Set your terms and have at.” she determined.

Aaron nodded reluctantly and the wings and eyes went back to normal. “You’re lucky.” he admitted. “You wouldn’t have lasted more than fifteen seconds if I was given free reign to use my powers.”

“You like boasting or are you just that scared?” Gertrude retorted.

Aaron then tilted his head and cocked an eyebrow. “I’m actually disturbed by you Captain Barkhorn,” he acknowledged.

The response threw Gertrude off kilter. “What are you talking about?” she asked, confused.

“I’m disturbed that out of both of us, you are the one that wants to end me more than I want to end you.” Aaron explained. “Very odd. The monster in front of you doesn’t want to fight, yet the monster in the looking glass does.”

“I’m not a monster and I look nothing like you.” Gertrude replied with venom.

“Oh really?” Aaron asked. “You look, but you don’t see. True, you’re not a monster, but you’re certainly not human in the grand scheme of things, none of you are. I mean come on; what kind of human being flies, or projects gusts of wind from their hands, or peers into the realms of the unseen, or stops bullets in midair? Face the truth Captain Barkhorn: you and I are more alike than we care to admit, and know this.” He pointed at everyone observing the standoff, before resting his left index finger straight at Gertrude’s heart, “if it wasn’t for a few twists of the tale during the long bloody history between our kinds, you all would be where I am now, an extant reminder of a soon to be extinct race.” Aaron watched as his words had an effect on everyone present. “Doesn’t feel good does it?” he emphasized. “Truth, like life, hurts like a bitch.”

“You talk too much.” Gertrude muttered, eyes intense and fists clenched. “Let’s do this.”

Shaking his head in wonder, Aaron advanced to within seven feet of the determined witch and stopped. “What are your terms?” he asked.

“No weapons, no flying,” Gertrude began, stretching her arms out, “just your hands and everything in between. The first person to land an unblocked blow on the body wins. The first person who throws their opponent in such a way that any part of their body, excluding the hands and feet, hit the ground, wins. Got it?”

Aaron regarded his opponent, with Strikers standing 5’7” and moving side to side, up and down, never idle, like a boxer warming up before a bout. *I have her in reach, yet she’s got speed in spades and a good deal of experience if the posturing is anything but. Not going to out punch this one. Gonna have to concentrate, wait for my opportunity, and connect with a blockbuster bomb power punch. Don’t hurt her Aaron or you’ll be in the doghouse for sure.* He got into his pose, a south paw style meant to hide the fact that he could deal damage with either hand and called out, “Bring it on.”

The two combatants circled each other, maintaining the distance, but ever so slightly moving in closer, a deadly nautilus creep only adding to the tension felt by the spectators watching above. Lynette turned to Erica and asked with concern, “Do you think she can beat him?”

Erica gave her a look and stated flatly, “She hit him once, she can do it again.” She then regarded the duo, now much closer than ever and yelled, “Kick his ass Trude!” As if that was a clarion call to action, the tension snapped like a brittle twig, and the war in the heavens began anew. Aaron jabbed
forward with his left, the speed like a cobra strike, but Gertrude deflected it with a quick left hand parry and deflected a follow up jab with her right. Barkhorn backed up slightly and then pressed in, getting within his reach and made ready to deliver an uppercut when she saw that Divale’s jab was meant to do just that, lure her in closer. She backed away before a nasty overhand hook came down like an engine piston, the blow meant for her head. Aaron cursed silently. *I've over committed. Think fast.* Gertrude saw her opening and pounced, letting loose with a series of jabs and two uppercuts with either hand. Aaron bobbed and weaved his head, using his double jointedness to contort and shift into positions that gave him breathing room. He blocked the last upper cut and pushed it away hard, sending Gertrude into a ballerina spin. However, Barkhorn rolled with the parry, using the momentum to get off a combination straight arm backhand and midrift kick. Aaron expected it and blocked both shots, grabbing her wrist with his left hand and pinning her leg at the lower calf with his elbow and knee. Bending backwards, he executed an improvised throw, launching her over his head and to the right near a pile of rubble. It should’ve ended the fight right then and there but, Gertrude twisted during the fall, resembling a lathe, and landed with one hand and two crouched feet, looking right at him. *He thought he could get rid of me just like that. This is no rookie you’re facing sergeant, no rookie.*

She charged him, catching Aaron flatfooted, and launched herself into the air with a right kick aimed at his head. Divale pirouetted in place, bringing his palms together and swinging like a sledgehammer down at her exposed back as she passed, but Gertrude swung her right elbow up at the last second, stopping the strike from connecting. Aaron ran in, but with measured steps, lest he make another mistake. Gertrude whipped around, fists up, and he stopped dead in his tracks, less than three feet away from her. Again, the two stared each other down. Aaron kicked a pile of debris away with the flat of his foot so he had maneuvering room, metal and pillar scattering like rats from a sinking ship, purple dust rising into the air. He feigned a uppercut and twirled into a double roundhouse kick. Gertrude backed out of the first and jumped up onto a pile of broken metal, still alight with violet fire, blocking the second and holding it firm. Using her strength, she locked Aaron’s left leg and threw him into the blazing fragments. Divale’s back slammed into the pile, the impact nearly knocking the wind out of him and dazing him. He regained his wherabouts just before Gertrude threw a roundhouse kick of her own. He rolled out of the way, avoiding the blow that whizzed past so fast, that the flames were extinguished. A piece of his pants was aflame and he quickly patted it out, standing up and raising his fists when he was done.

He inched closer, using his toes to move forward. Divale threw another roundhouse kick. Gertrude backed out of the way and moved in fast. Aaron rode the failed strike and jabbed. This too failed as Gertrude did a split, and cocked her right arm back, ready to send her fist into his crotch. She let it go, but Aaron grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her forward, kicking his right leg forward towards her groin. Gertrude had the same idea, throwing up her right leg. Both shots connected and sent both combatants backwards several feet, Gertrude rolling off to the side wincing and Aaron unceremoniously falling flat on his face, bouncing off the rubble like a rubber ball, holding his genitals in pain. The onlookers didn’t know what to make of the aftermath, still trying to figure out who won and who lost. No one spoke as the two fighters rose unsteadily, wincing and breathing deep, occasionally cradling their privates. Aaron got on a knee, hand over his family jewels and looked over at Gertrude, who just sat up, breathing with her mouth open, legs spread. He balled his hands into fists and knocked them against each other, the knuckles strikes sounding like a thrush cracking a snail’s shell against a rock. Gertrude thought about the gesture. *A bang bang play. A draw.* After a few seconds, Barkhorn nodded and pushed herself up, declaring, “Good fight. A draw, but a good fight nevertheless.” The rest of the present squadron cheered and applauded. The two adversaries got up and walked, gingerly if truth be told, to the center of the crater.

“Well, I didn’t expect that ending.” Aaron admitted with a wry grin. “Still, damn good fight. Best I’ve had in years.” He extended his right hand palm open and apologized, “If what I said back at the
beginning offended you, I am sincerely sorry.”

Gertrude nodded, accepting the offer of remorse and took his hand with hers. She shook it and pulled him close to her. “I want a rematch one day.” Barkhorn demanded in a low voice, grinning all the while.

“Anytime, anyplace.” Aaron came back and the two let go and flew up to join the throng.

Mio signaled to Yoshika to check both pilots out for injuries and turned to Minna. “I did what you asked.” she said

“How did it go?” Wilcke asked.

“As to be expected, she didn’t like it, but you were right to send me. If it had been you, she would’ve refused or resigned.” Mio replied. “Clostermann is a stubborn one.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Aaron Divale gets himself an unwilling partner, one whose affiliations could make for some friction. Will they prevail, or succumb to pride and prejudice?

Chapter IV: Fire And Ice

This enemy, the Neuroi, is unlike anything that I’ve ever imagined myself facing. Unlike an army of mortals, they can’t be bargained with, or reasoned with. They don’t feel pity, remorse, or fear. Eating and sleeping are not needed. Above all, they are one hundred percent obedient in executing their primary directives. This war will be a true test of our abilities, one that I’m not so sure we can win, not without a lot of sacrifice and bloodshed. I just hope we have enough.

Diary Entry January 2nd 1940

“Don’t get too close Lynn, or you’ll get burned.” Shirley cautioned while flicking the welding torch to life. Lynette was nervous, dreadfully nervous as she had never brewed tea like this with a full tin teakettle secured by a vise, just waiting for Yeager to apply heat with the flame, near a workbench in the hanger. She did so with the care of someone that was used to handling such equipment, making sure the fire was constantly moving under the teapot, and peering at the lid, watching for steam to rise.

“You sure this is safe?” Bishop asked, skeptical of the efficacy of the brewing method.

“Of course.” Shirley assured with a smile, “My dad taught me this trick when I was nine. Works wonders with coffee too.” Shortly afterwards, vapor began shrieking out of the lid. “There we go.” she stated with satisfaction, taking the heat away and turning off the gas. The torch sputtered and died, it’s fuel cut off. Lynette flicked the teapot open with her fingernail and placed two sachets of earl grey into the bubbling water to steep. The pair looked over their shoulders, setting their sights on Aaron who was sitting with his back against his locker with a needle and thread, sewing the tears in his pants rather quickly and efficiently, the needle practically invisible in his two fingered grip. “Still can’t believe he did it.” Shirley remarked, shaking her head in disbelief. “Gets the better of the matrix and deuls Gertrude to a draw after being buried alive with tons of rubble. Crazy.”

“I can’t understand why Captain Barkhorn would even go toe to toe with him in the first place.” Bishop remarked.

“Well,” Shirley began, putting the torch fuel canister away under the workbench and hooking up the tube and ignition head on a metal guidewire underneath, “you see Lynn, Trude has a lot of pride in
what she does. She backs down from nothing and no one, and isn’t afraid to give someone who she
cares about the bad news. From what I understand, Aaron said something bad about her people and
she didn’t like it. He may have apologized at the end, but he deserved what he got when she nailed
him in the balls. Would’ve done the same thing myself.”

Lynette nodded in understanding and regarded the teapot. “Is it safe to move?” she asked.

Yeager picked up two clean grease rags and gave them to her. “Hold it steady.” Bishop did as she
was told, wrapping her hands in the cloth and holding the bottom and handle. Shirley turned the iron
vise bar and the kettle came loose. “Thanks.” Lynette said. Her counterpart gave her a thumbs up
and went about gathering some tools to fine tune her Strikers. Bishop closed the lid of the teapot and
cought the whiff of bergamot laced black tea leaves. Earl grey is the best tea for a cold day like this.
She took up a teacup with saucer and walked to where Aaron was busily stitching away.

A bright light and all is noise, hot and loud. Voices, strained to the point of going hoarse, cry out in
torment. The light of the sun is coming in with the color of rose through the bloodstained triage tent
walls, the air thick with the overpowering smell of clotted blood, the scent of burnt flesh, the aroma
of boiling tar and oil, and the pungent reek of sulfur. Vision looks to the hands, stained sticky
crimson as they are placed into a barrel of water, the liquid already the color of a ten year old
cabernet sauvignon. Despite the cleansing, bits and pieces still remain between the webbing and
under the fingernails, but now is not the time to be picky. We now look upon the body of a young
man, stained with oil, vitrified earth, and blood, screaming in agony, hands over his eyes, unable to
face the treatment. His legs are horribly burned, to the point where they resemble charred logs rather
than limbs, still steaming, ruptures here and there dripping liquid. The meat is fully cooked and there
is no saving them, they have to come off. An unseen body gets closer, brandishing a bone saw, the
blade covered with so much gore that it resembled a club. ‘Please,’ the man pleads, now cognizant of
what was about to happen. ‘please not my legs.’ No reply or assurance is given, just a hard grab of
the upper thigh and the application of metal teeth to flesh. An arm pushes and pulls, back and forth
over the meat, the outer layer of the limb giving away like a fully done pot roast. ‘Oh my God!’ the
youth yells to deaf ears, ‘Please don’t cut anymore please! Please!’ Yet it goes on until the bone is
reached.

A prick of the needle on a finger brought the world back and Aaron cringed in pain. “Little fucker.”
he muttered, putting the digit into his mouth. That’s what I get for not paying attention. He took the
finger out and rubbed it dry on the front of his pant leg, before finishing the last few stitches. With a
flick of the wrist, he snapped the thread almost fully flush with the main piece after he tied it off.

“You’re pretty good at that.” a voice observed. Aaron looked up and saw Lynette holding a teapot in
one hand and a cup and saucer in the other. “Where did you learn to sew?”

“Observation, experimentation, and application.” Aaron replied. And boy did I ever get a lot of
practice. “What’s in the pot?”

“Earl grey tea.” Bishop stated with pride, extending the saucer to him. Aaron took it and waited
patiently as she poured him a full cup. “Any cream or sugar with that?”

“No, but thank you.” Divale answered and was about to drink up when Sanya, with Eila in tow,
came up to the duo.

“How about some of this then?” Sanya offered. She reached into her back pocket and produced a
flask. If she is Russian, that could mean only vodka, Uncle Joe’s little helper.

“Capful if you don’t mind.” Aaron said, brandishing his cup. With care, Sanya unscrewed the cap
and poured a quick dash into the tea. Divale nodded in thanks and took a good swallow. The tea was
steeped to perfection and still hot, the addition of the spirits making the warmth spread throughout his body that much quicker. “Marvelous,” he commented, leaning back on the locker door. “Takes me back to the old days.”

“What were they like?” Sanya asked.

Aaron was about to answer when the door to the office opened and out trotted Perrine, fully kitted out with her Bren and MAS machine pistol, pockets bulging with ammunition, face wracked with anger, her blistering gaze resting on Aaron as she walked towards the small group. Quickly, he bolted down the rest of the cup and politely handed it off to Lynette. He got up from the ground and pushed his glasses, slightly fogged due to the steam from the tea, back on his nose. The scene took on a Wild West quality, the kind of tale that Eisenhower would spout every so often to him, of gunslingers walking out of the saloon at high noon to face off in the middle of the town square. Even though far removed from anything even resembling a desert, Aaron could almost hear the cawing of carrion birds, the soft reedy squish of tumbleweeds blown away by the hot sandy wind, and the sizzling stinging trail of sweat as it traveled down the scruf of his neck. With a clear and present danger in front of him and closing with every step, training and instinct took over. Plans of attack, retreat, and counterattack were formed, dismissed, reformed, and committed to memory. Muscles tensed and the flood gates holding back his adrenaline opened up, the liquid courage and energy flowing like Niagara Falls. His breathing slowed and time seemed to move slowly as the pair eyed each other with malice, expecting trouble to break out any second. She moves like a knife, direct and to the point. The group didn’t say a word or move a muscle, watching with caution as Clostermann got closer and closer. When she was within fifteen feet, she veered away towards her Strikers, getting into a position to put them on, moving her gaze down and away. All of them, Aaron included, sighed in relief as the safeties engaged and the clamps opened, releasing her from her position. She walked up the launching pad and looked up, closing her eyes for the briefest of moments, before activating her Strikers, flying up and away through the hole in the roof.

“It is just me or was there a chill in the air?” Aaron asked, picking up the needle and thread and placing them on a nearby bench.

“She really doesn’t like you.” Lynette informed. “True, she is hard on all the newbies like me and Yoshika, but that’s because she wants us to get better and fast. With you, it’s pure black hatred flowing through her veins.”

“Comes from being one of those Knights of Saint Michael.” Aaron explained. “Those papists will never let lie even if you pay them.”

“Watch it Aaron,” Eila warned wagging her finger, “your mouth has already gotten you into enough trouble.”

“Captain Barkhorn was a calculated risk that I was willing to take.” Aaron retorted. “I could care less about what the Lieutenant thinks when I have at verbally and I do; truth be told, I care nothing. And if you’re all worried that she will somehow lash out like the captain, I doubt it. Those milk and honeyed hands look like they haven’t done a days worth of hard labor in their life.”

Lynette’s eyes bugged out in shock at such a statement. “Sergeant Divale!” she exclaimed, almost dropping the cup and saucer on the ground, “I think that’s the most acid thing anyone has ever said about her!”

“Hang out with me for a big longer sergeant and you’ll find out that the venom is only beginning to flow.” Aaron assured with a wink.

“Sergeant Divale!” a voice rang out from across the way. Eyes turned to the office where the head of
Major Sakamoto was seen popping out of the portal. “Please come into the office. The commander and I would like to speak with you.”

And the hits just keep coming. Aaron steeled himself for the tongue lashing and made his polite exit from the group, walking to the office doors. Mio saw him approach, walking with purpose. “Seems like you’ve recovered nicely from the fight.” she noted when he came within several feet.

“I’m used to pain.” Aaron replied. “How’s the captain?”

“Captain Barkhorn is fine, with no small thanks to Yoshika’s healing magic and a generously sized ice pack.” Mio reported. “Come, we have much to discuss.”

Aaron entered the office and stood in front of the desk. Commander Wilcke was sitting there, looking over some reports with some degree of captivation. Mio took her standard position to the side of the commander’s chair and waited. After finishing her appraisal of whatever those papers contained, Minna turned her attention to Aaron.

“I have good news and bad news Sargeant Divale.” she started. “The good news is that, in conjunction with Major Sakamoto, we have decided that your relationship with Doctor Domino will not be severed, however such a bond is still illegal fraternization. It falls to you and her to keep this under your hats. If news of this union breaks out, I will disavow all knowledge and fully cooperate with any investigation that may result from this, understand?”

“Yes Commander Wilcke,” Aaron answered, much relieved that finally something had gone his way today, “and thank you.”

“Don’t be so quick to thank me on this one,” Minna added with a fair bit of warning in her voice, “especially since I haven’t gotten into the bad news. This next exercise is a live fire combination of air and ground elements with a partner that you must protect at all costs lest you both fail the exercise. She has already gone up ahead of you.”

The world that Aaron stood on started to crack like overtaxed glass, and he swore that his heart had stopped beating, shocked to stillness by the sheer amazement of such a partnership being announced. She can’t be serious about this. I had to have heard wrong.

“With all due respect…” Aaron began, but Minna jumped up from her seat, causing Aaron to step back in surprise.

“With all due nothing!” Wilcke shot back, pointing her left index finger at his face. “There is a tension between you two that I want cleared up and the only way that’s going to happen is by letting the both of you work together. I don’t want this situation to escalate any more than it already has. Is. That. Clear.”

Aaron decided to let the matter go and nodded in agreement. “Yes commander.” he agreed. “I concur.”

“As I thought you would.” Minna grumbled, motioning for Mio to take over as she sat back down.

“As stated previously, this is a two part exercise.” Mio rattled off. “The first phase is in the air where you will work in tandem with Lieutenant Clostermann to shoot down all bogeys. After that, you will have a fifteen minute break back at the hanger where you will discuss strategy regarding the second phase, the ground, that will take place in a ruined cityscape. Ammunition resupply is not allowed, so you will have to kit yourselves accordingly. Any shortfall that happens is your fault. The exercise ends in failure if you or your partner go down. You will successfully complete the exercise if you both destroy all the targets. Any questions?”
“Where can I get more ammo?” Aaron asked, keeping it short and sweet.

Minna placed her hand under the table and pressed an unseen button. The immediate area next to where Aaron was standing opened up, and out of the hole, came an elevator shaft, the door a lattice of metal that opened up automatically when the ascending structure came to a complete stop. He walked, or shall we say, squeezed himself in as the elevator was not built with his bulk in mind, and he grumbled as he constantly banged into the ceiling or walls with his arms and head. With a frown, he closed the door and the elevator went down, the view of the office getting smaller and smaller before it was replaced entirely by flashing red lights. All was silent save for the pulleys in the elevator shaft humming away. The journey was uneventful and boring. Anyone got a deck of cards? Then the elevator stopped and the door opened up. No lights came on and Aaron stepped out into the darkness. He could tell by the echo caused by his steps and the retraction of the metal elevator door that the room was big. Suddenly, the lights came on with a flash, revealing a room that was lined with racks stacked to the brim with guns, ammunition, uniforms, medical supplies, and explosives, several levels in height, stretching to the furthest reaches of the room. Well now, this is what I call getting loaded out. He saw a few duffel bags hanging up on metal hooks and he took one, zipping it open, smiling. Time to go shopping.

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Nearly hidden amongst the cloudless blue sky nearly fifteen thousand feet up, Lieutenant Perrine Clostermann stood still, letting the winds dance through her hair, arms crossed and fingers tapping against the brocade on her sleeves, clearly impatient and unhappy with the current state of affairs. Why on earth did they choose me to team up with him? Why not one of the newer pilots like that idiot Yoshika or even Lynette? They’re the ones that need the experience, not me. This must be a punishment for what I did to them before ‘it’ arrived. I’ve got nothing against Commander Wilcke or Major Sakamoto, but they’ve made a huge mistake letting that thing into our squadron. The thought of that warlock roaming loose and fancy free is troubling and he already seems to have gotten his poisoned barbs into some of us if that little gathering is anything to go by. Remember Perrine, fear is the mind killer. Let it turn to something else. Try hate, yes hate. That will do. The rest of them may be deaf and blind to what he really is, but I’m not. Underneath that human disguise is a monster, a demon made flesh, nothing more. Out of the corner of her eye, movement drew her attention down towards the hanger entrance. She looked and saw, racing up to meet her, though maintaining a more than respectable distance, was Aaron. As he swung up and away, slowing down, she looked at his load out and wrinkled her nose in annoyance. He was carrying all his guns, the pistols tucked in the front of his pants, the shotgun sheathed in a knee high leather holster on his right leg, and that monstrosity of a machine gun in his hands. A grenade bandolier was across his chest going right to left and another holding his pistol ammo went the opposite direction. Pinned and sewed to the belt loops of his trousers and sides of his shirt were two duffel bags, bulging with contents that Perrine could only assume was more ammunition. That’s too much weight, but at least he came prepared. Should’ve expected nothing less from a trained killer. From a distance Clostermann saw the warlock take off his glasses and put them in his back pocket, the eldritch orbs looking at her. Perrine didn’t have the sharpest eyes in the world, but even she could see that he was not too keen on getting any closer to her than what was necessary, not out of fear, but dislike. Likewise monster.

Just as she had done before, she returned his glare with one of her own, a look that spoke of the generations of the Clostermann serving in the Knights of Saint Michael. From her great grandfather to her, staring down and defeating the evils of the world was as fundamentally simple as swimming was to fish. She pulled her Strikers out of hover mode and moved in towards him, the Bren on her back shifting slightly. He didn’t move an inch, hands firmly attached to his weapon which he held at the ready, wings catching the light of the sun. They do look like angel’s wings, but you are far from a
servant of God hellspawn. Perrine advanced until coming to a stop five feet away. The two stared at each other for a few moments before Aaron broke the ice in greeting. “Lieutenant Clostermann.” he stated lifelessly.

“Sergeant Divale.” Perrine returned with the same monotonous tone. “You certainly have come prepared, though I think you should shed some weight. You’re no good to me if you can’t avoid incoming fire.”

“I’ll manage just fine.” Aaron replied. “Any idea regarding our opposition?”

Perrine smiled. “I don’t know, you tell me.” she bragged. “What do you think our attackers will do?”

Aaron looked around him, furrowing his brow in thought. After a quick scan of his surroundings he nodded to himself. “No cloud cover at all which will negate that avenue of attack. Sun diving is an option, especially of they deploy fast movers. If they come in that way, it’ll be in small numbers, too many will tip us off to their plan for sure.” he answered. He moved off towards the Channel way, pointing to the black clouds still present over France and the woods far off to the north. “They would advance along these routes of attack. The clouds will camouflage them. If they hold fire, they can advance right in top of us in seconds. The woods are another point of entry into the fray, hovering out of the trees and taking long range pot shots. Some might swing around, hard and low, before pulling up over us, using the sun to dive in when we least expect it.” he added. He looked over everything and finished with a nod, Yes, that is how I’d do it.”

“Sounds too simple to me.” Perrine quipped with a sneer.

Aaron rounded in place and retorted, “I’ve got almost four and a half years fighting these bastards under my belt. How many have you got Lieutenant?”

Perrine was about to answer when Minna’s voice came over their ear communicators. “Exercise with begin in twenty seconds.” she informed.

Aaron racked the bolt to his gun. “I’ll watch Channel side.” he relayed, turning his head to face her. “You got my six Lieutenant?”

Perrine took her Bren machine gun off her back and pulled the bolt back. “If you apologize for that comment and the one you made at breakfast.” she uttered in a menacing voice.

“I’ll take my chances.” Aaron simply replied and looked away, smiling inwardly as he could almost hear Perrine’s temper flare like gasoline being added to a fire.

“Exercise begins in five, four, three, two, one!” Commander Wilcke counted down. “Air exercise has commenced.”

The duo stood there, unmoving, scanning for the enemy, Divale watching Channel side, and Clostermann the inland. Nothing could be heard but the whistling wind for many seconds. Suddenly, Divale called out, “Multiple bogeys!. Two quints woods, six o clock low, three quints Channel clouds, seven o clock level!” Perrine also saw something too, another two squadrons coming in level at twelve o clock.

“Didn’t account for them heading straight for us do you?” she mocked.

“Because I didn’t expect them to be that stupid.” Aaron replied. “Plan?”

“You take rear, I take front. Keep them off my back.” Clostermann ordered and jetted off, her targets further way.
Aaron couldn’t believe the sheer stupidity of what Perrine did. *Fucking dunce, they’re trying to separate us! Well, this day has certainly gone tits up in a hurry. Gotta dive, draw off as many as I can.* He made up his mind to go for the two enemy squadrons in the woods, even now getting into position like cannons along a ridge. As he sped closer, he could see the targets. These bogeys looked exactly like the Neuroi fast movers, from the thin mono wing body frame, down to the sharp points of the beam blister pods, except these were purple and blue, not black and red, clear indicators that they were dummy targets. *Core will be in the center as usual. How many followed me?* He turned to look and saw two of three tailing him, and closing fast, while the other made a beeline to the lieutenant. *Not enough. Wishful thinking that they would go for you instead of her. She’s the softer target, the isolated one.* The woods group fired, blue beams cutting through the air. Aaron angled his wings in front, weaving to and fro. One hit him and deflected off with a sharp grinding sound like a diamond etching a glass window. *Holy shit! This exercise is incredibly realistic! Everything from the impact to the heat dispersion is spot on. Which means I’ve got to take this up seriously, and take it up a notch.* Once again, his wings exploded into flame and his eyes became those of a crocodile, glowing red orange. He rose sharply and dove down into his intended targets. The enemy moved from side to side and front to back, trying to get an angle on him, but Aaron had already outmaneuvered them. He pointed his gun and fired. Four of the ten craft were critically damaged, their cores shattered, the bodies disintegrating into white flakes. The remainder turned to flee in various directions. Aaron pursued them like a man possessed, oblivious to the enemies surely coming up behind him, yet still too far away to be of much hindrance. He wheeled to the left, strafing most of the would be escapees. Five more go down. The two that made a move to get out executed Immelmann turns, looping up and flipping topside, firing. Aaron charged them, yet decline to fire, instead flying right between them. The beams nearly grazed him, one getting so close that he heard his nose hairs sizzle like home fries in a skillet. Upon getting close, Aaron barrel rolled, his wings striking the Neuroi and coming out cleanly, the bogeys rent asunder, dissolving into white particles. Suddenly, the trailing adversaries got within firing range and opened up. Aaron pulled a reverse Immelmann, going low and then leveling off, and added a hard g turn to the left, angling his body so that he could see them overshoot the mark. He breathed in and screamed.

Perrine hurled herself forward, pushing her Strikers to the limit to close the distance. Her enemies split themselves up, extending out into a broad front, and primed their weapons. *Will have to weave and blow through. Take shots and use your speed to get behind them.* She aimed with her Bren at the front line, one that opened fire at extreme range. At this distance, the beams lost most of their potency, yet reduced their thickness and brightness by over eighty percent, making evasive maneuvers that much more difficult. Clostermann put up her shield and continued, hearing the deflections. As soon as she got into engagement range, she let loose with the Bren. Three of the Neuroi went down, the rest veering away towards the safety of the other squadron. More beams, these much more dangerous, lashed out in an attempt to bring her down, but her speed was too much to compensate for, and she blew threw, turning hard to the right. Several Neuroi turned and proceeded to chase, firing all the way. With, nothing in front of her, Perrine shifted her firing position, aiming behind her and aligning her shields to the front. She sprayed and prayed, weaving in all directions, using the recoil to add to her erratic flight path. As she loaded another clip, her shield registered hits. Taking a quick peek, Perrine was shocked to see another squadron engage, homing in on her rear.

*Front and back. A dead man’s face off.* She unholstered her MAS and waited, keeping straight and absorbing the beam hits from behind. *Dangerous to not fire back, but I need to hear to gauge distance.* Movement in the distance towards the Channel drew her gaze for a long brief moment. The warlock had pulled out of a dive, his wings a sun yellow and aflame, and angled around, the scheme of his causing almost all of his bogeys to overshoot. Then, she winced in pain, as an unholy shriek
came forth from his lungs, distance immaterial. The Neuroi unfortunate enough to be caught in the harmonic blast were simply torn to pieces by a serrated wall of sound. *Stop it! Stop it! It hurts!* Eyes closed, teeth grinding in auditory suffering, she felt another deflection, snapping her back into the here and now. *They're close. Peel off in two, one!* Throwing herself bodily to the left, like a sleepy person turning in a bed from a nightmare, she angled herself out of harms way and spun to an upright position, both guns held out in front of her. The trick paid off as multiple bogeys collided with each other, the air chock full of glittering shards. Those that survived were blown to smithereens by the combined fury of a Bren and MAS on full auto. *Just as I planned it.*

The sky darkened for a split second and Perrine looked up at an angle as to not get a glare. Five shapes could be discerned, diving down, using the sun as an ambush point. *Damn it! “Lieutenant!”* Aaron rang out over the comms. “Dive hard right now!” Without even thinking about it, Perrine did as she was told, beams lancing through the air. The harsh bark of gunfire to her backside ripped the first four apart as they overshot her position, the remaining bogey turning away. Out of nowhere, Divale flew from in from behind her and kicked out with his right leg, the limb connecting with the craft. The impact was bone jarring and loud like slamming a door, sending the Neuroi into a tailspin. Aaron pulled out his pistols and fired down, double tapping each one. They all hit the same spot, dead center, and the last bogey vanished into a cloud of snow. He righted himself and scanned the skies. “What’s behind me?” he asked anxiously, the wings still smokelessly burning.

Clostermann, reloaded all her weapons with practiced ease before answering, “None at all.” She turned to him and grimaced, “What kept you? Another few more seconds, and I would’ve gotten tagged.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Aaron chided, turning around slowly, “I’ve just been protecting someone’s blindside while they went off on a fool’s errand.” He holstered his pistols and gesticulated wildly with his free hands. “What were you thinking?! Or, better yet, let me rephrase that statement: Were you thinking?! Rule number one with me Lieutenant: Never leave your wingman alone.”

“And yet you did the same thing.” Perrine retorted, “You’re just as worthy of blame as me, or is this a case of ‘do as I say and not as I do’?”

Aaron hovered over to her, eyes blazing. “Don’t trifle with me.” he warned clenching his fists so hard, the knuckles cracked. “I may have scruples, but I’m not above breaking them for the greater good.”

Undaunted, Perrine bared her neck, pulling the collar away and down. “Then go right ahead, if you’re man enough.” she dared. Aaron looked at her throat, milky white, the jugular exposed for him to see, pulsating slowly and calmly. *It would all be so easy. Grab that throat and push in with my thumbs. Could throttle the life out of this bitch in seconds. But, it’s not worth it Aaron, you’ve sacrificed too much to throw it all away to blind anger. Don’t go down that path, or you’ll slip into her grasp forever.* Clostermann watched Aaron weigh his options, eyes flashing with intent, yet he looked away, the burning wings dousing themselves silently until the pearly sheen returned.

Before either could say anything, Minna’s voice crackled over their ear communicators, “Phase one over, report to the hanger. Time will start to accrue now.” Both dived straight down towards the earth, Aaron maintaining his distance. He checked his ammo count and was pleased. *Less waste is good waste. How much does she have? Down and down they descended through the mid afternoon sun, the clouds of their fallen prey dissipating into nothingness. His thoughts faded as well as Perrine dove down and through the hanger roof, landing softly on the dais. Aaron looped around the landing zone, veering towards the lockers and settled down, retracting his wings. Surrounding the pad was the entire squadron, some of them clapping in approval of what the pair accomplished up above. Minna was one of them, though her applause was overshadowed by the intense stares she gave them upon entering the facility. Aaron groaned internally. *She was probably listening in.* “Splendid flying
you two,” she commended, nodding in approval, “risky, but you completed the objective. Have to say Sergeant Divale, you are quite the gentleman having the Lieutenant Clostermann enter first.”

Aaron spotted Lynette holding a small metal tray with a cup of freshly brewed tea, a bowl of sugar, and a three inch high porcelain pitcher of cream atop a lace doily, walking towards him. He took a deep whiff and smiled. *Earl Grey again. Not a bad choice.* Perrine went straight over to a chair and opened one of her breast pockets, pulling out a foil wrapper. She opened it, revealing what it was, a thick piece of dried beef from breakfast, and bit down, taking a huge chuck of it. “Well you know what they say commander,” Aaron began, walking to Lynette and taking the cup of tea, “age before beauty and all that.” Minna stifled a sharp intake of breath at such a spiteful statement, looking over at Perrine, who predictably shot Aaron a venomous glare from across the room. Wilcke tilted her head and gave him a stare of her own, the kind that advertised, ‘don’t push it or I’ll push you’. Spotting his faux pas and not wishing to be reduced to a tongue tied dolt like he did when Minna first gave him his comeuppance, Divale hurriedly added, “Though I might be wrong about that.” He downed the cup of tea faster than you could say knife, and placed it back on the tray. “So do you want to take command of the ground phase as well Lieutenant?” he asked, turning to face Perrine.

“I was expecting you to take the reins for that phase.” Perrine replied, still smarting from the remark earlier.

*My God, she’s actually letting me order her around. This is priceless.* “Alright then, how much experience do you have in engaging ground targets?” he asked.

“Not a lot,” Clostermann admitted, “maybe some strafing runs in passing.”

Aaron stared at her blankly for few seconds, eyes rolling in the back of his head in aneurism inducing despair. *Are you fucking kidding me right now? Out of all the squadrons that I’ve could’ve went to on this side of the Atlantic, I had to be placed in this one and assigned to the one fucking pilot who’s a wet behind the ears FNG who wouldn’t know a foxhole from her asshole. Fuck. My. Life. Is there a chalkboard anywhere?” Aaron asked aloud.

“Right here,” Gertrude called out, one arm grabbing the movable chalkboard against the wall and the other pressing a gargantuan ice pack on the outside of her womanhood. She slid it across the room with a flick of her arm, the wheels rolling like die from a gambler’s hand. Aaron stood still as the entire apparatus came to a rolling stop next to him.

“Thank you Captain Barkhorn.” he acknowledged, picking up the piece of chalk on the recessed tray and starting to write away. “What’s your ammo count?” he asked Perrine without looking at her.

“Three quarters down.” Perrine admitted again, cursing herself. *I was too gung ho with my shooting. Wasted too much.*

“Not anymore.” Aaron replied, unhooking one of the duffel bags that he had pinned to him. When he unsecured it, he laid it on the ground and pushed it towards her with a slight kick of his left foot. “Merry Christmas.” he added.

Perrine watched the bag slide across the concrete floor and come to a rest near her chair. Curious, she opened it and her eyes bugged out in surprise. Inside was Bren ammo, at least fifteen spare clips worth. Without so much as a thank you, she started pocketing the presents, fitting them anywhere where there was space. “How about you?” she asked, frantically stuffing her pockets.

“Well over a thousand rounds for my machine gun, twenty five shells for the shotgun, seven pistol clips, and seven grenades.” Aaron answered, still drawing away. “I’m A-ok.” He placed the chalk down and motioned for her to come stand next to him. “I don’t like raising my voice and I’m not in
Perrine reluctantly got up and walked over, standing to right of Aaron. She regarded the chalkboard and was amazed by what was there. Arranged from left to right were three different and highly detailed illustrations of three Neuroi types, complete with firing arcs and side views. “I have no idea how much intelligence you have regarding these enemy types or how up to date it is, so I’m giving you my version.” he explained and pointed to the figure in the far left of the board. “This is what I call a Legionary. These are the rank and file of the Neuroi ground forces. They’re bipedal, stand about as tall as Shirley in Strikers, and possess two forward mounted beamers in the arms. These weapons don’t do a lot of good against tanks and such, but they shred unarmored targets with ease, and that includes us. Their game is to get in close, soaking up fire along the way, while laying down suppressive fire of their own, and keeping you pinned down until they roll over you, or their buddies flank you. Never get into a shooting match with these guys at all, period. Keep moving, because although their agility leaves something to be desired, they adapt very well to changing circumstances. Unlike most Neuroi however, the Legionary has a flaw; they contain two separate cores, one in the chest and the other in the head. Hit either and you will bring it down. During my time in France, they have developed a new variant, one with a heavier armored chest, protecting the core there. The head is still a major weak point, so if you’re accurate, take your shots and go.”

“If we have the element of surprise, can we bring them down quickly?” Perrine asked, strangely polite.

“Yes we can, especially if they offer us their backs as they’re not as well armored there either, yet remember what I said, take your shots and go.” Aaron answered and moved his hand over to the figure in the middle. “These are called Strategos and like their name implies, they help coordinate Neuroi ground assaults with an acumen that would make those that come out of West Point look like grade schoolers. They’re as big as the side of a barn and thus have a lot of blind spots, relying a great deal on support for reconnaissance. However, they are not defenseless as they sport two side mounted guns, a large anti vehicle cannon on the top, and a rapid firing beamer in the front. They like to engage from a distance, but it’s not unheard of to see them roll up and fire point blank range at strongpoints like reinforced pillboxes, or even straddle a trench line and fire off their side armaments at infantry. Many variations exist but each have a common weakness, the lower glacis. The armor there is thin and they know it and like to park in spots that offer the best protection for it. If you have a shot, take it. When these beasts are on the field they are priority number one.”

“If there is a way to hit them if we don’t have a kill shot?” Perrine inquired.

“If you have elevation on your side,” Aaron explained calmly, “hit right on top of the main cannon. Their energy reserves are fairly close to the surface. It will trigger a large explosion that will cause them to pull back. In some cases, the detonation will crack the core.” He then moved to the last figure in the far right. “Last, but not least, is the Cataphract, a six legged construct that was developed within the last year or so of the Neuroi invasion. They’re not as well armored as their bulkier cousins, but what they lack in protection they more than make up in speed. I’ve seen these thing run down Hellcats. They like hanging back until a gap in the line is opened and they storm right in causing complete havoc at and behind the lines. The head contains the core, but it is sharply angled. You’ll waste too much ammo going that route. A good tip is to use explosive weaponry against them, and if you don’t have that, aim for the legs to bring them to a halt so you can line up the shot. Any questions Lieutenant?”

Perrine looked over the chalk drawn figures and nodded slowly, combining the information on the chalkboard with what Aaron said in her mind. *Pretty straight forward. Doesn’t waste any time.*

“None.” she replied. “Covered all of it.”
Aaron turned to Minna and asked, “How much time do we have left?”

Minna looked at her timepiece and answered, “Little over five minutes.”

“Excellent,” Aaron remarked, shouldering his machine gun, “that should give us plenty of time to scout defensible positions.” He swung around while walking out the front door to the hanger, “Let’s go.”

Perrine turned in place, not budging an inch. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” she queried, clearly indicating that she wished to be addressed by her rank.

Aaron opened the door, letting the afternoon March air inside the hanger, before turning his head and restating, “Let’s go, now.” He then walked out of the hanger and into the outside world. Perrine fumed as she picked up her Bren and stomped out, the squadron members parting this way and that.

“I’m going to kill that son of a bitch if he doesn’t address me by my rank. He may have command, but that doesn’t give him the right to ignore regulations. Protocol will be obeyed. She walked outside into the sunlight, and came face to face with a dike made of earth roughly twenty feet high, a line of footprints going up it. Grunting, she trudged up the embankment, muttering under her breath.

As soon as this is all over I’m giving that warlock a piece of my mind and I hope he chokes on it. With a lunging step, she reached the top and she looked for him, only to find a devastated cityscape. It was a major metropolitan area, a cultural center, a major hub of military communication, obliterated beyond all comprehension. For kilometers in either direction, destruction was evident. Tall buildings were hollowed out, like the spent exoskeletons of insects and spiders, windows blown out, the blackened char of fire along the frames looking like eyeliner that had been caught in rain, streaming down in long dark lines. Rubble and debris lined the bases of these silent guardians, streets and avenues, pockmarked with craters, their interiors glassed by enemy beam fire. Slagged vehicles and their rusted parts were strewn about, some of them containing a skull, or the burn outlines of what was a once whole person that used to be a person that was unlucky enough to be struck full on by a heavy Neuroi shot. Nature, now with nothing to hold her back, reclaimed sectors with ivy fronds atop roofs and alongside walls, in some cases, covering the entire structure in vibrant green. Flowers grew out of ruptures in sidewalks and broken water mains. In the air was a rank odor, clear indicators of exposed sewer lines. Nothing stirred here. This place was a tomb. Amidst the ruins, Perrine spotted Aaron, looking at a ruined pillar of some sort, turning over bits and pieces of stones with his hands and feet.

She walked to his position and was about to say something, but was caught short when she saw that Aaron had tears in his eyes, saline orbs dripping down from his face and hitting the parched ground. A bright light and an explosion deafens hearing for several seconds. Heat and searing pain lance over and through an unseen body. Breathing is hard and ragged, fluid ejecting out of a mouth, tasting like hot sand. It is blood and lots of it. Realization comes: wounded. Gaze looks down, and spots a screwdriver, the head poking out of the side up near the left lung. Collapse of the organ is imminent. Breathing slows and a voice calls out, “Medic!” Vision reacquaints with the immediate surroundings. The interior is that of a factory, long assembly lines that stretched for well over three hundred feet, incomplete chasses of tanks and heavy vehicles in various states of fabrication. The explosion took place on the far right, fuel stores that had the unfortunate circumstance of being too close to a Neuroi beam, catching and propelling a nearby workbench, the length of a five dinner tables, and all of its contents in it’s angry wake. Fire rages inside, flames quickly surrounding the unseen figure. Blood loss is having an effect and the muscles start to lock, lacking the vital essence to move properly. Suddenly, a violent groaning of metal is heard from above. Gaze goes up and spies a tank turret, suspended by heavy chains, the detonation offsetting the stability of the part. It rocks back and forth like a cathedral bell at mass, it’s moorings grinding against the frame. Nothing can be done as the chains snap and the object of doom descends down. Before it strikes, the world is jarred. Unseen hands push one out of the way with force screaming “No!”
“The Plague Column.” Aaron uttered, tossing a stone in his hand away to the disfigured base. He wiped the tears away with his sleeve and regarded Perrine, caught flatfooted at the sight of him weeping. “Have you ever been to Vienna Lieutenant?” he asked, his voice overcome with sadness.

“No, I can’t say I have.” Clostermann answered.

So this is Vienna, or was. Wait a minute, if he’s saying that this is Vienna. “Hold on,” she asked with a start, “you were at Vienna?”

Aaron nodded while looking at his cracked timepiece. He gestured for her to follow him and the two walked off at the quick step into the ruins. “I was.” he answered after wheeling around the bend down an alleyway, “I’ve seen many cities in my time. Leningrad, Warsaw, Athens, Budapest, Marseilles, Lyon, Nice, Bordeaux, Paris, Berlin, just to name a few of the marvelous beacons of culture and history, laid to waste by this war. None of them, in my opinion, could hold a candle to the beauty that was Vienna. The center of the old Holy Roman Empire, the birthplace of the Hapsburg dynasty, it’s destruction hurt me in ways you can’t even imagine. Every blown out building a shot in the back, every toppled monument a knife in the gut. I grieved long after the ashes of the city fell like black rain from the heavens, as if the angels themselves wept at such a crime against the world.”

“If that is the case,” Perrine theorized, not caring a wit about Aaron’s past feelings, “then you know this city pretty well.”

“Like the back of my hand.” Aaron answered, the melancholy in his voice replaced with determined resolve. The duo walked into the middle of an intersection, a line of destroyed tanks forming a barricade on three sides, overshadowed by a brick building, the closest wall covered with ivy. He pointed at the debris and ordered, “Get entrenched at an angle, covering the west and north avenues. I’ll look over the east and our route of egress. See anything coming down, tell me.”

That’s it. “You know,” Perrine reminded, “I’m not some NCO here. I have a rank that I earned through service to my country and I demand you show me proper respect.”

Aaron’s eyes bulged out of his skull in shock. “Are we really having this conversation right now? You’ve got to be kidding me. We don’t have time for this.” Perrine merely crossed her arms, not budging an inch, and Divale lost it, face exploding in rage, and he charged at her, cocking his right arm back, fist balled up. It was at this point that the normally antagonistic Clostermann, who could count on being protected from on high, lost her nerve and backed away in fright at the warlock barreling towards her with bad intentions. They can’t see me, and I can’t yell for help in time. She backed up into one of the tank wrecks and froze as Aaron’s arm went forward, hand denting the thick rusty plates with ease, mere millimeters from her head. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re trying to prove to me bitch, but let’s call a spade a spade here when I say, I don’t give a fuck about your rank or anyone else’s.” Aaron retorted, glowering at Perrine. He pointed to the sky and growled, “Up there, you are the boss and I will regard you as such, but right now, you’re not up there, you are down here. This is my domain, my house, and my command, which means I can say to you whatever I fucking damn well please. Now, get your ass into the position that I need you in so we can get out of this place smelling like your rose perfume.” He turned for a split second to regard his timepiece and rounded on her, screaming, “Do you understand?!?”

“Yes!” Perrine yelled back sliding down the tank chassis, arms outstretched to protect herself, trying to back away from him as fast as possible. She was absolutely terrified of him now and her eyes showed it, ones once so full of defiance now overflowing with dread.

Without speaking, Aaron pointed with his left hand and Clostermann gathered her wits and ran off with the speed of a scared leopard. Keep pushing my buttons woman and see what happens. Aaron wedged into a tank wreck, using the drivers slit to keep a lookout. He stewed in the cramped interior
for a few seconds before noticing that his communicator was blurtng static at odd intervals. He nodded in understanding. Someone’s listening in and I have a good clue as to who it is. He toggled the dial from seven to two and said softly, “If I didn’t know any better Major Sakamoto, I’d say that someone’s cheating.”

Silence ensued and the static stopped. “It’s only as a precaution Sergeant.” Mio explained. “Even though we are well over three miles above you, we don’t have effective line of sight to you. If something were to go wrong, we need to listen in on your conversations. No one is going to cheat you out of victory.”

“I take it you heard what happened down here not too long ago?” Aaron asked, knowing what the answer will be.

“Yes and saw.” Mio answered with anger in her voice, “To say that Commander Wilcke or I weren’t too pleased with what you did was an understatement. When this exercise is over, you are going to have some explaining to do.”

“It’s my command and she was jeopardizing the mission by disobeying direct orders, not much to explain there.” Aaron informed. “I’ve seen people get shot for less.”

“While true, you could’ve handled it a lot better.” Mio replied. “There’s no need to get violent over a simple training mission. You’re fifteen seconds out. Good luck.”

Aaron cut the comms and went back to Perrine’s frequency. He shouldered his machine gun and rocked back and forth on the balls of his heels. Alright Aaron, this is it, Vienna part two. You know the streets and buildings, that will give us an advantage. However, you have an unruly variable, one that would certainly put a bullet in the back of your head than execute your commands. The enemy will come towards the north, the east is too near the ingress for a flanking maneuver. Such a move wouldn’t be fair, but keep your eyes peeled in case you’re wrong. Manage your ammo count and keep her within arms reach at all times. Don’t make the same mistake twice. “Exercise commencing in five, four, three, two, one. Live fire exercise initiated. All observers are to practice due caution.” Minna’s voice rang over the channel. Aaron closed his eyes and smiled. Bring it on.

Mio looked down at the city below, keeping a close eye on the duo’s last known position. The rest of the squadron was there, hovering around her like a jury waiting to deliver a verdict. “Start to spread out.” she ordered. “Make sure there is overlap and stay above the three mile mark. Dismissed.” All the pilots saluted and flew off in multiple directions going off in pairs. Soon, all that was left was herself and Commander Wilcke who put her right hand to her chin in thought. Well entrenched position. Will advance a flanking force from the west and engage. Try to get them pinned long enough to swoop in from the north. Streets are too narrow for the big guns, so we’ll have to settle for the small fry. As she came to her decision, she waved her hands near the edge of the playing field, the action summoning a pair of Strategos and a full platoon of Legionaries marching in unison towards the barricade. “I see you’re not taking it easy on them.” Mio observed.

“Would you?” Minna politely countered. “Even though they were separated from each other, they still managed to eke out a victory. They seem to be working well, despite being lone wolves.”

Mio thought about what Minna said and remarked, “I personally chalk that up to luck. Their communication was horrendous and could definitely use some work.” She bristled upon remembering the way Aaron confronted Perrine, throwing a punch that could’ve killed her. “If that blow came any closer I would’ve-”
“As would I,” Minna assured, interrupting Major Sakamoto. “I will have them resolve their differences one way or the other. You can count on that.”

Suddenly, three of the tanks from the back of the barricade were flung into the air by an unseen force. With little wiggle room, the Neuroi couldn’t dodge effectively. They brought the Strategos to a halt, out of the danger zone, priming their cannons. The Legionaries who took crushing losses as the debris slammed into their ranks, wiping out huge gaps, those unfortunate souls reduced to grainy white smears. The enemy armor opened up, the freem of their cannons slagging the hulks into molten metal or pressing them away so that they could advance once again. Gunfire came from the barricade, a Bren opened up, targeting the Legionaries who survived. Several went down and the rest advanced firing their beamers. The rear elements moved up, pushing a partially slagged tank into the side of a small house with a bone jarring crunch, brickwork and wooden walls falling down like cut down scarecrows. Minna then heard Divale’s voice utter one word, “Arbitrium.”

Out of the virtually destroyed vehicle, Aaron rammed his hand through the metal of the turret ring and grabbed one of the Strategos’ side mounted guns. Minna watched spellbound and shocked as his left hand went into the Neuroi weapon like a hand through water and ripped it away, the cannon now fully affixed to his arm and priming a shot. The Neuroi cried out in pain, a shrill discharge of sound that grated the senses. Aaron’s new toy whined to full power and let loose a shot of energy that slammed into the side of the Strategos and out the other, striking the building on the far side, disintegrating one of the walls in a shower of stone fragments. The rest of Aaron emerged, the tank armor coming away like streamers at a New Years party, wings shining bright yellow, screaming a warcry that caused the rest of the living enemy units to stop in their tracks and regard this new threat that sprung out from their exposed rear. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Neuroi were momentarily at a loss, a lapse in judgment that cost them dearly as more shots rang out from the defenses, cutting down more Legionaries. The surviving Strategos angled itself in the middle of the road, weapons ready to fire and aiming at the rapidly advancing Aaron who was taking pot shots with his machine gun with his free hand, shells burrowing into Legionaries that tried to vault over debris piles and dig in. The Strategos fired a shot from it’s main cannon. Aaron flapped his wings and jumped to the right side of the street, the beam whizzing past him. He rammed his right wing into the building side, expanded the tips and curling them like hooks, creating a means to secure himself. Rather than stay put, Aaron continued to run along the length of the wall, gouging out a long line into the sun dried bricks as he rain downed death from his machine gun. Legionaries opened fire on his position, but nothing got through his left wing that he placed in front of him like a tower shield. His shots fouled up the side gun and it exploded into shards of white. The charging cannon on his arm lashed out once more, striking the ground near the front of the Strategos, causing it to dip into a massive crater of vitrified earth. Suddenly helpless, it tried to extricate itself, but Perrine shots struck the lower glacis plate and the Neuroi exploded, the shockwave wiping out a post office nearby and rupturing a still pressurized water line, liquid gushing up and bathing the landscape. Aaron got down from his perch and landed next to a Legionary who whipped around, firing its guns. He backhanded the closest beamer away and shoved the cannon arm deep into it’s chest and retracted his arm, sans the cannon, and kicked the hapless enemy into a group of survivors. The cannon cracked under the overpressure and exploded, taking the whole kit and caboodle out. All firing ceased, the patter of water striking land and building the only sounds that one could hear.

“We have company!” Perrine rang out, breaking the silence. “Another group coming from the north!” Aaron ran towards the barricade and pushed a tank out of the way, revealing Clostermann who was loading another clip.

“If we run fast enough we can make a trench line near here that will get us into a bunker complex. Move out!” Aaron ordered.
Perrine breathed heavily while running right behind Aaron as he vaulted over a low lying picket fence, boots hitting the ground, kicking up dust and pebbles, as he motioned for them to come to a halt inside the blown out window display of a storefront. *Fuck he’s fast.* Behind them in the distance, she could pick up the sounds of debris piles being run through by Strategos and random beam fire from Legionaries, bracketing possible ambush points with concentrated firepower. Aaron got to the storefront first, the remains of a candy store with overturned display cases, rotten confectionary wrappers littering the streets, blowing in the wind. A sign lay off in the corner, the writing grimy and smudged by the elements to the point of illegibility. Twinkling glass looked like dew in the sunlight, crushed to slivers by Aaron’s boots as he leapt into the store proper. After checking his corners, he waved her forwards, to come closer to his position. Perrine ran out across the street, scanning to and fro for targets. Thankfully, they were clear and, instead of going through the window, she went through the front door, triggering a nod from Aaron, the kind that screamed, ‘ok maybe I should’ve looked to see if the front door was open’. He then gestured to his eyes with two fingers and then pointed up to the sky. *Any flyers?* Perrine looked up and around, seeing nothing but blue. She shook her head and Aaron took out his ear communicator and encouraged her to do the same with an intense look.

After doing so, he explained, “As must as I believe that this is for our own good, I can’t help but feel that we are going to get screwed if they can listen in on our communications.” He walked over to a side door behind the check out counter, the wood dusty and rotted to the foundations, and kicked it in, the planks giving away easily, tumbling down a flight of wooden stairs. Aaron produced a flashlight and turned it on, the beam revealing around fifteen wooden steps leading down into a earthen basement with cement flooring, and ventured down.

“Where are we going?” Perrine hissed as she followed behind him, craning her neck to get a glimpse of what laid beyond his frame. “I thought you said we were going to go to a trench line.”

“We are,” Aaron answered, sidestepping the ruined door, directing his gaze to a corner of the room, “but not at that particular point. I said that to throw them off.” Getting his bearings, he walked to the far left corner where a large trunk sat, a large iron lock prohibiting access. Perrine watched him grab the lock and give it a sharp twist, breaking the mechanism with ease. Throwing the ruined security device over his head like refuse, Aaron opened the chest. Instead of tools, clothing, or spare merchandise to stock the shelves upstairs with, there was a large manhole cover with a rotating handle like those found on naval vessels.

“A secret entranceway to the trench network.” Perrine breathed, realizing what she was seeing.

“Indeed Lieutenant.” Aaron agreed, turning off the flashlight and giving it to her. Perrine took it and he grabbed the wheel, wrenching hard to left. The sound of grating metal was loud, every revolution getting worse and worse. “Before the attack, the Austrian government had secret entranceways constructed in central locations for egress and ingress if certain points ever came under fire or occupation. Very noble in principle, but unfortunately, civilians got wind of their existence and tried to use them to escape while the Neuroi attacked. Created a lot of friendly fire accidents and congested the whole network. Lots of people died from being buried alive when the Neuroi decided to collapse the tunnels rather than fight through them. Ugly mess.” Finally, the wheel stopped turning and Aaron popped the cover open. “In you go, I’ll watch your six. Take the right tunnel.”

Perrine flicked on the flashlight and pointed down, the ray of light showing an earthen tunnel that went left and right. It wasn’t that much of a drop, maybe six feet at the most, so she got on top of the chest and shimied her way through the porthole, landing with a soft crump on the ground. She quickly looked back and forth, seeing nothing but darkness in either direction. Crawling forwards down the right tunnel, she called out “Clear.”
A split second later, Aaron plopped down behind her and pulled the portal shut with a clang. Then he placed his hand to the metal and uttered, “Sigillum.” A faint red rune appeared on the metal and faded away.

“What was that?” Perrine asked, wariness evident in her voice.

“It’s a mark of sealing.” Aaron explained, trying to adjust to the confined space with great difficulty. “Helps keep the bad guys out. Proceed.” Perrine turned away and crouched down to her belly, crawling along the soil slowly. The tunnel was narrow and shoddy, clear indication that his was a rushed job. Looking behind her, she saw Aaron on his back, legs extended to either side of him, pushing himself forward along the tunnel floor, clasping his machine gun in his hands, head sometimes grazing the ceiling, covering his face with a deep brown tint. Like that monster, not so proud now are we?

She grew a bit uncomfortable with him being behind her, head along the ground, mere feet away from her rump and she warned, “Don’t get any ideas back there.”

Aaron glared at her and stated, “While my tastes do run into women of some refinement, I have much more pressing matters to devote my attention to right now.”

“I don’t trust you at all.” Perrine retorted, not accepting his answer one bit.

“Likewise.” Aaron countered. “Do you see a fork in the tunnel yet? If you do, head left and keep straight.

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Minna furrowed her brow as she looked to and fro along the trench line, getting a sinking suspicion that she had been duped. Doesn’t trust me to keep my word does he? Guess it serves me right for taking that fact for granted. But now the question is, where the fuck did he go? “Mio, do you see them anywhere along this side?” she asked.

Mio flipped up her eye patch and activated her third eye, peering into every shadowed crevasse that could hide as much as a baby rat. After a few seconds of searching, she shook her head no. “I personally think they pulled their comms.” she added, thinking about the situation. “Told us he was going left when he was planning to go right all along.”

A Kansas City shuffle; make everyone look left while you go right. Great misdirection play. Minna waved her hands again over the city and swerved her arm to the right in a sweeping motion, fingers splayed out. Full column sweep, penetration in echelon along that line. They can’t defend the whole thing. I’ll pressure them to move and force them into a dead end.

Mio looked down the way to the right and caught a brief glimpse of movement. She hovered higher and stared intently at the surrounding area. Sure enough, the twin figures of Aaron Divale and Perrine Clostermann could be seen, navigating a trench line with urgency. You better run you two. The commander doesn’t like being taken for a fool.

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Aaron took a gander over the lip of the trench wall with a small hop while running down the length of the fortification. He could see nothing, but he knew that deep down, he will soon. The commander’s no fool. Once she realizes that she’s been had, all hell is going to break loose. We need to find a spot where we can do as much damage as we can. Then, he saw what he was looking for, a mortar pit with several ruined weapon emplacements, the tubes rusted beyond repair. The sand
bags were torn, leaking sand like blood from a ruptured artery. Several boxes of mortar rounds lay unopened and Aaron skidded to a halt to get a peek inside them. Perrine saw what he was doing and asked, “What’s the point? We don’t have anything to fire them with.”

He cracked open the first of two boxes and found several fist thick shells, all in decent condition. Aw yeah. Now we’re cooking with gas. “These rounds are activated when the bottoms strike a hard surface.” he explained, going to the other box and opening it. “See if you can find rip off a metal base plate from one of those. We can use them as extra strength grenades when the enemy arrives.” Aaron smiled as he found still more mortar rounds and dragged the box to the other one. Perrine, for her part, ran to one of the mortars and snapped off the base plate of one with the butt of her Bren, the metal giving away easily. She tossed it over to him and turned to the right, slightly further down the trench line for about twenty feet, and spied a MG 34 with a full belt of shells still loaded.

“This will help,” she exclaimed, running over to the weapon. She tried to pick it up, but the rear end simply came off, the victim of battle damage. The firing assembly is still in one piece. With care, she carried the gun back to the motor pit as Aaron lined the shells near the base plate, tucked in right against the trench wall so that a stray shell or beam wouldn’t set them off.

“Nice work,” he acknowledged, setting up his machine gun. He turned to Perrine who laid on her stomach, her top half barely cresting the tip of the trench and deployed her Bren and the MG 34, holding them both in either hand. “Can you handle two at once?” he asked with concern.

Perrine glared at him and was about to come back at him, but a building fell in the not so distant distance in front of their position and the pair hunkered down. Out of the red and white cloud came one, two, now three groups each containing three Strategos and fifteen Legionaries, a grand total of nine and forty five respectively, fifty four bogeys smack dab in front of three machine guns. “They don’t know we’re here at all.” Perrine gloated. “We’ll annihilate them.” Aaron was going to say something further, but his words were drowned out by the simultaneous firing of both machine guns, the recoil driving the weapons deeper into the ground like saws into a log. Fucking damn it! He had wanted to wait until they got closer, to maximize the ammunition usage and create a more effective killing zone, but Divale realized that the situation had advanced without him. He was now committed to action. Angling his wings, he managed to create two mantlets, protecting him and Perrine, though in her case, he had to curve a little in order to not obstruct her field of fire. He opened up and slammed the first mortar shell onto the plate, the butt eliciting a tinny tonek. Setting his sights on a group of Legionaries, he lobbed the shell in a high arc. It flew through the air and landed in between them, detonating upon impact, the shrapnel and concussive blast ripping them into chucks, spilling white shards.

Perrine was right, the enemy did not expect them here and they incurred losses at a staggering rate. Within the opening seconds, fourteen casualties were sustained, with four being Strategos, resulting in a huge decrease in offensive firepower. However, they reacted quickly and moved in, Legionaries advanced under fire, holding position as those in the rear moved ahead, firing their beamers. The Strategos angled their armor and parked near small bumps and depressions, protecting their lower glacis, firing their side and top mounted cannons quickly. A full charge wasn’t necessary at this range in order to kill their targets. Aaron’s wings took a beating from hits, the beams deflecting into buildings behind them, the sky, or directly back into the fray, with one striking the primary cannon of another Strategos, removing it from the field in a spray of white. The impacts jarred his body considerably and he struggled to maintain balance while reloading and lobbing primed mortar shells. Perrine wasn’t doing too well either as the fight went on, the recoil from both machine guns throwing off her aim. Most of the shells didn’t connect and the low magazine capacity of the Bren hampered her more than it helped. It wasn’t long before the MG 34 ran dry and she struggled to reload the Bren. Dirt and debris had gotten into the firing mechanism and she took out a hankerchief from one of her breast pockets and tried to clean it out.
With Perrine out of the fight for now, Aaron cast his last mortar round at a Strategos at an angle, watching it barely crest over the rubble pile it was hiding behind, the resulting explosion rocking it backwards so violently, it flipped end over end. He brought his spare wing to him, adding an additional layer of much needed protection, as he reloaded his machine gun. *We can’t keep this up for much longer, we have to get out of here before they flank us.* He let loose a stream of bullets and yelled, “Lieutenant, get that jam sorted out and get behind me. We’re moving out!”

“What do you mean?!” Perrine screamed back over the beam fire and explosions. “We can still win this! We’re not done yet!”

Another Strategos shot nailed Aaron dead center and caught him flatfooted, the impact force sending him back into the opposite end of the trench wall hard. He fell off to the side just in time as another shot oblitered the spot he was in sending him cart wheeling through the air further down the right side of the trench line. Time seemed to slow as his body tumbled and spun. Perrine couldn’t move. *No! No! He goes down I lose! I will not lose this exercise because of his weakness!* She unholstered her MAS and popped up to the lip of the trench wall, firing off a full clip into a quartet of approaching Legionaries looking to exploit the breach. All fell quickly and Perrine ran low and hard to Aaron who was pushing himself back up with difficulty, the wind clearly knocked out of him. “On your feet Sergeant Divale! Move it!” she called out over the din, clapping her hand to his wide back and gripping his shirt hard. With all the strength she could muster, she helped him to his feet and the pair ran down the trench line. The pair of remaining Strategos moved up, with one of them straddling the trench line and priming the main cannon.

“Left, then right!” Aaron cried, regaining his senses and breath. The two managed to turn the corner before the Strategos fired, a fully charged lance of energy that took out a full chuck of trench and the surrounding terrain with it. Perrine saw the path that need to take through the smoke and flying debris and proceeded to go down it, her grip on Aaron gone for the sake of speed. A harsh pull of a slide caused her to turn around and freeze. Aaron was standing there, just standing there, and facing the opposite direction.

“What the hell are you doing sargeant! Come on!” Perrine yelled, the sounds of the enemy armor crushing debris into dust not too far away.

Aaron waved her off. “We have to split up in order to get breathing room and regroup. I’ll hold them off. If you continue down that path, you’ll come to an open blockhouse, another entry into the tunnel network is under a large desk. Inside, you will go right and stay to the right for five junctions before coming to a door. You’ll pop up inside an aircraft factory with multiple floors. Wait for me there and get your comms back in. Now move Lieutenant, move!”

Perrine didn’t waste time and ran like the wind, her Bren still jammed and her MAS out of bullets. Not wasting time to reload, she sped down the trench line and saw the blockhouse, blowing past the open entrance like a sprinter. Inside, the structure was a mess, disheveled, but the desk was there, and the door leading into the tunnels under it. As she grabbed the wheel and turned it, she cursed inwardly. *Don’t you die on me Sergeant Divale, or you’ll have me to deal with when you come to.*

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Building after building crumbled under the continuous cannon fire from the Strategos, bathing the area in a dense pink fog of stone and brick dust. Minna directed the carnage, wiping out anything taller than walking stick height. *I’ll leave them with nowhere to hide and obscure their vision. Neuroi can see through such minor impediments.* She moved her hands this way and that, combining what remained of her forces, and advanced through the city as one unit. Recalling what Aaron did at the beginning at the barricade, Wilcke positioned her units so as to cover all avenues of possible attack.
The wind picked up, a southern breeze that waved her hair gently. Excellent, that will… The thought went to the back burner as Minna looked down, her brow furrowed in puzzlement, for the dust cloud was still hovering over her detachment and almost moving along with it. “Mio?” she asked concernedly, “Is Sergeant Divale anywhere near there?”

Mio craned her neck and flipped up her eye patch. It didn’t take her long to locate Aaron, stomping off in the direction of danger. She nodded yes before both their ear communicators crackled to life for the first time in almost nine minutes. “Alright you bastards,” Aaron cackled, “Time to die!” Sharp tinny clicks registered over the frequency, sounds that both officers knew well: the pulling of grenade pins. Suddenly, within the mists, the light from a pair of golden wings could be seen, piercing the veil like the rays from a lighthouse. Minna smiled. There you are. The grenades went off, the death cries of the Neuroi reaching far and wide, the blasts creating holes in the fog or war, revealing the unseen. Aaron was running full tilt at the closest Strategos with his shotgun, pumping shot after shot into two Legionaries who were blown backwards by the impacts. The side cannon whined as it charged, but before it could fire, Divale cart wheeled up and over the side of the Neuroi, his wings carving into the main cannon’s turret ring. The Strategos, the last one in the group, went up, the blast causing Aaron to fly into and through a window of a building that was easily twenty five feet away, shattering the glass like weak eggs. He rode the momentum and forward rolled along the floor, bits of window pane embedding themselves into his back. Grimacing in pain, he rounded a corner and came face to face with some Legionaries that looked to trap him. They fired first, but Aaron was quicker. Eschewing the steps, he slide down the wooden banister, and slam fired his Ithaca. The first two went down, but the third sidestepped, trying to avoid the buckshot. It was partially successful, but threw the aim of it’s shots, burning ceiling tiles off in sheets. Adjustment would come too late as Divale lunged forwards, using his now empty shotgun as a club, and brought it down, handle first, into the head of the Legionary, stamping it down until it became one with its stomach, if it had one, and kicked it in the midsection, sending it out the door and into the street from whence it came.

Taking shelter behind the wall, he holstered his shotgun and whipped out his two pistols, cocking the hammers fully back. Aaron took a deep breath and ran out the door, his wings positioned in front of him. They were waiting for him, behind bits and pieces of rubble, standing crouched, or on their bellies, and opened fire. What occurred next was something that neither Minna or Mio saw before and likely would never again as Aaron, proceeded to weave through the dazzlingly lightshow, dancing like a whirling dervish, squeezing off shots with deadly accuracy. Every shot was a kill shot as beams crisscrossed the air so often and thick that not even a double jointed mosquito had a snowball’s chance in Hell of getting through. Minna hovered there, three miles up, mouth agape. What am I seeing? Mio, normally reserved, couldn’t help by clap in approval of such tactics, though she doubted they could work again outside of training. As the last of the Legionaries tried to pivot in position to get off another shot, Aaron kneed it in the gut, grabbed its tubular head, and rammed it so hard into a nearby brick wall, that the Neuroi was embedded up to the sterum. It jerked spasmodically as death set in and melted away into white shards, limp arms falling to the side. Minna then saw Aaron look up at the two of them and winked, before running off into the center of the city. Oh no he didn’t. You’re dead, you’re fucking dead.

Mio turned to face Minna who was rapidly pointing at numerous points throughout the city with a fury that made the most zealot preacher look tame by comparison. “Commander,” she began politely, “I believe that is against the rules.”

“I’m not breaking any rules,” Minna replied harshly, “merely altering the dynamics of the playing field. It’s time to take this game to the next level.”

Perrine strained against the wheel lock for the seventh time and gritted her teeth as she swung her
body to the left. The rusty wheel finally gave and she stumbled into the earthen wall of the tunnel. Finally! Swinging it all the way to the left, she grabbed her Bren, now cleaned of the filth and fully loaded, and kicked it in the middle with her left Striker. It flew open with a clang and slammed into the stone behind the frame. She ran out and found herself in the rear clockout area of an aircraft factory, broken lines containing tools and aircraft pieces, pulleys lying dormant. On the ceiling, huge fuselages were suspended on chains like bound prisoners, swinging absent with the winds whistling through the multitudes of broken windows, sunlight bathing the area with a glow. A series of explosions drew her attention to a nearby wall to the right. She ran to a small portion that was broken down, sections of brick looking like cell peepholes. Clostermann gazed out into the world and saw a host of those six legged Cataphracts moving with haste down towards an intersection, cannons firing beams at a quick moving figure that was shrouded by distance and dust, the bark of machine gun fire answering the aggressors own. Sargeant Divale you stupid bastard! She tapped the stud on her communicator and asked, “Sargeant, can you hear me?” The moment the stud was released, heavy weapons fire could be heard on the line, along with the crump of explosions and the shrill freem of Neuroi beams.

“You have the most inopportune timing of anyone that I’ve ever met when it comes to contacting me Lieutenant Clostermann.” he replied, breathing heavy. “You in the factory?”

“Yes,” she answered, a bit miffed, “and I’m going to give you some covering fire.” Perrine shouldered her Bren and pulled the bolt back. “Get to the middle of the intersection so I can get some shots downwind.”

“Ok, moving now.” Aaron stated. Perrine aimed her machine gun. The traffic stop was clear of any major obstacles and, as if on cue, Aaron ran out into the coverless area and whipped around, popping off a few shots before, diving into a sinkhole. The move saved his life as dual beams lanced through the air and turned a nearby troop transport into a ball of fire and shrapnel. The shooter made its way through the smoke and fire, a Cataphract, as big as two Tiger tanks stacked on top of each other, panning to and fro for a target, the multifaceted gemstone like head twitching as if stricken by palsy. Clostermann’s finger squeezed the trigger and shots erupted from the Bren. Striking the head, many bounced off into the air or the ground, thankfully enough buried themselves deep into the core location and it crumpled into a heap. More of the enemy walkers emerged firing at the building Perrine was tucked away in. Most of the shots went wild as they had not correctly ascertained where exactly she was, nailing sections of the upper structure and roof, which wouldn’t have been a problem had it not been for the fact that the chains restraining the massive airframes above started to snap. Clostermann looked up in terror as one started to slide from its moorings with the speed of a snake shedding its skin. This was a very bad idea. Not waiting, she ran along the wall, keeping one eye on the falling part, and the other along her path, bounding over debris. By the time she got behind an industrial lathe, the fuselage came crashing down, crushing assembly lines and rolling like a cylindrical boulder the size of a causeway right at her. Perrine turned to run, but she slipped on an open package of metal nuts that scattered like marbles across the dirty concrete floor. She looked in terror as the frame continued its’ deadly course, nothing so much as slowing it down. Regaining her senses, Clostermann hunkered down as close to the side of the wall as she could, hoping against all hope that the structure will hold. Closer and closer it rolled, flattening a propeller blade into the thickness of flower petals. Closing her eyes she prayed. God sent me an angel.

A section of the wall above her ruptured, wood and brick tumbling down. She looked up in fear as a Cataphract emerged from the opening and took the full fury of the rolling doom wheel to the face, catching it flush on the head, the rolled aluminum frame mere inches from Perrine's body. As it dissolved into shards, showering her with white, she heard the distinctive dot and dash taps of morse code. (You still with me Lieutenant? Morse only.)

Recovering from her shock, she morsed back. (Yes, barely but yes.)
Perrine crawled as best she could, traversing a thin route alongside the wall and the airframe until, when she passed the end and a busted water cooler, she saw the opening of the factory, a wide door that was pulled up and secured with a metal bar. (About seventy five feet away from the main departure entrance.)

(Do you see a church beyond that?)

Her glasses were blurry through dust and Neuroi death cloud and she rubbed them clear with her sleeve. Putting them back on, Perrine saw the miraculously intact buttressed front of a church. (Yes I do, roughly five hundred feet away past the intersection)

(Ok, that is Saint Stephens. Make your way towards it.)

The rooftop of the factory shook, dust and metal gantries falling down from heavy impacts. *Oh no, they’re on the roof.* (That’s a negative sargeant. Those Cataphracts are on the roof and this place won’t take much more of this. There’s got to be another way out.)

(There isn’t.) Harsh gunfire could be heard from outside. Perrine didn’t dare move. (More are coming in and they’re gunning for you as they can’t find me. If I remember correctly, that factory also manufactured bombs. Do you see any from where you are?)

Perrine craned her neck and peered through the destruction left in the wake of the rolling part, moving her body out of her confined space. Off in a far corner, in a section marked by caution yellow paint, was a partially opened steel heavy munitions locker, the red tip of a high explosive bomb warhead visible. (Yes.)

(Alright then. Shoot the percussion cap and fly like Hell out of there, using the blast as a speed boost. That should distract them long enough for me to get to the church and meet up with you, preferably without being seen, though I doubt it.)

Perrine’s eye’s widened. (You can’t possibly be serious.)

(I’m deadly serious Lieutenant. There’s no other way and no other choice. Take the shot and move.)

Oh this is just great. Perrine closed her eyes and gently rocked her head into the brick wall. I knew giving him the command was a mistake. Why did I do it? She opened them back up and positioned her body in a crouching position, taking aim at the tip of the exposed bomb with her Bren. Breathing slowly, she concentrated. **Start up the Strikers, hard and fast. Get halfway down and pull the trigger. Just hope they don’t hear me.** The rotors appeared and whirled to life, the thrum sounding like an explosion in of itself within the factory. She moved out at full speed, keeping her sights trained on the tiny target. Before she got to the midpoint, another Cataphract burst through the wall near the munition locker and primed its weapons. “Too slow!” she reveled, and pulled the trigger. The lone bullet sailed through the air and hit the tip of the bomb dead on, the explosion engulfing the enemy before it even had a chance to let loose with its deadly salvo. As Aaron advised, Perrine used the concussive force to add to her speed and she pulled a high g thrust through and out the open door, seconds before it slammed shut behind her, the far side and roof of the building folding in on itself. Two Cataphract saw the witch make her getaway and ran off after her, leaping onto low lying roofs and barreling through all manner of obstacles as if they were tanks running through walls of paper mache. They fired on the move or in the air, beam fire wiping out car sized craters into the earth or blowing out building walls. **I have to use this, even though my hair will be a mess if I do.** Perrine twirled around and yelled with her right arm outstretched, “Tonnere!” Blue chain lightning shot forth from the palm of her hand and wrapped itself around her pursuers, cooking them with millions of
volts of electricity, before they popped like overblown balloons. Feeling good about herself, she
turned to face forward and her smile of triumph was replaced by a fearful trembling as another
Cataphract had out maneuvered her when she wasn’t looking and proceeded to ram into her.
However, the blow never arrived as the harsh bark of a machine gun obliterated the head in a shower
of shards, and the body tumbled away. Perrine tried to get around, but failed. It’s legs, still not fully
dissolved, clipped the back ends of her Strikers, cutting off all power and sending her into a tailspin,
careening towards the walls of Saint Stephens. At this speed I’ll be bug splatter.

Suddenly, her world became enveloped in white, a pearly shiny white that obstructed all views. She
had the realization of being held tightly and turned her head around to see Aaron Divale in deep
concentration. “Hang on!” he yelled, and the two braced for impact. For a long second, nothing
happened, and then, a bone jarring, bowel loosening reverberation, cracking, and smashing of
something solid beyond his wings was heard. Aaron gasped in pain, eyes bugging out of his skull,
and he coughed hard. Perrine got a very sinking feeling. I know that reaction. He just got the wind
knocked out of him. Oh God no. Another hit was felt and Aaron’s grip gave out. The world revealed
itself to Perrine as she bounced off his body. She was inside the church around six feet up off the
marbled ground, falling down onto the dais, just askew of the pulpit and in front of a massive
organ, its massive bronze pipes the length of her bedroom back at Dover Castle. Perrine hit the floor
hard and cried out in pain as she fell on her left arm. She grabbed it on instinct and winced in pain.
Please don’t be broken please don’t be… The furthest wall away from her to her left became rubble
as the head of a Cataphract barged in, weapons primed. Clostermann froze as she saw the twin
cannons twitch in readiness and she resigned herself to defeat. However, she didn’t pay attention to
the hands of Aaron Divale, positioned right under the monster’s head, shoving the shotgun into it’s
skull, and pulling the trigger as he ground it in like a pestle to a mortar.

The gemlike head detonated and the body crumpled lifelessly away to the right. Aaron flipped
himself up and ran over to Perrine who was still clutching her left arm in pain. “You alright
Lieutenant?” he asked, putting his shotgun back into the holster on his leg and whipping out his
machine gun.

“I’m fine.” she lied through gritted teeth forcing herself up to a sitting position. “Just give me a
moment.”

“We don’t have a moment.” Aaron simply said, and then, in a most unwelcome and unceremonious
fashion, picked up Perrine like a sack of potatoes, slinging her over his right shoulder, and bounding
out of the hole in the wall without so much as saying a word.

“What are you doing! Put me down!” Perrine screamed, kicking with her legs, and flailing her good
arm around, as every lunge by Aaron elicited more pain.

“Shut up woman!” Aaron roared back, leaping over the hood of a slagged car. “Apparently someone
here has never learned the meaning of gratitude.” He then put on a haughty air, over exaggerating
refinement. “Why thank you for saving my ass back there Sargeant Divale because if it weren’t for
your timely arrival, I would’ve become something akin to a paint can splattering its contents all over
the walls of Saint Stephens.” He spied a busted open sewer pipe, drained of all effluent he hoped,
and crouched down. Then something came into his vision, close to his skull, and he heard a sharp
click of a safety being turned off. That bitch. Pulling his head back, he saw the barrel of Perrine’s
MAS pointing at the center of his face. He turned to the right and saw her, the face near purple in
anger and frothing rage.

“Put. Me. Down. Now.” Clostermann growled. Without taking his eyes off her, Aaron placed her
feet first on terra firma with the care of a wetnurse swaddling a newborn. “You touch me like that
again, I’ll finish what Captain Barkhorn started.” she threatened, waving the weapon at Aaron’s
manhood, once she was free of his loathsome grasp.

“You haven’t got enough bullets.” he commented. A tumbling building brought the two to silence, reminding them of where they were. “Get into the pipe, I have an idea that will get us out of this. It’s not the best plan, but it’s the perfect plan.”

“What is it?” Perrine asked intrigued.

“Showing all of you why my last name is Divale.” Aaron answered coolly.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Dark secrets are revealed about Aaron Divale, ones that could jeopardize his life and the lives of his erstwhile allies.

Chapter V: The Furies

Many think the phrase, “Facing your personal demons,” is just that, a string of words that form a poetic diversion. The terrifying truth is they aren’t figures of speech, gestating from the womb of humanities first love, power. All evil spirits are its purest definition, corrupting and controlling behind the scenes, silently lurking within the darkest recesses of the soul like a cancer. I must tread carefully, for once I start going down that dark path, I’ll lose everything I hold dear.

Diary Entry December 26th 1939

“By God, this place stinks.” Perrine complained once again for the umpteenth time. “Couldn’t you find a better way to get in front of the enemy?” The pair had been inside the sewer line, a long rusty pipe that curved like a horserace track, for a good three minutes, inhaling all manner of still present noxious fumes and being very careful in not getting too close to the walls, still slick with something that was shiny like oil.

“It could be a lot worse Lieutenant,” Aaron reminded, “there could be actual shit in here.” He took another step forward and a fleshy squelching sound echoed down the pipe as his boot met metal, shifting like grease. *Personal note; never start a sentence with 'it could be a lot worse’ unless you wish evil to befall you.* Glaring at Perrine, who he had expected to point out such hazards as she was the one in front, he uttered distainfully, “Thanks.”

She smiled mirthlessly and continued on her way, looking down at the pipe floor. *It’s starting to elevate now and go straight.* Snapping her fingers, Perrine drew Aaron’s attention and pointed. “Excellent.” Divale noted, nodding in relief, “This means we’re are at a rise, right where I knew it would be.”

“How many days were you in Vienna?” Perrine asked, fairly impressed with the warlock’s memory.

“Three,” Aaron answered, “all awake, no sleep whatsoever. Worst days I had, at least up until later when they got worse, much worse.” He saw a break in the wall of the sewer line, facing the lower slope of the ridge rise, sunlight from the now late noonday sun pouring in, and made a fist, a sign for halt. Perrine stopped and was about to ask why, but soon understood. *He wants to go on ahead.*

Doing her best, Clostermann turned sideways and leaned back, using the tip of her Bren to keep her away from the wall, not too keen on getting acquainted with whatever was on it. Aaron, despite his large size, articulated around her, shifting his body like sand, a sight that made Perrine thoroughly
uncomfortable. The move didn’t last very long and he quickly stepped up to the furthest edge of the opening and took off his watch. Slowly and carefully, he angled it so that the sun wouldn’t catch a glare and gazed into the lens. Alright, just how F.U.B.A.R is this situation right now? Let’s see; three, seven, twelve, fifteen Cataphracts, maybe more hidden in the back, and they’re all actively searching. Have to make this quick, which means that there will be some collateral damage associated with this.

“What’s out there?” Perrine asked, impatiently.

Aaron shrugged his shoulders and answered, “Just three quints worth of Cataphracts, possibly more, bearing down on us.”

Perrine’s eyes bugged out. The commander is nuts! No one has ever faced down these kinds of odds before and won. “You honestly believe we can win?” she asked incredulously.

“I don’t think Lieutenant,” Aaron assured, “I know.”

Clostermann scoffed harshly, “If you think you can use lead to solve your problems, you are thoroughly mistaken. Even after all that you saved for me in the hanger, I only have three clips left and my MAS has one full clip left, and that’s already loaded. No idea what you’ve got, but I can guarantee that it isn’t enough.”

I have five hundred rounds for my machine gun, three clips for my pistols, two of which are loaded, and three shots left for my shotgun. “And you are right,” Aaron agreed, “but we will use magic to solve this conundrum.” He looked at her and added with emphasis, “Both of our magics.”

Perrine grew apprehensive and puzzled, two things that didn’t sit well with her. “How?” she asked

“Like you, and I will assume the rest of the squadron, I too have a special ability.” Aaron explained. “I can absorb, magnify, and project magical energy into a blast that can wipe out vast swathes of the battlefield with just a command. I need your attack, your Tonnere, to help me to reach the level that I need to make this work.”

“Now hold on,” Perrine reasoned, “if you can absorb magic, then why don’t you just absorb this playing field. It’s pure magic anyways.”

“While a feasible option, it’s too spread out and diluted to be of much use. Too much time will be wasted, time which we are rapidly running out of.” Aaron countered. Looking at her with an almost pleading look, he asked, “Will you help me?”

Perrine thought long and hard about what Aaron had to say. He’s right, we don’t have the luxury of time, but I’ve never used Tonnere twice, not even in practice. It could cause me to pass out and we’d still lose. However, the sight of seeing him electrocuted by over a million volts of electricity may be worth the pain of defeat. “You got yourself a deal.” she decided. “How long?”

“Not very.” Aaron replied, and sat down on the floor of the sewer line, crossing his legs and placing his hands on his knees, fingers rubbing together like a Tibetan monk at meditation. He breathed in slowly and exhaled, the air emanating from his lungs clear to see, like body heat escaping ones mouth during a winter’s day. Perrine saw an instant change in her surroundings and looked on in awe as ice crystals formed and grew like heat blisters within the pipe, sounding like wind chimes, if wind chimes could replicate the sound of grinding glass. She shivered and drew her overcoat closer to her body, sinking her head deep into the collar. A bright red mandala appeared underneath Aaron while his brow furrowed in concentration, the symbols rotating within concentric rings around him with breakneck speed. “I just want to let you know that I am sorry.” he suddenly said, eyes still
“Why?” Perrine asked, filled with all manner of terror at the sight before her eyes.

“I’m sorry that you will have to face her first, alone.” Aaron answered. Then, as if storm clouds burst, all movement and sound stopped, the rings of the mandala frozen in time. Perrine backed away and looked around. On the sewer pipes, one the ice crystals broke off, the heat of the day too much for it to retain its form and fell, but not in the way that was expected. Seconds went by and the frozen water was still suspended in midair. Gravity seemed to hold no sway over the world as the sparkling object, at an extremely slow pace, twirled, tilted and fell with an infinitesimally sluggish pace. *What in the world?* Suddenly, all started to fall away, to the sides, to the earth, to the sky, like sand in an hourglass. Every particle of matter disappeared, the pipe, the sunlight, Aaron Divale, even the world that Perrine knew ceased to exist, and was replaced by one of darkness, a shadowy reflection of the evening hours, everything looking like it was discharging heat waves like summer scorched asphalt. Scared and now utterly alone, Perrine began to panic. *Where am I!? What is happening!? Where is that thrice damned warlock!?*

“It is about time that you decided to pay me a visit.” a booming matriarchic voice declared with a bit of annoyance. In her fright, Perrine yelped in fear, looking around for the source of the speaker, yet finding none. “What is this now?” the sound asked with piqued interest “Ah, this is someone new.” Clostrermann’s heart beat faster than she ever knew was possible, the vibrations in her chest so intense that she thought the organ would burst. Then, to compound her fears, she heard the soft tread of footsteps over a stone surface, coming towards her. Whipping around, she saw shadow, but it was a clever illusion. Within, a silhouette could be seen, that of a person of indiscernible shape and dimensions. As the sounds of the pace got louder and louder, details started to emerge like passers by from a dense fog.

At the base of this realm of reality, whatever it was, black shoes, burnished to a high glossy sheen, the heel five inches off the ground, clacking softly yet menacingly, became visible, the stitch lines resembling the hue of tanned human skin. The flesh could be seen at the meat of the foot, a gangrenous yellow that seemed to project an oily wetness about the skin, akin to that of earthworms emerging from a recent rain. Further up the leg we go, covered in long dark leggings that were adorned with reflective runes that twinkled in the lightless abyss, each one burning Perrine eye’s with malevolence. Past the calves and knees, one could clearly see that the dimensions were that of a woman, with wide hips and prominent thighs, ones of dense muscle, the fabric barely containing their power. Towards the barely there navel, the pants were loosely tied by a thin black string, the V cut scandalously low almost to the point of indecency. Securing the pants to the body was a long belt of a reddish hue that flowed like blood along a floor, one that seemed to bend the laws of physics with the fact that it maintained its shape all the while, the clasps ivory like human teeth, the holes bored within the cavity of silver laughing skulls, the buckle that of interwoven human fingers, the ends still bloody. A short ways up, past a toned abdomen, a top can be distinguished, the bottom fringes lined with tarnished gold trim, the main body black and stretched by the bosom, held together like a bodice with the straps, long thin silver ribbons, crisscrossing up along the sides up until the armpits, the cut low like the pants, the two ties coming together in a bow that went upon the neck. The arms came forth, powerful and tensed, the sallow complexion lined with tattoos of amethyst purple that glowed within the deep dark, the fingernails long and corpse grey, ends sharpened into dagger points. Finally, the catharsis of the act, the face made its entrance upon the scene and this time Perrine let loose a scream as the lips, ones much paler than the flesh curled in a callous grin, teeth dazzlingly white regarding her. Following the lower half was the upper half, short venom green hair directing attention with its short bangs to the eyes, ones the color of a stygian midnight that had never been cleared away, ones that if one were to dwell for any length of time would be to invite madness. As Perrine’s cry of terror gave out, her legs went limp, overcome with the sight of this thing before her, a thing that her mind gave voice to. *A demon!*
“A new plaything!” the demoness exclaimed with surprised happiness. “I must have done something right in the previous life.” She laughed a cruel laugh and added, “Can’t imagine what that might’ve been.”

Perrine started shaking uncontrollably until she remembered her cross. *My cross! That will protect me from this evil until that warlock arrives!* Quickly, she pulled the silver chain, revealing it in all of its glory. Clostermann grabbed the still warm metal and held it out in front of her declaring, “Stay back denizen of Hell, or I will invoke the wrath of God upon you!”

“And it brought toys?!” the entity cried out in joy. She lifted her hand and Perrine found herself levitated off the ground by a few inches, unable to move. “Let me see this wonderful bauble you have.” Perrine struggled, gritting her teeth, trying to stop herself from being pulled forward by the demon’s magic, but she was powerless. The fiend rose to her full height, one that could equal Aaron’s as the helpless witch hung in the air like a steer hooked on a chain before being sent through a slaughterhouse. It stopped in front of Clostermann and leaned in, gazing intently at the cross, before plucking it out of her limp grasp, and taking a good whiff along its length as if she were judging the quality of a premium cigar.

As she examined the icon, Perrine could smell an intoxicating blend of frankincense, myrrh, and aniseed, emanating from the demon’s pores like a poison gas, making her dizzy. Suddenly, the evil spirit spoke. “A follower of the Knight’s of Saint Michael? All this time I thought only men were allowed into their ranks. Things must have changed since the last time I stomped around topside.” she mused. Regarding Perrine, she asked playfully, “Do you know what I use these things for?”, taking the cross and moving it slowly in a straight line from the middle of the witch’s forehead, down past the lips, betwixt her covered breasts, and along the middle of the belly before coming to a rest near the pearl of her maidenhood. “I like to soil virgins like yourself, feeling their lips quiver in the palm of my hand in pain and pleasure as their innocence drains from their bodies.”

“No!” Perrine gasped, gaining some semblance of resistance to the demon’s fragrant charms, yet still seeing the world as a spinning object. “Let me go you fiend!”

It smiled and chuckled, “Oh, I’m going to thoroughly enjoy you Frenchie.” Opening the mouth, Perrine nearly gagged as a long black tongue, slathered in slimy phlegm extended to lick the sides of her face and around her ears, generating a sensation that was loathsome yet stimulating, making her tilt her head away to avoid it. “I have such wonderful things to show, and do, to you. So, what’s your safe word?”

“Ismenoth!” a hard voice bellowed from behind the pair. The demoness, now named, turned around angrily and hissed as Aaron Divale made his presence known within the room, walking towards them with intent. “Release her at once, or you’ll deal with me.” he warned.

Ismenoth sighed in frustration and muttered out loud, “And thus did brave Sir Galahad save yet another damsel in distress from the vile monster.” Turning around to face him, staring into eyes that were level with her own, she threw open her arms and shouted in apparent joy, “Aaron, how nice to see you again! It’s been way too long since our last meeting.”

Grimacing and groaning like a nephew visiting his cheek pinching grandmother, Aaron moved within the reach of Ismenoth and let her embrace him, wrinkling his nose at her stench, and recoiling from her touch. He looked at Perrine, shocked and appalled beyond all comprehension, and asked her concernedly, “Has she hurt you?”

Ismenoth uttered a gasp of indignation, releasing him and pointing a finger at his chest. “How dare you assume that I would harm any humble guest that comes to this realm. I had no intention of splitting so much as a hair on that head of hers.” She paused, placing the fingernail on her right index
finger in her mouth, playing all sweet and innocent, before admitting, “Though I did have a few in
depth thoughts about how I was going to abuse that lovely mouth of hers.

“Of that I’m sure.” Aaron deadpanned. “You still haven’t done as I demanded, Ismenoth. Let her go
now.”

Snarling like a caged lioness, Ismenoth brandished the cross like a dagger and drew it close to
Aaron’s right eye. “Remember where you are and who you speak to!” she yelled.

With a speed that made Shirley look slow, Perrine saw Aaron snatch the cross from Ismenoth’s
clutches with his right hand, and backhand the demoness hard against the face with the flat of his
straightened left, the blow sounding like a fisherman banging the days catch against the hull of his
boat, sending her to her knees, black blood seeping like pus from a torn lip. “And you remember
who you serve.” he replied with force. Ismenoth spat a long stream of ebon liquid out her mouth, the
tainted vitae bubbling and hissing like communication static as it struck the ground, fumes coming off
the unseen surface, and glared at Aaron. With a quick wave of her hand Perrine was let loose, her
Strikers touching the ground. “Get behind me.” Aaron ordered hastily. Without wasting time or even
saying a word, she ran behind him and cowered like a shy child when being introduced to relatives.

Slowly, the demoness got up and gave a uncouth grin. “Enjoy your victories while they last
Aaron,” she cautioned, “sooner or later, I will have what I am due, and you will know my
displeasure.”

“That will be the day that I come face to face with my maker.” Aaron boasted. “I have a request of
you as well.”

Ismenoth’s eyes changed from resentful to expectant. “Is it going to be something like what we did in
the old days Aaron?” she asked, nearly bursting with excitement. “That one job we did together six
months ago was exhilarating. I still get moist when I think of it.”

“It will be a demonstration,” Aaron clarified, “an exercise in destruction if you will.”

Ismenoth hung her head and bewailed, “Really, Aaron? You come all this way to see me, totally
uninvited and with a guest in tow, and you only want me to help you with a public relations stunt?
For what purpose does this ‘demonstration’ serve anyway?”

“To show people what happens when I get annoyed.” Aaron answered, extending his arms, taking
Ismenoth by the tips of her shoulders. “To deliver a message that tells people to not fuck with me.”

Ismenoth walked deeper into Aarons reach and embraced him fully, like a lost love. “But I so much
love it when people fuck with you, or you fuck with people. I get to watch after all.”

“Do we have a deal?” Aaron asked. “If so, then I will pay the usual price.”

“No,” she replied with a frown, “not unless we raise the stakes a little bit.”

“If this is about what I think this is about then the answer is no, nor will you drag the Lieutenant into
this.” Aaron countered.

“Oh no, nothing like that,” Ismenoth rapidly stated, “it’s just that I haven’t seen you in a while and I
was hoping that you’d give me one of those massages that you do oh so well.” She took Aaron’s
hands and placed them over her ample breasts before adding with lust dripping from her tongue, “A
very deep massage.”

Aaron furrowed his brow and then turned to look at Perrine who had backed away when the
demonness drew near. “Prepare yourself Lieutenant. We have a battle to win.”

Ismenoth also gazed at Clostermann and added with venom, “I’ll make this short and sweet Frenchie: if we meet again, just us, I won’t be so nice.”

Minna looked to and fro as her wing of Cataphracts searched in front of them, toppling buildings, blasting craters in trench lines, and burrowing like moles with their legs at uprooted water and sewer lines. The rest of the squadron had relocated to her, the other sections declared clear by Mio, who was peering through the city like a watchman in a crows nest. “Please tell me you have something good to report.” Wilcke said, getting rather tired of this game of hide and seek that her pilots were playing. They couldn’t have gone far with what they both suffered after that collision at the church. Mio said nothing as she continued to scan the rapidly deteriorating battlefield, until she saw a mist coming from a broken sewer line up along ridge. Without a word, she pointed at the location and Commander Wilcke immediately waved her hand, making it into a make shift pistol, aiming directly at the target. Several nearby units took aim, priming their cannons. Good night. “Bang.” she uttered and the Neuroi fired simultaneously, all the beams striking the same spot, the local area vanishing into dust and debris. Content that she had dispatched of them, she turned to Major Sakamoto to see if they were still in the game when she had an uneasy feeling. Mio was stone stiff, mouth open in terror, eye wide as it could ever hope to be, pointing with a trembling hand at the sewer pipe.

Minna regarded the blasted hellscap and the color in her face drained as she saw mammoth sized wings the shape of a bats, the color of charcoal, every feather adorned with runes etched in all manner of shades and tones. Like a clamshell on its side, the limbs parted revealing Aaron Divale, in a way that nobody had ever seen before, and deeply wished to never see again. His frame had increased in size three fold, making the Cataphracts look like pygmies in relation. Covering his body from neck to foot, riveted by bolts of steel, the heads that of howling wolves, was a massive brass suit of ancient armor, complete with gauntlets, vambraces, and pauldrons, every surface bearing murderously long edges as sharp as scalpels. A silver mail shirt could be seen, jutting out from his waist and extending down to his upper thighs like a ringed skirt. His legs were adorned only by thigh and calf plates with the feet and knees bare, the same color as the armor. The visible flesh was pale like Sanya’s, bulging blue veins thick as baling rope snaking their way along his lower limbs. In his arms, he carried two mauls, each as long as a telephone pole made of Damascus steel, the striking heads fashioned into merged dragon heads with their maws wide open, the teeth extending out, increasing the killing reach of the massive hammers. All this meant nothing once Minna gazed upon his face, the color of snow, hair now tied up into a scalp knot, drawing the flesh taut around the skull, making Aaron look like a vampire from old Gothic legend. This isn’t some fairytale, this is a living nightmare. Completing the ensemble, were the eyes, that now burned blood red, the heraldry of the enemy, pupils nonexistent, silently regarding the Neuroi in front of him.

Recovering from her shock, Minna did the one thing that she could do against so large of an exposed target. “Fire!” she bellowed. Every unit on the field within range let loose, beams littering the air, each one packing enough power to knock out a Tiger tank in one shot. She saw each blast strike Aaron in a multitude of spots and bounce off as if they were shooting spitballs at a rampaging rhinoceros. He took several steps forward, oblivious to the barrage, yawning loudly. The Cataphracts ceased fire, priming more shots, as Aaron gazed at Minna eyes boring a hole into and through her soul. “You fool!” he roared, his voice carrying far and wide, frightening even the other pilots with its force. “I rule the ruins!” With a flick of his wrists, searing beams of white light flew out from his mauls and struck almost a half dozen Cataphracts instantaneously, and they ceased to exist as fighting units. As they died, they didn’t dissolve into white shards as they normally did, but exploded into red pulpy masses, splattering the ground and everything around in wide candy apple red sheets. The sound they made was wet and liquid, nearly making Wilcke vomit purely on reflex, but she
swallowed it back, the acidic taste of bile the only evidence. Others lost their lunch behind her, who they were she could’ve cared less.

It was then that Aaron began to move. With uncanny agility of someone or something of that size, he closed in quick amongst the Neuroi lines, swinging his mauls like battle axes. The first victim was struck so hard that it bifurcated down the middle and the second was knocked away into the air, both falling into pieces, blood gushing like fountainheads. Fire came in again as Aaron side flipped over another Cataphract, grabbing its head in his massive fist, and driving it head first into the body of another that was trying to get away. He casually kicked both corpses into the church, taking it out completely, the bells in the towers pealing in protest as their holy home crumbled. A sneaky Neuroi unit managed to get in behind and attempted to bull rush his rear, but Aaron reached back with his arm and twisted the sharpened edge into its direction. The Cataphract couldn’t react fast enough as it ran into the blade, removing all six legs in a spray of arterial vitae. It tumbled and slid on a carpet of its own life force, trying to angle its cannons for a parting shot, a last show of defiance, but failing miserably. Divale walked to it and drove the butt of the shaft into its skull, killing it instantly. Minna shook her head in disbelief as Aaron systematically tore her formation apart piece by piece. *I can’t hurt him, but I can hurt Perrine. Where is she?*

Perrine was still in the sewer line, now fully exposed to the carnage that raged around her, firing her Bren and Aaron’s machine gun with either hand. The recoil was hellacious, but certainly welcome as she downed more of the six legged walkers that swarmed all over Divale in an attempt to bring him down. She lost count of how many she killed, all the effect of having witnessed what happened before he transformed into an avatar of battle. Perrine drew in deep breaths, her lips trembling just by thinking about who and what she saw. *That didn’t happen. None of it did. This isn’t real. This is all a dream. It has to be. That’s right, that’s all this is. Soon, you’ll wake up in your warm bed with the morning sun shining on your face. You’ll look upon this absurdity and laugh.* Her thoughts didn’t wash. A loud crump behind her, made her jump forward instinctively out of the pipe and barrel roll down the slope and into the street. Less than a second later, a leg of a Cataphract swooped into her former hideout and crushed the pipe as if it were made of modeling clay. She reached for her guns and painfully realized that in her haste to escape, she left them behind. All Perrine had on her person was Aaron’s shotgun tucked under her uniform. Before she could get it out, the enemy leapt on top of her. The impact would’ve flattened her into the thickness of paper had it not been for her shields being raised at the last second. Undaunted, the monstrosity battered her defenses with its front legs, every blow a lightning strike, sending slivers of magic scattering to and fro like rain on a tin roof. She cried out in anger as she untucked the shotgun and pulled the trigger at the Cataphracts head, the blast making the body part disappear. Not waiting for it to dissolve, she rolled on her stomach and behind a piece of debris. Peering over it, Perrine saw Aaron, grinning like a madman, pick up a Cataphract, its legs flailing about as it tried to shake free. Grabbing a hold of either end, he lifted it over his head and ripped it in half with a sound of a wet poncho being torn. Blood cascaded down his body like a waterfall, his mouth open, taking in gallons of the stuff, before tossing it away like a paper cup at an office water cooler. He turned to her, licking his sticky lips, and asked in a mocking tone, “What took you so long? Another minute and I would’ve been tagged.” Perrine couldn’t speak and even if she did Aaron interjected, “Get down!” Perrine forced her body to do what she was told as a long red beam flew over her head, missing by inches, and sear past them both. “She’s done having fun with me and is now gunning for you. You can’t stay here.” he explained, deflecting some shots with his wings. With his right hand, Divale pointed to a lone tank further up the slope. “Run and get in a position to use your Tonnere. Once you’re at the optimum distance, fire at my palm and I’ll take care of the rest. Now go! Run like I was chasing you!” he demanded, letting off more blasts with his mauls. Perrine got up and ran, gritting her teeth in pain as fatigue and muscle cramps started to rear their ugly heads and take their tolls, the burn and ache nearly causing tearful pain. Scared out of her mind,
the only thought she had was of escaping to the safety of the tank. Breathing hard, she vaulted over rocks and zigzagged as beams detonated to her sides and rear, showering her in vitrified rain. She stumbled, and her glasses fell to the earth, cracking. Oh no, I won’t be able to see right! Frantically, she ducked down and searched for her spectacles with the urgency of a miner in the Klondike panning for gold. “Lieutenant!” Aaron screamed some distance behind her. Clostermann turned and regarded Aaron, or at least what she thought was Aaron as he resembled more like a fuzzy bronze blob with a tiny black dot in the center of his body. Is that his hand? he cried. She raised her right hand and concentrated on drawing on her power. This is uncharted territory for me. Hopefully this hits where it’s supposed to.

“Tonnere!” she called out, blue lightning discharging forwards and down. Aaron saw the power coming towards him and kept his hand perfectly still as the bolts collided, the force of the impact cracking bone and ripping muscles in his hands. He bit the pain down and closed his eyes as he concentrated on funneling the energy to the center of his being and directing it up to his other hand, his left. He could detect the strikes of enemy fire and the punches of legs against his armor, but he paid them no mind, his training fully taking over. Divale took in one breath and opened his eyes, seeing his enemies before him. “Dies irae!” he screamed, and all became a blinding white as pure energy erupted from his hand, engulfing the enemy, the nearby area in front of him, all the way to the starting area, encompassing all that was once the city, roaring like a pride of lions. Buildings winked out of existence and still functional water mains blew up from the heat discharge, vaporizing their contents instantly when they contacted the air, hissing like an army of snakes.

All of the 501st looked on in stunned quiet, too shocked beyond words to speak of the level of utter destruction being played out before their very eyes. Minna herself went limp, her Strikers the only things keeping her upright. My God. Such power! As if they were the magic words that ended the spell, the noise and light subsided and the city was covered in a swirling grey mist, the water vapor condensing soon afterwards, falling down as rain all over them. “De vi murum!” Aaron shouted, his voice carrying over the comms, and the mist was pushed away revealing a glassed landscape. Nothing stood at all within the training area, save for what was behind him before he unleashed hell. In the distance, Commander Wilcke could make out two figures waving. As one unit, the squadron rushed in and hovered in place as Sargeant Divale and Lieutenant Clostermann awaited to be addressed. Regarding Perrine first, Minna saw that she was dirty and fatigued after having used Tonnere for the second time, her hair frizzed to the point where her once tamed mane resembled an afro despite the rain, glasses gone. She would’ve laughed if it weren’t for the fact that she was still in shock. As for Aaron, he himself even more dirty and tired, she was relieved to see that he had reverted to his natural state, yet as she looked at him, she noticed that his earlier training injuries had vanished without an trace. What in the world is this devilry?

Saving the thought for later, she clapped in applause, water coming off her hands in squirts. “Splendid work you two.” she stated. “You have successfully completed the second part of the exercise. Not many pass this stage, but you have done it. Congradulations. Both of you get cleaned up and meet me in my office in the hanger, starting with Lieutenant Clostermann first. Dismissed.” The rest of the squadron clapped and whistled in approval. Ever the one wishing to stay away from the limelight, Aaron meekly curtsied and quickly spread his wings and flew away back to Dover Castle.

Perrine walked up to Minna and uttered in a low voice, using the rain patter as a cover, “Commander, I need to speak with you now. It concerns Sargeant Divale and I believe the safety of the 501st as a whole.”

Wilcke nodded, noting her anxiety and was about to say something to the effect that she would look into it, when Mio called out, “Commander, I think you need to take a look at this.”
Minna looked at Mio and saw something in her friend's face that looked an awful lot like fear. *Mio never gets spooked unless it’s really bad.* Quickly, she flew over to her location and gazed downwards. On a slab of purple glass, even now disappearing along with the rest of the training area, the color fading away with the rapidly vanishing downpour, was the unmistakable red of blood, emitting the foul stench of stomach acid and bile. Wilcke looked in the direction where Aaron flew off to and narrowed her gaze. *What are you hiding from me?*

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Aaron looked at his watch as he made his way back to the hanger, once again ferried by Hajikata in his jeep. It read five o'clock in the evening and the sun was beginning its downward trek towards the horizon, the sky becoming less blue and more golden like his eyes. The wind blew softly, giving him a chill as it passed over his still damp hair and clothing, for he had washed both in the shower. “You look tired Sergeant Divale.” Warrant Officer Keisuke remarked, going past the outer gate and making a left along the grassy field. “You should definitely try getting some sleep tonight. The best way to do that is with a warm cup of tea, an even mixture of chamomile and mint, with just a half spoonful of honey. Works every time.”

Aaron nodded and stated, “I’m not that tired, I mean, after all, I remembered my shoes.”

Both men laughed at the statement and soon, the hanger came into view. Hajikata put the jeep in park and let Aaron out. “That’s a start.” the young officer commented, stifling another chuckle. “Hopefully it will lead to better things. Farewell sargeant.” Aaron saluted out of thanks and respect and Hajikata drove off towards the castle as he had done several times since the morning, the sound of the revving engine getting softer and softer until disappearing entirely. Turning around, Divale jogged over to the front door of the hanger, not wishing to keep the commander waiting lest her get an infraction. Before he got within thirty feet, the door suddenly opened fast, and the form of Major Sakamoto emerged who gave him a puzzled look. “I thought you would’ve came in through the roof.” she pointed out.

Aaron slowed down his jog to a brisk walk and answered, “I’m just full of surprises I guess.”

“Yes,” Mio flatly replied, hand near her katana, “you most certainly are.”

He stopped on a dime, a few feet from the threshold, and grew tense, wary of what Mio was doing and why. “Major,” he asked cautiously, his thoughts and present movements going back to their first meeting last night, “is something wrong?”

“Only if you don’t tell the truth.” Mio answered, backing away into the hanger and out of side. “Come in, they just got done talking and are expecting you.”

What did she say? *Oh dear God if she blabbed about what she saw, I’m as good as dead.* Aaron breathed in deep and walked through the door slowly, accepting whatever possible treachery that could be thrown at him, regardless of direction. The hanger was dark now to the point where overhead lights had been turned on, casting their luminescence over all things, leaving long shadows. He continued his trek when he passed the doorway, going by Mio without so much as a look as she closed the portal shut. His heart beat steadily, despite knowing that she was behind and had her hand on her sword. Footsteps are quiet, trying to get me to misjudge the distance between us if something were to go down. Plenty of space in here to dodge and reposition if that happens. Calm down Aaron, it’s just a meeting. Minna’s office was occupied, judging by the half open door with light pouring out of it. A whoosh was heard as the compressed air within the pneumatic delivery system propelled some sort of dispatch along the pipe. It didn’t frighten him one bit and Mio, behind Aaron by several feet cocked her head to the side. “When I saw you last night, you came in with your head held high.” she said. “What changed since that time?”
Aaron got to the door to the office and pushed it open while answering without turning back, “Our positions.” Two chairs were set in front of Minna’s desk, the furthest left containing Perrine, who looked better from her grand adventure a few hours ago, but still retained a hint of frizz in her hair and her stare. Wilcke had a piece of paper in her left hand and placed it off to the side, diverting her full attention to Aaron who sat down in the remaining seat without a word, Mio closing the door behind her and taking up her position next to the commander. Minna leaned forward, face and eyes intense, barely holding back some wrath that was slowly brewing under the surface, and gestured for him to do so as well with a curling of her right index finger, and clapping her hands. Aaron complied immediately, getting so close to her face, he could see his reflection in her pupils.

He found it hard to maintain his gaze with the witch and briefly looked down, but Minna would have none of it. “You look at me when I talk to you.” she said menacingly. Righting his stare, Aaron swallowed deep and he felt an icy tingle down his spine. “Before I get into anything regarding the result of the exercises,” Wilcke began, “I want you to answer some questions of mine that stem from the testimony of Lieutenant Clostermann.”

“Did she-” Aaron started to ask, but that question died as Mio drew her katana and held it to her side, both hands on the hilt.

“She is irrelevant at this point and time.” Minna interjected. “I am not. Now, I want these questions answered truthfully and fully, or I won’t be held responsible for what I am prepared to do to make sure that my pilots are safe from all threats. Understand?” Aaron nodded so slightly that one would’ve believed that he hadn’t moved at all. “Now, after the fight in the church, you both went underground along the sewer lines leading up to the ridge. While in there, you told Perrine that you had a way to turn the tide, a power that needed her Tonnere, correct?”

“Yes, Commander Wilcke.” Aaron answered.

“To that end, you executed what can best be described as a ritual, one that opened a gate to a realm that was far away from here. What was that realm and where is it located?” Minna asked.

“That realm the Lieutenant spoke of is a part of my soul, yet apart of it.” Aaron explained. “It’s akin to dealing with a mental patient who exhibits multiple personalities. Each personality is obviously being channeled through one person thereby making it a part of the person as a whole, yet every one is distinct, operating within specific perimeters, like branches within a nation’s military.”

Minna digested the explanation before continuing, “This part of your soul is inhabited by a demon going by the name Ismenoth. How long has it been within you?”

“Ismenoth has been with me since my creation, a partnership that wasn’t by choice.” Aaron replied.

Wilcke bit her lower lip and glowered at Divale, her knuckles and finger bones of her clasped hands cracking in anger, the flesh bleached white from clenching so hard. “Why didn’t you say anything about this?” she asked, through gritted teeth.

“I may have been birthed by darkness,” Aaron expounded, finding his courage, “but I don’t pay homage to it. Ismenoth may be a demon of immense power, but she serves me, not the other way around. She can do nothing to you or anyone else in the material world without my express authorization.”

Minna pointed a finger at Aaron’s face and conjectured, “And of the realm within? You arrived sometime after Perrine did, during which time Ismenoth was primed to do unspeakable things to her. Was Lieutenant Clostermann in any real danger then?”
“Partially.” Aaron clarified, hastily adding before Minna’s patience broke like a leaky dam. “Even within her realm, her ability to project her power is limited. She can’t physically harm you at all, only psychologically. Ismenoth loves and thrives on playing mind games, trying to probe your brain for weaknesses that she can exploit to her advantage, corrupting you to her way of thinking. I’ve been fully capable of deflecting even her most complex schemes. If something would’ve happened to Lieutenant Clostermann, it would’ve only—" 

Minna unclasped her hands and drew her pistol, cocking the hammer fully back, quick as lightning, and Aaron soon found himself staring down another gun barrel for the second time today. “It only would’ve been the worst mistake you’ve ever made!” she screamed, “I, as the squadron leader, am responsible for the wellbeing of all my pilots! Each and every one of these women, has trained, fought, and bled for me! They have earned my trust, respect, admiration, love, and protection!” She placed the pistol flush against Aaron’s skull. “If anyone were to harm them, in any way whatsoever, I would kill them in a second.” 

Never taking his eyes off her, Aaron moved his hands away from his body, palms and fingers splayed. “If you want an assurance that I will never summon Ismenoth again, unless by your word only, I’ll gladly give it.” he offered, breathing slow and steady. “Let’s all just put our weapons away and get this meeting done with, for I’m sure that we’re all in need of some dinner and well deserved rest.”

It was at this point that Perrine quipped, “For the first time today, I am in agreement with the warlock.”

Minna glanced over at Perrine and then back to Aaron. A tense second passed before she uncocked the hammer and holstered her pistol. “Last question.” she stated. “After the exercise, Major Sakamoto discovered a rather sizeable blood stain on the ground. Neither of you were injured nor sick during that debacle, so where did it come from and why?”

“It came from me.” Aaron answered. “The way magic works for a witch is different than that of a warlock. Magic flows efficiently within a witch, all facets are in harmony, even at its rawest stages. Imagine yourself a fisherman on the banks of a clear pond, teeming with fish to the point where all you have to do, is expend a fraction of your energy to reach into the water and pluck out whatever it is you want. That’s magic in a witch in a nutshell. With a warlock however, the fisherman, instead of a pond, is now confronted with a long winding river, sectioned off by canal locks. To find his catch, he has to travel along the length of the waterway and pay to have the locks opened. The price to do so in my case, is my own blood.”

“How much is required?” Minna asked, intrigued and concerned at the same time. “Depends on many factors; how quickly I need it, over how long of a time, does it need to an increased area of effect, a longer range, more power, you could go on forever. Most of my magic only requires a few drops at most. Over time, and repeated use without sufficient rest, it could result in me vomiting out the contents of my stomach.” Aaron replied.

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“Does this effect your performance?” Minna pondered.

“No, only in the most extreme cases will it ever.” Aaron answered.

“Is an example of an extreme case, Vienna?” Minna queried.

Aaron nodded. “I understand that what I’m saying is a lot to take in all at once, and, of course, this is raising more questions and your doubts about me.” He leaned forward again and pleaded, “I want you all to trust me and I want to trust all of you, but this way isn’t cutting it. Maybe we could arrange
“a meeting where I can speak freely regarding these things.”

“That is already being taken care of as we speak.” Minna explained. “Tomorrow after lunch, you will meet the entire squadron here for a coven.”

Aaron’s eyes narrowed, “What is a coven?” he asked.

“A meeting.” Mio pointed out. “Every one of us will ask you a series of questions that you must answer. You will sit in the center of the room in a revolving chair and address each in turn. The commander will have in her possession a weirding stone, an ancient magical artifact that can detect falsehoods by vibrating rapidly. Everything you say will be kept confidential. You will have the ability to refuse to answer up to three questions if you so choose. In addition, every pilot will have the ability to ask questions about a particular possession of yours.”

Aaron’s ear perked up. “What?” he asked in shock.

“Your belongings that you brought with you on your December trip have passed clearance and will arrive at the castle in the morning.” Minna stated, gesturing to the piece of paper off to her side. “You have my word that all objects will be accounted for at the conclusion of the coven.”

“A meeting that I don’t like people snooping around my things. Some of those are incredibly dangerous if one handles them incorrectly. But, if this is what I need to do in order to sleep at night without having the need for a shotgun under my pillow, so be it.” “Sounds good to me.” Aaron stated, leaning back and relaxing a tad. “So what about my results? Were they decent?”

Minna opened a drawer on her left and pulled out a few papers, each line handwritten in red, blue, or black ink, with a plethora of notes along the margins. She removed the first one off the pile and reported, “Your physical fitness is quite excellent. According to Major Sakamoto’s observations, you have exemplary strength, endurance, and agility, facts that I won’t disagree with. However, there are a few red flags, first being your concussion history. Six such hits would render any such individual susceptible to suffering more of them, more frequently. You don’t show any symptoms, but that doesn’t mean they’re not there. I want you to go to Sergeant Miyafuji at least once a week for checkups on that front. Secondly, you have an injury history that would make the entire US 1st Division jealous and any doctor nervous. Again, I’m asking you to get checkups in case there are any lingering effects. Lastly, eschewing the fact that you have night terrors, PTSD, and possible anger management issues, your drinking needs to be regulated. After the coven, you are hereby restricted to one drink a week. Go over that, you’ll answer to me.” Wilcke then pulled out another sheet and continued, “As for your marksmanship, you scored well above satisfactory. The weapons you have are in excellent condition and you use them effectively and efficiently. We all could learn from such things.” She regarded Perrine as she uttered that last sentence for emphasis and went back to the notes, “If it weren’t for the fact that Sergeant Bishop was with us, I would call you the best shot in the squadron, a title that I don’t bandy around lightly. We’re proud of you.” Reaching for another piece of the paper pile Minna grazed over it and repeated, “Individual has superb flying skills as befitting a veteran pilot and clearly demonstrates in-depth knowledge of aerial maneuvers. Combining magical spells and effects, this individual can quickly integrate within any operational scheme that they so choose. Signed Captain Gertrude Barkhorn 501st JFW, witnessed by Lieutenant Erica Hartmann 501st JFW. Postscript, hits very hard.”

Minna gathered up all the papers and placed them back in the drawer before closing it. “Besides that, there’s very little good news concerning you Sargeant Divale.” Well fuck me. “For starters, your evasive maneuvers during the first exercise leave something to be desired. According to eyewitnesses, you took quite a few hits that would’ve been considered fatal had it not been for your preternatural pain tolerance. In addition, I’ve been receiving numerous complaints from the
groundskeepers that state, for the most part, that the amount of dust and destroyed vegetation that still presently litter the inner ring will take a while to sort out. Needless to say, they are not happy with you and neither am I. Finally, and most distressing, is how you acted during the final stages. You tunnel visioned at the worst times and it nearly got you in the end. Tunnel vision occurs when you start taking things for granted, believing that the enemy will always make the same mistake. That needs to be corrected and fast, because, sooner or later, life is going to write a check that your body can’t cash, and you’re going to be stuck footing the remainder. Moving on to the second exercise, I don’t now where to begin to criticize you. Granted, it may be the lone wolf nature in you, but you left your wingman hanging out to dry on not one but two occasions. I consider it a miracle of God that you managed to avoid complete disaster today. And your behavior towards her, even though she admits that she may have goaded you, is downright inexcusable. We function at our best when our communication is at its best. If we can’t communicate, we get mixed signals, and mixed signals equal dead pilots. I’ve buried enough of my friends and I don’t want to be the pallbearer to another from this squadron. Thankfully, me and Major Sakamoto have the perfect solution for that in mind.”

Mio pointed to both Perrine and Aaron and declared with some joviality, “Meet your new partner.” Perrine, up until that point had been watching and hearing Minna tear the warlock a new asshole, with glee. She almost smiled at a few parts, but kept her compsure. Now, that word, partners, hung in the air, echoing in her mind. The world around her spun as if she were inhaling Ismenoth’s musk once again and her breath left her momentarily, causing her to hold her chest to prevent her from hyperventilating and fainting. She looked over at Aaron who wasn’t doing so hot either, his complexion paling, feeling like a shattered mirror, broken up and reduced to a mere shell. He slumped in his chair as if his spine turned into a limp noodle and made a move to get up. “I need a drink.” he commented as he turned away.

Minna slammed both her hands down on the desk, causing Aaron to stop in his tracks and Perrine to look on with a start. “Part of being wingmen is reconciling your differences with each other. This reconciliation between you two starts right now. Unless you both make peace with each other, none of you will leave this room.” she explained. Mio then walked to the front of the door and stood there with her arms crossed. Stymied, Aaron simply got up and walked to the far wall and leaned against it. Well isn’t this a grand old bonding session. I rather die in a ditch alone, unloved, and unwanted. Then again, when I think about it, we did succeed and we did complement each other decently enough when we were on the same page. Maybe she has something here? Fuck it, let’s try it. What’s the worst that could happen?

“Well,” Aaron began, clearing his voice, “might as well get this ball rolling.” He sat back down in the chair and looked at Perrine who, predictably, turned away as to not see him. “I apologize for everything that I said.” That statement caused her to turn her head and regard him coldly. “I shouldn’t have went off on you like I did, I could’ve handled things much better, and you have my word that I will be more gentlemanly going forward.”

Man this pill is bitter. Worse than castor oil, lemon juice, and vanilla extract mixed together.
Perrine narrowed her eyes. “I will take back some of what I said about you, as long as you address me always as Lieutenant, even when you call the shots.” she demanded.

“Deal.” Aaron replied.

“Not bad you two.” Minna observed from her chair, hand on her chin. “Things are looking up.”

“They’re not good enough for me.” Mio pointed out, still standing at the door. “This animosity between you two, where does it come from? Be honest lady and gentleman.”

Perrine stood up immediately, turning to face the major, and pointed at Aaron. “I don’t like this so
called gentleman because his is anything but that. He isn’t even a man much less human. He’s a
warlock, the very things that my father and grandfather dedicated their lives to ending. This is a
monster, a feral beast that deserves nothing less than being chained up and cast to the deepest pits of
Hell from whence it came. The sargeant epitomizes everything that is wrong. I saw him pick up and
rip a Cataphract apart, drinking its blood greedily like a cat does milk. I will say this for the record
when I say that you both made a huge mistake in letting him into the squadron and letting him roam
around without so much as a minder. In addition, he is a cocky, disrespectful, mouthy, overbearing,
vviolent, childish, rank amateur who thinks that he’s the greatest thing to come about since the
creation of fire.”

Silence reigned for many seconds before Mio turned to Aaron and asked, “Rebuttal?”

Aaron stood up and copied Perrine’s position, facing Major Sakamoto and point at Clostermann. “I
don’t like this so called lady because she’s an egotistical, brownnosing, duplicitous, arrogant,
ignorant, two timing, ice queen who’d rather than save anyone from drowning would instead piss in
their mouths to help the process along.”

Mio looked at Minna who shrugged her shoulders. “At least we now know where you both stand in
relation to each other and in doing so this will act as a springboard to better things. You may both
leave now and get some supper.” she commanded. Both Perrine and Aaron saluted and left when it
was returned, politely bypassing Mio who stood off to the side of the door. When they had left,
Minna got up from her seat and ran her hands through her hair. “If this had been a movie, your
performace would’ve won you an Oscar.” she admitted smiling.

Mio smiled back, yet gave her a curt look, “Just for the record, I didn’t confer with you on this at
all.”

“I know Mio, I know.” Minna confessed, “It was all for the Lieutenant’s benefit not yours.”

Mio nodded and decided to broach a thorny subject. “Are you sure that this was the right thing to
do?”

Minna nodded slowly, whether out of confidence or fear, Mio couldn’t tell. “They both got through
the exercises and managed to work together in small doses. If we can continue to foster that
relationship, they will be a top tier team within the squadron. Plus, Perrine is the only one that hasn’t
had a dependable wingman since she came over. I had thought about using Yoshika, but ever since
that incident last week, she and Lynette might be a better match. Speaking of Sargeant Miyafuji, be
sure to tell her to meet up with Captain Yeager as they take them out for another exercise.”

“I will.” Mio responded. “What kind of exercise?”

“Shirley will be the attacker and they will be the defenders, and it will take place in Bedgebury
Woods at oh nine hundred hours.” Minna replied.

Mio stood by the door for an extra second before asking, “Do you believe that there could be foul
play in the works?”

Wilcke walked towards Mio and put her right hand on Sakamoto’s right shoulder. “For her sake I
hope not.”she said. “I'll not be any more forgiving with her than I will with him.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

An ancient malevolence seeks to claim lives in Bedgebury Woods. Without weapons, can our hero stave off the coming doom?

Chapter VI: Shot In The Dark

Every so often, I get a sixth sense that I shouldn’t be where I am right now, that something is very wrong, unnaturally so. Learned men say that it’s just a trick of the eyes, a figment of an overworked imagination. To them, I say, try to spend a few hours in those woods and come back the same man. After what I saw in the forests of old Transylvania, I doubt they could.

Diary Entry February 19th 1941

The jeep’s suspension vibrated violently as Shirley drove along the road at breakneck speed leading to Bedgebury Forest, just east of Tunbridge Wells. *Damn potholes! Weren’t they supposed to fix this last month?* Despite the state of the road, which wasn’t in all that good of a shape, they had made excellent time. The exercise area was over an hour away from Dover, but with Yeager behind the wheel, she had shaved it down to barely over thirty minutes. The day was slightly cloudy and the sun was dancing around the puffs of white, trying to show its face. They had been passing nothing but farmlands as far as the eye could see, an area populated with red barns, metal silos, and pastures full of cows, grazing on the green grass. *Almost reminds me of home. Wonder how my brothers and sisters are doing?*

She looked over at Yoshika, sitting in the passenger side, firmly grabbing the seat with both hands and looking absolutely petrified as the world went by her so fast. Shirley leaned over, still keeping her eyes on the road, and asked jokingly, “I should go faster, don’t want be late.”

Yoshika looked at her in terror and squeaked, “Please don’t! I think we should slow down! I’ve been in one accident and I don’t want to get into another!” Her mind drifted back to Japan, before she even thought about joining the war, and remembered the accident. Her cousin Michiko nearly died when the tractor driven by her grandfather swerved violently to avoid hitting a deer, propelling her out of the vehicle and down a rocky hillside. She got hurt bad and if it wasn’t for the timely arrival of Major Sakamoto… *Don’t think those thoughts Yoshika. They’ll make you think of home. I hope mom and grandmother are alright in managing the clinic without me.*

Shirley was taken aback by such an emotional outburst and decided to reduce her speed as she rounded a corner. *I guess just this once I’ll play it safe. Wouldn’t want to lose the only healer in the squadron. Poor kid, she doesn’t know what she’s missing.* She looked in the rearview mirror at her other passengers, Perrine and Aaron who sat next to each other, but on the furthest edges, nearly looking like they could fall out the doors and over the sides. They held their training weapons, shining bright purple in the sunlight, Perrine a Bren, and Aaron an MG42. *If they think they can bring me down, they’ll have to catch me first.* Smirking, she looked away and continued to drive.

Meanwhile, Perrine found it hard to keep her eyes open, regardless of the bumps and whistling wind.
She took off her glasses and stretched, yawning loud and wide. Looking in the lenses, Clostermann could detect the telltale signs of black circles under her eyes. *Didn’t get much sleep. How could I with what happened yesterday. Even when I did, it was a nightmare, with that demon chasing me throughout the castle.* She shivered at the thought and put her spectacles back on. Across the way, Aaron’s body ached and his head was pounding like someone was taking a hammer to his temples. He rubbed them and winced, silently blaming himself for the mess he was in and feeling, *I feel like the night after shore leave. That is that last time that I’ll ever give that demon bitch the time of day ever again. Didn’t think she would be so quick to get into it after I slapped her. Who are you kidding Aaron, Ismenoth will do whatever it takes to get your soul, even if it means invading your dreams and subconsciously raping your brains out. Just another example of a devil’s bargain that bit me in the ass.* He adjusted his glasses and looked over at Clostermann, who gave him a disapproving look, and tapped on the seat cushion that lay vacant between them in morse code. *(You ok over there Lieutenant?)*

She scowled as she tapped violently, *(No thanks to you and your damned Ismenoth.)* *(I didn’t mean for any of that to happen. I wanted to win that exercise just as much as you did. I am sorry.)* *(Sorry?! You’re sorry?! Sorry isn’t good enough when every time I closed my eyes last night, all I could see was her face staring at me.)* *(Oh, and you think that it’s easy for me to deal with? She’s been my traveling companion for my entire life. I deal with her every waking moment Lieutenant. Consider yourself lucky to just have been in her presence for only a little while.)* *(Speaking of lucky, is that why you look terrible this morning? Did she collect on her ‘payment’?)* When Aaron moved his hand away she continued *(You disgust me! Cavorting with demons in such a base manner! Major Sakamoto should’ve lopped your head off right then and there.)*

“Trust me, you weren’t the only one there who wished she did.” Aaron admitted.

Shirley’s ears perked up and she asked, “What was that Sargeant?”

“Nothing,” Aaron lied, “just wondering if we were there yet.”

“Did we stop?” Yeager countered. Aaron stifled a chuckle. *Wow, way to make me feel like an impatient asshole captain.* The troupe drove on, until after cresting a large hill, Bedgebury came into view, a vast woodland that spanned well over hundreds if not thousands of acres, thick with pine and elm trees with tall grasses and heather scattered about the place. Long grass grew in tall clumps around the outskirts of the forest, looking like hairy sentinels standing guard. Shirley selected a patch of grass almost two hundred feet away from the woods proper and placed it in park. “Everybody out.” she ordered. “Get your kit and fall in.” Yoshika was the first to get out, grabbing her doctor’s bag, relieved that the harrowing journey was now over and placed her feet down on the earth, nearly having an urge to get on her knees, bend over, and kiss the ground. *Thank goodness that’s over.* She breathed in deep and sighed in happiness as the juniper infused March air entered her lungs. She turned to regard the forest and for some strange reason began to grow uneasy as certain details seemed suspiciously absent. *That’s very odd. Even at this distance we should be hearing the chirping of birds or the buzzing of insects. There’s not so much as a fly about the place. Plus, it’s sunny out and the trees are thin, so why is it dark when I look into it.* The opening of the passenger doors brought her out of her doubts. Perrine exited out the jeep and closed her door softly while Aaron just vaulted over the side, the suspension visibly jumping up a inch as he did so, racking the bolt to his MG42. *(The exercise isn’t ready yet Sargeant Divale.” Shirley noted. “Don’t want to cause an accident now do we?”*
“Sorry Captain Yeager.” Aaron apologized, putting the safety on. “Old habits die hard.”

Shirley shelved that away and gestured for everyone to gather around. “Ok folks,” she began when everyone was close enough to hear, “the rules are like yesterday except, there is to be no flight, and you two are the defenders and I am the attacker. Sargeant Miyafuji will act as a medic in case anyone takes a bad fall from a root or a rabbit hole. Understood?” Everyone nodded in agreement and Yeager turned and pointed at the woods. “Let’s go!” she stated and she set the pace with a brisk walk, Perrine scampering off to her side and Yoshika and Aaron bringing up the rear. Their feet made a reedy crunching and swishing as the grass was trampled into mats with every step. Yoshika’s unease began to grow as she moved amongst the long grass, swearing that she could see faces in the green blades leering at her and her friends. She kept a clear eye on the ground looking for any signs of recent animal spoor or a flightless bird’s nest. Nothing. Not a God damn thing. Miyafuji lookeoed up at Aaron who was also being wary of his surroundings.

A bright light and a door is seen, red and inviting. It’s pushed open by an unseen hand and ears pick up a hard click of a hammer being cocked. A steady finger wraps around a cold steel trigger and across the threshold we go. A nose sniffs the air, and starts to identify aged carpet, recently varnished wood, and the aroma of coffee and cinnamon from further within. Vision looks down a long hallway, the walls and ceilings carved wood, stained an burnt oak, the carpet a thick brown. On plinths of some rough hewn veined rock, placed every few feet or so away from each other, were life sized statues of men and women in the nude, locked in various poses and emotions. They are exquisitely crafted, the work of a master, so real that one would expect them to come to life at any moment. Realization kicks in, these are too real. A free hand, large and calloused, brushes its fingers over the foot of one of the creations, expecting to feel polished stone, yet instead, running over molded wax. The body heat causes the touched area to deform and run, like a candle to a flame. A hole opens, ejecting a rank and foul odor, green yellow liquid bubbles out and onto the brown carpeted floor moving with the speed of tree sap in winter. Sight recoils in disgust and horror. The reek of decay hangs in the air as a voice is heard down the hallway, emanating from a part that refused to be illuminated by the open door. It is that of woman laughing, a cacophony of hisses lingering like a lovers kiss. It starts to speak. “Come on in little man and know me better.”

“You alright Sargeant Divale?” Yoshika asked, knocking Aaron out of his memories. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Aaron answered, pushing a clump of long grass away from him with the machine gun barrel, “except everything in front of me.”

“You feel it too then.” Yoshika remarked. “Something is wrong here, very wrong. Like we shouldn’t be here.”

Aaron nodded in agreement. “No bird, no animals, hell, even no wind blowing through the trees. Nothing is moving, it’s stagnant. Everything is screaming stay away or I’ll do something bad to you. Awfully strange that they can’t see it.” He gestured to Yeager and Clostermann who passed the opening treeline into the forest, the ancient pines soaring high, branches interlocked and bent, like an arch.

“Maybe they don’t sense it like we do?” Yoshika suggested.

“Like, instincts?” Aaron asked.

Yoshika shook her head, and clarified, “I have no idea what you’ve seen out in the world Aaron, but I deeply believe that there are some people out there that are more in tune with the world’s other side. Eila for example most certainly is, with her precog powers.”
“What about you?” Aaron queried, as he came to the threshold of the heart of darkness. Yoshika paused, as if reluctant or unwilling to go further into the subject. Divale caught the mood she was in and added, “If you don’t want to talk about it now, I understand.”

Miyafuji smiled in thanks and stared into the woods, the figures of Shirley and Perrine getting more indistinct as they ventured deeper. *I think it has to do with my father, the work he did.* She gazed up at Aaron and he braced himself as if he were about to enter an enemy bunker and motioned for her to follow him, to follow behind him to be exact. Thus, the two entered Bedgebury Woods. Just a few feet past the natural unnatural archway, the ground became littered with a thick layer of pine needles with ringed clusters of concrete grey pine cones, wisps of spider webs cocooned around them. Most of the pine needles were an acorn nut brown, dried out to the point where even Yoshika, who wasn’t the most experienced in such things as tracking, could see where her fellow pilots stepped, the sheddings depressed into the unseen soil and crushed into powder. The trunks of the trees looked like dogs with mange, barren patches that gouged into the meat, leaving desiccated wood behind, the bark in a position akin to a hangnail. Looking up, the slightly cloudy sky became fractured into hundreds of blue shards with the occasional yellow of the sun peeking through, slowly strangled into nothingness as the branches splayed out from the main bodies like the heads the fabled hydra. *Still no sounds of any life in here. What are we getting into?*

Aaron, panned the MG42 side to side, taking measured steps through the fallen foliage. He sniffed the air like wolf and squinted his eyes, staring off past their position. Some fifty feet away, Yeager and Clostermann were standing in a little clearing, the earth clear of debris and dark like coffee grounds. *Strange that there’s a clearing this far into the woods. They would normally be further in towards the exact center, not right within a few hundred feet. Was this place inhabited at one point?* Then his vision found something that stuck out of the foliage, a stone marker, a mini obelisk made of carved granite. Aaron knew what it was immediately. *An old trail marker or riding route? What about markings?* Quickly, he cycled his gaze at the trunks of every tree near that monument and found quiet a few marks, but they weren’t dusty and old with age, nor pronounced like they would be, even after the passage of many years. The marks were small and irregular. Moreover, the wood looked fresh.

“Are you two going to dawdle or ante up and kick in?” Shirley asked with her arms crossed, growing impatient.

Yoshika quickly scampered towards them with Aaron progressing at the quick step. “Was this forest inhabited at one point recently?” he asked, still looking around. “I mean, just look.” Divale pointed with his left hand at the clearing boundaries and back at the route marker he found. “That’s not a natural outcropping and those marks on the trunks are fresh. Plus, look there at how angled the boundary is with the forest and the clearing. God doesn’t work in straight lines.”

Both the witches looked at what Aaron was showing them, and he could see that it was having an effect. “Maybe it was in the past,” Shirley countered after digesting what she saw, “These woods have been talked about since before the Norman Invasion, but the British Government has been trying to get this place made into a preserve of some sort and has restricted the types of people that can be here. No one has set foot in this forest for a long time from what I’ve heard.”

“Or maybe not.” Perrine piped up, looking intently at the ground a few feet to the right of the group. Shirley followed her stare and saw what at first glance appeared to be rather smooth rounded pebbles, slightly embedded in the ground, but they were too reflective for that. She and Perrine stepped to the odd sight and got on their haunches. Shirley pick one of them up and patted off the dirt. The pebble ended up being a brass shell casing of a small caliber. “Casings,” Clostermann continued, “And a lot of them.”
Yeager placed the spent round shell near her nose and sniffed. *Recently fired too.* “Someone was here recently. Poacher probably.”

“More like poachers.” Aaron stated, holding two other casings in his hand that didn’t match the one that Shirley had. “This one is from a shotgun and that other from a rifle,” he explained. “My guess is there were three and that is probably why the trunk markings are fresh.”

“But,” Yoshika began filled with doubts, “the marks are all around us. So if they were made with bullets, they were firing in all directions.”

Everyone looked at each other and didn’t speak, the implication of Yoshika’s statement too terrifying to comprehend. “The question that remains now is what were they aiming at and where were they?” Perrine deduced. It was then she noticed something on Yoshika’s upper shoulder, a faint red dot of blood. “Are you hurt Sergeant Miyafuji?” she asked, pointing to her shoulder. Yoshika ran her right hand against the dot and felt cool blood come off the stain. She looked at the crimson streak in her right hand with shock and fear.

*What in the world?* Suddenly another dot appeared, the impact indicating that it came from above them. Everyone saw the blood drop manifest and looked up as one. There, high above the group, suspended upside down by the ankles with thin strands of piano wire like marionettes, were the bodies off three individuals, mangled and mutilated beyond recognition, mouths rictus locked in terror.

Miyafuji couldn’t contain her horror and screamed, her cry echoing throughout the forest, cut short by dry heaves as nausea started to kick in. She went a ways away in the direction that they came from and threw up. Shirley went over to Yoshika to keep an eye on her, leaving Perrine and Aaron to the grisly sight.

“Guess we know where the poachers went.” Aaron observed without emotion.

Perrine gave him a look of shock. “Does this not affect you at all?” she asked.

“I’ve seen worse things out there Lieutenant.” Aaron answered. Shaking her head, Clostermann turned and walked away deeper into the clearing, yet when she took her seventh step, her right boot landed on something that felt funny. *What the-* The thought evaporated as a gunshot rang out from within the darkness. Screaming through the air, a cluster of buckshot struck her training Bren full on on the reciever, shattering that part into purple fragments, scattering like shrapnel from a grenade, all of this happening too fast for her to raise her shields in time. One of the pieces slammed into her chest, just above the heart. Perrine felt the impact, the brief burst of pain and heat preceding the gradual warming sensation of losing her life force all over her chest. Before she could process the fact that she had been shot, Clostermann fainted, falling down like a felled tree.

Yoshika and Shirley whipped around in time to see Perrine fall. Aaron unfurled his wings, sending his right underneath her body, cradling her fall, while stamping the other into the ground forming a barrier. “Everyone stay put!” Shirley barked. “Sargent! What happened!”

He craned his neck and looked in the direction of where the shot came from and spied the gun smoke. It was a mounted old fashioned firearm, looking like a blunderbuss, the trigger wound with wire, a long strand leading to where he remembered Perrine standing on. “It was a graveyard gun captain.” Aaron reported back. “Remote triggered by a pressure plate looks like. I don’t see anymore out there.” He looked over at Clostermann whose blue overcoat front was becoming purple with every heartbeat. “She’s hit bad! We need a medic!”

Yeager tapped Yoshika on the shoulder. “Get over to her and do your job Sergeant! Stay within your tracks in case there are more! I’m contacting the commander! Go!” she ordered.
Yoshika, recovering from her heaving, ran over to the duo, taking care to stay within her own tracks. Have to hurry, Perrine has thin blood and needs coagulant. She set down her bag and did a quick assessment, feeling Closterrmann’s pulse. Wound above the heart, lots of bleeding due to capillary clusters. Still breathing and pulse is still strong. Maybe just a flesh wound. Opening the bag, Yoshika reached in and felt wetness and broken glass within. Oh please no. She pulled out a few pieces and confirmed her worst fear, the coagulate bottle had fractured, probably from a stray shot by the boobytrap. No problem, I’ll just use plan b. But first, I need to get that coat off. Fishing out a pair of trauma shears, Yoshika said to Aaron, “Keep her still and angle her head.” Aaron did as he was told and Miyafuji went to work, ripping through the fabric.

“I repeat,” Yeager called into the communicator as she moved to the makeshift triage station, “we have a pilot down! Lieutenant Closterrmann is wounded!”

“What is her condition?” Minna rang back, concern in her voice.

Shirley with one final lunging step got to the doctor and protector, Yoshika opening up Perrines overcoat with the shears. She grimaced as she saw an irregularly shaped puncture wound, fairly deep in the flesh. Blood was everywhere and Aaron was daubing the area clean with towels. “Looks bad, but Sargeants Miyafuji and Divale are working on it now.” Yeager reported.

“Ok captain,” Wilcke replied, “your orders are to get her patched up and get out. The exercise is considered cancelled. I’ll get on the line with the local garrison commander at Tunbridge Wells to see what I can do to get that area locked down. Minna out.”

With the job done, Yoshika gently peeled the thick coat away as well as the bra, revealing Perrine’s exposed chest, gently elevating and receding, like a red and white crimson tide. Aaron turned away, allowing for privacy at such a time and stared into the woods, searching for further threats. With the clothing off, Miyafuji saw that one of the shards of the magic Bren failed to dissipate, living off the energy of Closterrmann’s magic to sustain itself in the material world after being virtually destroyed. Then, she saw something else that made her heart sink, near the end of the shard, angled towards her heart, was a fully live painball that too was sapping the witches magic. “What are you doing Sargeant?!” Shirley asked with force. “Do your job! We have to get out of here!”

Yoshika turned to face Yeager, her face contorted with helplessness and dispair. “I can’t do anything! Look!” she replied, gesturing to the wound and the broken coagulate bottle. Shirley took one look at both and breathed deep, knowing why. “The coagulate is busted. I have nothing left to stem the bleeding. If I use my magic, it will tighten the flesh and drive that shard into the painball, setting it off. With it being this close to her heart, the concussive blast will either put her into cardiac arrest, or even pulp the organ.”

Shit this is bad. Perrine has thin blood and she’ll bleed out if we can’t get that under control. Could he do anything? Shirley gave Aaron a tap on the shoulder and asked, “Is there anything you can do for her?”

Aaron turned and looked at the situation for the first time, and furrowed his brow in thought. After a brief second, he nodded, saying, “Yes there is. I can give her something that will stop the bleeding, but it will only work for a short time, so act quickly.” He turned to Yoshika and added, “Give me a scalpel and get ready with the morphine.” Quickly, Miyafuji did as she was told, handing him the scalpel and readying the tiny morphine syringe. Both witches looked on as Aaron ran the blade over his right index finger, opening up the skin. He handed it back and applied pressure slightly under the self inflicted incision, closing his eyes as he did so. “Obnitor.” he said. A light green aura grew in intensity as a single drop of blood seeped from the cut. With delicate care, he positioned the finger over the wound and let the droplet fall into the hole. Yoshika saw the edges of the hole darken and
the surrounding lost blood evaporate into the air like smoke, reeking of rust.

“Amazing!” Yoshika exclaimed. “You cauterized and cleaned the-”

“That’s all fine and dandy, but we need you to get that out of her Sargeant.” Shirley interjected. “As Sergeant Divale just told you, the clock is ticking.” She noticed Perrine’s eyes fluttering as she regained consciousness. “She’s waking up.”

Perrine’s world came in blurs as she opened her eyes. Large furry blotches surrounded her, making her uneasy. “Where? Who?” she managed to wheeze out before he pain in her chest flared up again, stifling her questions.

“Stay perfectly still Lieutenant.” Shirley’s voice ordered. “The bleeding is under control, but you’re not out of the woods yet. A piece of the gun is lodged perilously close to a painball that is deep enough to cause lethal damage if it goes off. Keep your breathing steady and don’t move a muscle, or else you’re a box job. Understand?”

Perrine froze. Oh God. This is going to require surgery. I hope Yoshika is as good a doctor as Doctor Domino says she is. She looked at her chest with just her eyes, doing her damnedest to keep it shallow as possible, seeing the wound. Clostermann also saw the frayed stitching of her coat lying on the ground as well as her bra that resembled a bloody rag than underwear. Angrily, she snarled at Yoshika, “What the hell did you do, you country peasant! This coat was a part of my family for generations and you destroyed it!”

Yoshika was taken aback by such a verbal onslaught, looking like she was about to cry, but Aaron stepped into the fray, replying coldly without turning around, “The nature of your injury necessitated taking extreme measures to save your life. If she had tried to remove your clothing the old fashioned way, a ruined heirloom would’ve been the least of your worries.”

“You shut up!” Perrine retorted. “You don’t understand how important this was to me!”

Oh, for fucks sake!” Aaron came back, his patience clearly at an end. “If you are truly hurt over it’s loss, than after we get you patched up, give me your measurements and I have an exact copy made up for you at Gieves and Hawkes!” He paused to catch his breath and added with less fire, “On me, all of it, deal?”

Perrine stared at him wide eyed. They are some of the best tailors in all of England! “But that would be very expensive,” she thought aloud, “and besides, don’t they do men’s clothing?”

“I can afford it,” Aaron answered, “believe me. Plus, I’m sure that if they were to receive a larger sum, they can accommodate you.” He reached behind him and pointed at Yoshika, “Get that morphine administered and start the surgery.”

Nodding, Miyafuji wiped the injection area, Perrine’s upper left arm, and applied the syringe. Clostermann winced as the needle stung her flesh and relaxed as the powerful sedative worked it’s magic. Aaron, knowing that she will need room, got up from his position and walking forward into the gloomy beyond, sidestepping the dead bodies hanging in the air like a deer corpses outside a hunting lodge, looking over the earth for more trip triggers. Shirley came up behind him, making sure her steps were in line with his. They both looked onwards into the interior of Bedgebury Woods for many seconds, before Aaron broke the ice in a low voice, “I’m no Peter captain, but this smells awfully fishy.”

Shirley nodded, “Yes it does. Those bodies weren’t set here as a warning, but bait. The trap just adds more to the fact that someone wanted people to investigate, to come here.”
“Which then raises the question,” Aaron stated, “who else knows we’re here?”

Yoshika cut into Perrine’s chest for a fraction of an inch away on the furthest side of the painball, allowing it to slide backwards into the cavity. She then pulled out a pair of tweezers and gently felt for a point to extract the shard. This is the most important piece. Without the shard, I can just remove the painball by hand and cast it away. With methodical precision, she found a level surface, and grabbed the shard piece. With her eyes on the painball at all times, Miyafuji pulled it out, the magic dissipating once it’s connection was severed, and dissolving into pieces. It was then she heard a fit of low crying and immediately looked down at Perrine. “I’m sorry if hurt you,” she apologized.

“What?” Perrine asked, very confused.

“I heard you crying and I wanted to apologise.” Yoshika explained.

“I wasn’t crying.” Perrine replied.

“Then who was?” Yoshika asked. Another round of racking sobs reached her ears. Apparently, Perrine heard it too and darted her eyes back and forth to find the source.

“Do any of you two hear that?” Clostermann asked.

“Hear what Lieutenant?” Shirley queried, turning around.

“Where?!” he demanded, clearly scared. Then, out from the dusky interior, everyone could now hear the grieving echoes of a woman, long heartbreakingly painful anguish that at once filled the heart with sadness and chilled the blood to the temperature of December snow. Aaron, planted his wings down in a wide V formation, covering all three of the witches behind him. Shirley got behind his left wing and crouched down.

“What is that captain?” Perrine called out, getting uneasy at not being able to do anything about her situation.

“Some questions are best left unanswered.” Shirley curtly replied. “Keep your voices down. All of you. How far along are you Yoshika?”

“Just need to remove the painball, clean and sanitize, and then seal with magic.” Yoshika reported.

“Work faster.” Yeager ordered and looked at Aaron. He returned her stare and saw that she was very afraid of whatever it was that lay out of sight. “You know what that is don’t you?” she asked in a low voice that betrayed her true emotions.

Aaron simply said, “Banshee. Not something I encountered before, but I can tell that this entity is big and very powerful. It’s hunting us right now, trying to see where it can get to us.” He looked at his MG42 ruefully, “And here we are armed with training guns. Do you have anything on you that can fire actual bullets?”

Shirley clicked the heels of her shoes together and out of the sides popped two thin holdout pistols, FP-Liberators and she handed them over to him. He took them, each one nearly becoming invisible in his grip. “Can you hold it back long enough for us to get out?”

Aaron thought about it and shook his head, “I honestly don’t know, but I’ll do my best.”
“Got it!” Yoshika exclaimed from behind them. They both turned and saw her holding the bloody painball in the tweezers, Perrine looking at her with relief and a meek smile. Suddenly, the crying became a high pitched wailing, and the ground far in front of them seemed to move, rippling like the Channel. Aaron turned to Shirley and gave her a look, one that said in no uncertain terms, get out now.

“We’re leaving now!” Shirley barked running to the improvised triage.

“But I need to—” Yoshika began, but Yeager was on a mission, scooping up Perrine in her arms and pushing Yoshika away with her body. “The bag—”

“Leave it!” Shirley interrupted. “Move Sargeant! Move!” The words sparked Yoshika to action and she ran after Shirley who was sprinting like Jesse Owens towards the jeep. In the meantime, Aaron kept perfectly still, pistols trained at the darkness as the crying seemed to intensify, lamenting the lost of its quarry. He listened through the keening as the footsteps of his squadron mates got softer and softer, until he heard nothing. Getting up, placing both pistols in front of him, he walked slowly into the shrouded beyond, looking at the ground and into the treeline for ambush points and traps. His boots made no sound and the wailing ceased. The silence was deafening. Sweat beaded along Aaron’s brow as he scanned for the banshee admist the gloom. As he continued on, the quivering earth began to become clearer. He wrinkled his nose as he saw a carpet of worms, thick and long as pencils, wriggling and writhing above the surface as if from a heavy rain, sounding like a nuns rosary beads being rubbed together. They parted as he made his way through, squirming away from his personage, like torches keeping away rats or snakes. Where are you?

“You’re a long way from home, little man.” a woman’s voice mocked, calling out behind him. “You look homesick.”

Aaron kept perfectly still, ears straining to hear any changes in position. “You have to have a home for that.” he deadpanned. Slowly, he turned around and was confront by a true monster of greater proportions than himself. The banshee was tall, eclipsing the nine foot mark, ghost pale and emaciated, bones jutting out from the long white gown she wore, one that billowed in an unfelt wind. Aaron couldn’t see her feet, but was sure that they were massive, judging by the broken toenails that emerged from the gown bottom, each as long as one of his machine gun bullets. Her spindly arms terminated with long fingers that stretched out for a good three feet, finger nails razor blade thin. Finally, the face, oh the horrible face. Her mouth was a mass of needle point sharp teeth, yellowed and decayed, the lips curling down and away as if laden with weights, revealing the infected gum line. She was smiling, a grin that went up above the temples, dimples level with the upper portions of the skull. Her spider web grey thin hair stuck out in patches that seemed to have no pattern, barely covering two beady glazed eyes and a sunken nose that sniffed the air like a bloodhound.

“Put those weapons away boy,” she demanded, pointing at him with one of her clawed hands, “it isn’t your time yet.”

“I would if I could, but I feel very insecure without them.” Aaron quipped. “If you think you’re going to have your way with those witches like you did those poachers, you’re sadly mistaken. You have to get through me first.”

The ancient wight-like creature laughed in cruel amusement. “It wouldn’t be that much of a challenge. Those won’t hurt me, and neither will you.”

Aaron lowered his glasses and glared at the fiend, his stare causing it to recoil a touch backwards. “You want to bet?” he boasted.

“Oh you stupid warlock, you stupid man.” the banshee replied with sadness. “Don’t you see that you
are on the wrong side of the coin? What can those witches or the humans they protect offer you? You aren’t a protector or even a friend in their eyes; you’re just another monster like me, twisted by fate to walk the earth, to be ridiculed and shunned. They will never accept you for what you are, yet you cling to them like a babe to its mother. Why?”

“To hear my answer as to why I serve them,” Aaron started, “I must first hear why you don’t.”

The banshee wheezed and wailed, the pain of recollection tormenting its inner being. “It was during the days when the just King Charles the elder fought to keep his kingdom in one piece. Back then, these woods were inhabited by good folk; honest, hardworking, and loyal Englishmen and Englishwomen. We supported his right to rule as he was the king and our protector, our savior, our rock from which we could climb towards a brighter future. My husband and my two sons enlisted and fought with the Royalists against those faithless Parliamentarians. At Marston Moor, they all fell, victims of the marksman’s bullet. Parts of our village tried to flee, but there was a full regiment of horse blockading the woods, denying any who sought escape. They pleaded for mercy, and received none as they were driven back by steel and lead. They sat there, starving us of food and water. People died in droves over the next few weeks.” She stared at him, her voice changing from lament to ire. “My family, my neighbors, my friends, my people were treated like dogs and left to die, wasting away. Towards the end, I entered the church, long since abandoned as a place of worship from the death of the clergymen and nuns, and prayed for redemption, for vengence against those that committed these terrible wrongs against us. As I cried and cried to the wooden cross, the effigy of our Lord lying prostrate in his final moments on earth, I saw a demon appear at the pulpit, baleful red and horned. He walked toward me and raised my soaked head by the hand and told me that he would grant me the power of revenge in exchange for my soul. As my grief knew no bounds, I accepted saying that if God wouldn’t help me, the Devil would.” She looked at her arms and hands before adding, “They all died horrible deaths, every one of them justified for the evil that men do in war. Though I’m no longer whole, and forever denied entrance into the hallowed halls of the kingdom up on high, it was worth the price.”

Aaron listened to her tale and couldn’t help but feel pity for the banshee. He shook his head in stunned silence and said, “Your story resonates within me, for I too have wanted redemption for my blood bound sins.” He took a step backwards, “As agreed, I give my answer. I fight alongside them in the hopes that I can one day become what I once was, to fully become human again. I will pay any price, sacrifice all that I have, even my soul if it meant that I can enjoy life as one of them.”

“You embark on a fool’s errand my friend.” the banshee retorted. “They made sure that your kind were beyond help.”

“I won’t stop trying, not until the day I die.” Aaron answered.

“And you will warlock.” the undead guaranteed. “Yet, in return for hearing my words, I will grant you and your erstwhile friends mercy this one time.” It turned and gestured to the where the witches ran off to. “Leave this wood and never return, for if you do, you will pay the ultimate price.” Aaron backtracked the way he came, gazing at the banshee for a good while before she flexed her fingers and hunched down in a stance that reminded one of a tiger before pouncing on its prey. “Of course, I never specified for how long.”

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Yoshika’s legs burned with exertion and her breathing was heavy and labored as she struggled to keep up with Shirley who was already halfway into the long grass field. She took a glance behind her for the third time, trying to see if Aaron was tailing them, but there was nothing. “Captain!” Miyafuji called out, pausing every few words to breathe. “Where’s Aaron? Why isn’t he with us?”
“No time to explain!” Yeager barked without looking back. “We have to get out of here.” She looked down at Perrine and saw that the wound was bleeding again, streams of vitae running over her hands, warm to the touch. “Hang in there Perrine. Just a little bit longer and Yoshika will close that wound. Stay with me.”

“I’m trying Shirley, God knows.” Perrine answered back, her voice full of pain and a tad bit of weakness from blood loss. “I don’t want to die here.” she stated with fear in her voice, her hands clutching Shirley’s arms.

“You won’t, because here we are.” Shirley answered triumphantly. Sure enough, she had reached the jeep and with a great feat of strength jumped up over the rear of the vehicle and landed fully in the back. She gently set Perrine down in the luggage area and feverishly worked to get the seats moved up to allow for more room for Yoshika to work. Shirley bent over the seat and reached underneath to find the rear drivers side passenger seat latch. Her fingers grazed a bar of metal and she grabbed it. Shunting her body forwards, the seat moved forward until it failed to progress any further. One down, one to go.

Footsteps could be heard and Yeager turned to see Yoshika finally make it to the jeep, her face red and legs looking like rubber bands with how they were languidly propelling her body forward.

Miyafuji was spent and collapsed on her hands and knees trying to go on, but her body wouldn’t let her. I can’t stop here. Perrine needs my help. She looked up and saw the tiniest bit of Perrine’s face over the lip of the jeep tailgate, pale and getting worse by the minute. Gritting her teeth and calling upon the last reserves of energy she had, Yoshika forced herself up from the grass and climbed into the back, just as Shirley moved the last seat up and away. Suddenly, two loud pops could be heard coming from the woods followed by an ear splitting shriek that echoes for miles around them. Everyone was spellbound, frozen in fear.

Shirley recovered the fastest and ordered, “Yoshika, get that wound closed! We’re leaving!” As she climbed up and over the right rear passenger seat, using her long legs to her advantage, she wondered if Aaron was alright and if she should wait. This is a pickle now isn’t it? Do I stay here and wait for him, or so I get the hell out of here? Even he said he might not be able to stop it. May even be dead for all I know. We can’t stay here, exposed and unarmed like this. We have to go. Aaron, I’m sorry. I had to make a choice. She sat down in the drivers seat and turned the key, the engine roaring to life. Then, she heard a sound that didn’t at all remind her of what a standard jeep engine should sound like. Furrowing her brow and staring her ears, Yeager listened intently. The hell is that sound. It’s almost like words. Could it be- She whipped around and to her relief, the form of Aaron Divale emerged from the treeline, running like a escaped convict from a pack of guard dogs, clutching the holdout pistols like relay batons, pumping his legs into the earth so fast that one could mistake them for cloth covered jackhammers. His face was concentrated focus yet his eyes spoke of what he had to witness.

“Captain Yeager!” she screamed loudly, closing the distance. “Get that piece of shit moving and drive, drive like you stole it!” Needing no further nudging, Shirley put the gear in drive and slammed her foot on the accelerator, the jeep jumping forwards. She built up speed quickly, but despite that, Aaron was gaining with every steep and he leapt at an angle. The body of the warlock sailed through the air and landed square in the front passenger side seat, the impact causing the steering wheel to veer hard to the right, but Shirley had anticipated that and propped her body against the hard jolt, maintaining their present escape path. Aaron gasped for air, not to ease his muscles, but to calm himself down from his fright, tossing the pistols onto the middle seat between him and Shirley.

“Alright,” he said, wiping the sweat from his brow, “alright, that scared me shitless, and I already went.” He took off his glasses and placed them in his breast pocket, running his hand through his sweat drenched hair. “When we get back, I’m going to need a shower, or two.” Remembering, he
turned around and regarded the two the back. “Is everyone alright?” he asked.

Yoshika nodded, the aura of her blue healing magic at work. “I’m closing the wound now. The bleeding is no longer an issue. Lieutenant Clostermann will be okay.”

Perrine looked at Aaron, who visibly breathed a sigh of relief, and asked, “What was that awful screaming in the woods? Where did it come from?”

Aaron looked over at Shirley who gave him a small nod. Well, they might as well know now because they’re going to know about it later. “Have either of you two ever felt uneasy about being in a particular place before? Even though everything is fine and nothing out of the ordinary can be discerned, you just feel unwelcome and get that feeling of icy fingers up and down your spine?”

Both the witches nodded and Aaron continued, “You see, certain places in this world were the sites of horrible events. Though long since passed, the trauma still resonates, contaminating that place with malignant influences. What happened in Bedgebury Woods produced a banshee of great power.”

Yoshika and Perrine trembled in fear at the mention of the word banshee. “Will it pursue us?” Perrine hurriedly asked.

“No it won’t.” Aaron assured, “ Spirits of that nature cannot pass beyond their domains. Unless an extraordinary event happens, the banshee cannot leave those woods. We are safe.”

“Speaking of extraordinary event,” Shirley brought up, “Trying to tell this tale to the commander is going to take something beyond my power to explain.”

Aaron placed his hand on her right shoulder and offered, “I’ll do the talking if you want.”

Shirley smiled and gratefully replied, “Bless for your bravery Sargeant Divale.” She leaned in close and said under her breath, “Don’t let it get you into trouble.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The coven commences and Aaron Divale must face his peers one on one.

Chapter VII: The Opening Arguments

*The unthinkable, the inconceivable, and ultimately the undeniable has occurred. As one body, they all wanted me to be the one. I am shocked beyond all words. Why me? Why not anyone else who is better suited? Whatever reason they had, they never told me. Maybe they see something in me that I don’t, or maybe I do see it, yet am blind to it. God only knows.*

Diary Entry December 26th 1939

Minna placed the large black telephone back on the rest with a small click and looked at Aaron sitting across from her, the only one from the incident in Bedgebury Woods in the hanger office, sitting comfortably in the chair. Mio, as always, was by her side. “That was the garrison commander of Tunbridge Wells. He’s taking elements of his defense force and cordoning off any traffic in and around Bedgebury Woods.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover,” Aaron stated, “and not a lot of people to do it with.”

Wilcke nodded and replied, “And that was what I told him too, but he feels that he’s responsible for what happened there today. This gesture on his part is his version of making amends, of which I’m thankful.” She looked at Aaron and smiled, genuinely, an expression that took him by surprise. “Speaking of thankful,” Minna remarked, holding out her right hand, palm open, “you did very good today with your conduct. Without you, we may have lost a pilot. Thank you.”

Divale shook the commander’s hand, smiling back as he did so. “Anytime.” He rolled his shoulders carefully after withdrawing his hand and added, “Is she alright?”

“According to Sergeant Miyafuji, she’ll be out of commission for at least a week, maybe more if the rehabilitation doesn’t yield immediate fruits.” Mio reported. “Perrine is fine.”

Aaron sighed in relief inwardly, adjusting his glasses. *Then I have done good today. Maybe this will show them all that I’m worth my word. Even she will have to admit that.* “So what happens now?” he asked.

Minna got up from her seat and walked toward the door. Stopping at the threshold she turned and explained, “Now we all get to go to the coven. Are you ready?”

Aaron rose to his full height and shrugged his shoulders. “Bring it on. I’ve nothing to hide.” He was about to turn towards the door before he decided to ask the commander a question. “Do you both
“You gave you word that you can control it, confine it to a specific place.” Mio pointed out behind him, reassuring him. “You haven’t lied yet from what I’ve seen and I don’t think you’d start now.”

“I appreciate it.” Aaron answered. Wilcke opened the door for Aaron and he went through, Mio following behind him, closing the door upon her passing. The hanger was empty and their steps made a harsh clopping that echoed within the building, the door to the front of the hanger slightly ajar. Minna furrowed her brow and pointed, Mio nodding in response. *May have to lodge a complaint with the housekeeping staff again. I will not suffer vermin and flies in my hanger.* The sounds of an idling engine and the smell of exhaust wafted through the open portal. The trio continued on their way before Minna pushed the door open into the March afternoon, the sun covered up by dark clouds, casting the world a shade darker than it should. Hajikata saluted from the drivers seat of the jeep and the three all piled in, Minna front passenger, Aaron and Mio in the back. When that all strapped themselves in, Warrant Officer Keisuke shifted gears and wheeled around, turning towards the open outer wall gate. Thinkinig about something, Aaron asked Minna, “Did they have any trouble getting the crate here?”

Minna tilted her head and answered, “Not at all, though I am a little puzzled as to why you took so much.”

Aaron sheepishly replied, “It was only what I deemed essential. You know, personal things that I didn’t think deserved being neglected.”

“I fail to see how three cases of wine and nineteen bottles of calvados can be deemed essential sargeant.” Mio quipped with a cocked eyebrow.

“Needed something to wash down what I had to eat over there.” Aaron defended.

“Such as Sargeant Divale?” Hajikata asked as he went through the gate and began the laborious turn to the vehicle depot.

“Boiled shoe leather, grubs, and maybe some scrapings from a two day old MRE packet.” Aaron rattled off. Minna and Mio stared at him wide eyed, even the normally professional warrant officer took a gander at him from the rearview mirror. “And that was on a good day.”

Minna turned away and shook her head in disbelief. *And yet you’ve maintained that physique. Wow, just wow. Dieticians the world over would pay a fortune for your secrets.* She saw the open depot door and ran her hands through her hair. *Now it’s time to see if he really can deliver on his promise.* Hajikata slowed his speed as the jeep entered the vhicle depot proper, a well lit concrete floored interior that was sectioned off with yellow lines, each space occupied by some method of transportation. On the left was another jeep, a covered troop transport, and a duo of motorcycles, one with a side car and the other without. On the right were the heavy hitters, a Flakpanzer IV mobile anti aircraft cannon, a Panther medium tank, and a Ferdinand heavy tank destroyer. Work benches like the ones in the hanger were spread out along the walls, filled with tools. Fuel reserves were located in the back, red and yellow caution paint around the compartments. Heavy chains and pulley systems lined the ceiling, hitched onto gimbals and rollers that can facilitate repositioning with ease. Towards the middle, an empty space could be seen, or, at least, it would’ve been empty had it not been for thirteen steel chairs being arranged in a half moon formation around a single brown leather revolving chair, a wooden table next to it. Off to the rear of the gathering place was an enormous crate, cobbled together with a varied assortment of rough hewn planks from fishing boat hulls, doors, even antique street signs, their jingles still visible. The front of it was open, wide open, filled from floor to ceiling with all manner of bric- a-brac. An overflowing can of nails sat away from the gaping maw, their heads bent and twinkling from the overhead lights. A pulley system activated as the jeep
rolled into a parking spot, the door to the outside world closing. Hajikata killed the engine and quickly opened Mio’s passenger door with Minna and Aaron getting out themselves.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to get a few things from my luggage.” Aaron remarked politely. Minna nodded and he jogged over into the crate, almost jumping in with the gusto of a dog leaping into a lake to fetch a stick. She turned to Mio and pointed at both her eyes and then at Aaron’s new position. Keep an eye on him. Walking to the seat furthest in the back, the one in the center of the throng, Wilcke sat down just as the depot door closed with a resounding finality.

“You all be seated, the coven is about to begin.” she called out. From behind her position, a door opened and stepped the entirety of the 501st JFW along with Doctor Domino who was bringing up the rear, holding a large brown bag. They all took positions at random, the byproducts of Minna’s orders. As seats filled up, rummaging could be heard from within the crate, loud and somewhat frantic. She looked over at Mio who strangely held her hand outwards from her face, averting her gaze. Mio saw Wilcke look at her and pantomimed dressing. What in the world is he doing?

Finally, Aaron emerged from the wooden museum and the room exploded into peals of laughter. He wore long denim pants, the blue long since faded to whitish grey, and an unbuttoned pink shirt. His right hand carried a bottle of calvados with two glasses and his left held a thick tome with a piece of paper jutting out like a bookmark.

“What’s so funny?” Aaron asked loudly in bewilderment, as he sat his effects down on the table and sat in the revolving chair. He glanced at Lucretia and Hajikata and furrowed his brow, puzzled as to their inclusion at this meeting. What are they doing here?

“You’re looking good Sergeant Divale.” Erica gasped as she tried to stifle her laughter, holding her sides. “Pink really does suit you well.”

“In my defense, this was cold stream guard red when I got it in ‘39. Plus, if I’m going to answer questions, I’d like to do it in clothes that make me feel comfortable.” Aaron explained. He looked over at Minna who got up from her seat. The giggling and chuckling stopped as she walked towards him, right hand clenching something. Wilcke stopped a few feet from him and opened her grip. Aaron looked at her finger tips, that held with care, a greenish rock shaped in the likeness of a triangle. The wierding stone. “State a falsehood for the record.” Minna demanded.

“I have six toes on my right foot.” Aaron answered. At the conclusion of his statement, the triangular rock vibrated intensely in the commander’s palm. Seemingly satisfied, she placed the stone in her right coat pocket and walked back to her seat.

“As we discussed before Sergeant Divale,” Wilcke began as she sat down, “You will answer all questions posited by the squadron. Here, we are all equals. Rank will not matter here. We will refer to ourselves by our first names out of transparency and trust. Remember, you have the ability to not answer a question if you feel that it is too personal. However, any lie you utter will be detected, and I will press for the truth whether you like it or not. Is all this understood?” Aaron nodded and sat down, the leather feeling cool and comfortable, the fabric sagging inwards. “Now before we go,” Minna started, gesturing to her left and right, “I must ask if anyone here wishes to vouch for your character.

“I do Commander Wilcke.” Lucretia answered, grabbing her bag and getting out of seat.

“The coven recognizes Lucretia Domino.” Wilcke intoned. Domino walked to the edge of Aaron’s table and turned to address the squadron.

“Like many on this island nation, I came here as a refugee, searching for safety, but my journey was anything but pleasant. The Neuroi had wiped out Calais and the Dunkirk operation was about to be
called off. I had managed to get to Normandy where several patrol boats were ferrying people to and fro, saving any who still remained. The boat that was carrying me was strafed by an enemy fighter before it could get away from the beachhead, the engine and rudder rendered useless. The crew, those that survived, abandoned ship despite the protestations of the passengers, myself included, for we had children on board. For six days, the survivors huddled together for warmth and security, living off whatever rations and water that we could find in the hold. Several died and I took it upon myself to bury them, marking their graves with sticks tied with canvas straps. Things were desperate, and some of us left the safety of the boat, searching for anyone that could help us. We called and called until our voices gave out, but for those six days, nothing.” Lucretia expounded, her head downcast, the memories coming back in a wave of laments. Her face brightened as she continued, “Then on the seventh day, a miracle happened.” She turned and looked at Aaron with the faintest glimmer of tears in her eyes. “He found us, all of us. I had no idea who he was, but I didn’t care, even after he showed me his eyes.” At that point, Lucretia opened the bag, and pulled out a thick bound scrapbook, holding it above her head like a standard bearer does a flag, turning to face the witches.

“The sergeant carried me and six children across the Channel and dropped us off at Southampton. Before he left, he told us his name, Aaron Divale, The Saint of Calais.” Lucretia proclaimed. Hushed whispers and gasps of awe rounded the half circle around Aaron. “Since that time, I have collected pictures of those that he saved over the next three months.” She opened the scrapbook and gave it to Aaron. Aaron looked and saw page after page of newspaper clippings and editorials, headlines in bold black ink THE SAINT SAVES ANOTHER, FIVE NEW ARRIVALS ATTEST, IS THE SAINT REAL. Pictures of men, women, and children lined the sides, everyone of them smiling, thankful and grateful for being alive. Divale couldn’t help but look back to those days, days that, deep down, he wished would come back.

A bright light and the world is shrouded in darkness, the air heavy with soot and heat. No natural light shines down in the coal mine, for a coal mine it is, veins of anthracite barely visible. Weak beams of yellow pierce the veil of perpetual night, illuminating the precious mineral. It also reveals the faces of the miners, children dressed in rags, dirty and underfed, hefting picks the size of half their bodies, hacking away with the helmet lamps guiding their strikes. Dust grows thick and many cough, some uncontrollably as they toil, soon to be victims of black lung. Chains are fettered to their feet, loops of steel connecting the rows upon rows of wasted youth. Mine carts are pushed along rails, collecting the coal. Towards the end of the line, a massive pulveriser slams down, hard and fast, obliterating the massive ore into hand sized pebbles. The solid metal piston is streaked with dried blood, its greed caring not for what it destroys. Bodies lined the side of the hammer, covered in bloody sack cloth, the area smelling of decay and buzzing with flies, a makeshift drain trough overflowing with coagulated blood.

A young boy struggles to lift a piece of coal into the bin, even on the tips of his toes. He is weak from the work and lack of sleep, arms and back scarred and soot stained. The grip around his prize loosens and he falls backwards, falling on his back, the rock landing on his left foot. Cries of pain cause another individual to intrude on the scene, this one much bigger, an adult, the features hidden by the gloom. The hands carry a coiled whip and the boy looks on in mortal terror, throwing up his arms to shield himself from the lash. He closes his eyes, expecting pain. A struggle is heard, followed by the cracking of bones. He opens his eyes just in time to see his would be tormentor lying on his back, the chest caved in by some traumatic impact, vitae gushing out of the mouth. The whip is pulled away and the youth follows the trail. It leads to another figure, this one much bigger, eyes burning yellow as the hands coil the whip. They grip the hardened leather and pull hard. The cat o nine tails snaps in half with the sound of thunder, the noise causing others to gather around and stare. A hand picks up the still terrified boy and a booming voice calls softly, “You are safe now. Come with me.”
Aaron closed the book, not wishing to reminisce any longer, and handed it back to Lucretia, who then walked to Minna and handed it over to her. Wilcke looked it over and saw page after page, face after face of what Sargeant Divale had done, skipping the editorials. *So many people. So many lost souls saved from certain death and given another chance. Have we misjudged him? Was I wrong about his intentions?* “And despite all of that,” Domino added, her face contorted with abhorrence, “they treated him like a monster. He came here with open arms, bearing no weapon or ill will, and they locked him away. Not a single soul trusted him due to his lineage, not a single day went by when he wasn’t watched with suspicion. I, and I alone, who was assigned as his personal doctor and psychologist, was the only person who had constant contact with Aaron for three months. During those three months he revealed his past, his pain, his immortal soul to me. The things he told me would make a statue weep tears. All the while I kept asking myself why, why him, why is he the one who is punished for doing the right thing? He deserves none of the insults and jeers that I know her gets from behind his back.” She turned and pointed at Aaron, tears about ready to burst. “Aaron Divale, more than anyone else that I have seen does not warrant the title of monster, for what kind of monster saves lives? The answer is simple: none, for it is only a good man that does such things, a good man that I have come to love.”

Divale sprang up from his chair like a jack in the box, eyes wide with shock and terror. “Lucretia!” he called out, taking two bounding steps to reach her.

The tears finally broke their barriers and streamed down Domino’s face as she looked up into Aaron’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” she choked, “they already know the truth about us, all of them.” She started sobbing and Aaron took her into his arms, holding her close and tight. He placed his right hand behind her head, stroking her hair gently to calm her down, taking off his glasses with his left, and placing them in his front pocket. *There is only one explanation for this.*

“It is all right Lucretia. No one is going to take you away from me.” he said. Aaron opened his eyes and cast a baleful stare, orbs aglow with swirling molten vehemence at the one person who could’ve leaked the information, the only one who could speak Italian other than the two lovers; Francesca Lucchini. “I’ll make sure of it.” he vowed through gritted teeth.

Lucchini couldn’t bear the ire in Aaron’s stare and looked down. “I’m sorry Aaron.” she confessed remorsefully. “Everyone hounded and hounded me, asking what happened and it just came out. I didn’t mean any harm, you’ve got to believe me. If I only knew about this earlier I would’ve keep this secret.”

Minna added her own two cents, “While word has gotten around about this union that you two have, I have instructed all of my pilots to put the kibosh on disseminating this information along unsecured channels.” She turned in her seat and added with force, “And I will state again for the record that if any investigation results, I will personally root out whosoever blabbed about this situation and will hold them solely responsible for it. Is that understood?!”

“Yes commander!” the squadron as a whole replied.

Aaron regarded the commander and his anger decreased. “Again Minna, thank you.” He then gazed back at Francesca and made a gesture with his left hand, one that made it clear to her and everyone else that all was forgiven. Lucretia stopped crying and gave Divale a kiss on the side of his cheek, the smell of her perfume now on his flesh and clothes. Aaron kissed her on the forehead and the two broke away, returning to their seats.

“Nothing further Commander Wilcke.” Lucretia stated as she sat down, drying her eyes.

“Is there anyone else who wishes to vouch for this man’s character?” Minna asked.
“I do Commander Wilcke.” Hajikata answered, ignoring the stares of surprise from the rest of the squadron, Mio’s in particular as she nearly fell out of her seat in shock. He walked to a central location, making sure that his gaze could encompass all present, and bowed respectfully.

“The coven recognizes Warrant Officer Hajikata Keisuke.” Minna stated, clearly puzzled as to why.

Hajikata cleared his throat and began, “I will not lie when I say that I’ve heard many things from the garrison units that paint a bleak picture of Aaron. They say he’s heartless; well, of course he is, for how can one have a heart when it was never whole to start with? They also say that he is angry and lashes out; of course he does so, for he is afraid, placed in a situation that he never dreamed of being in and surrounded by those that he doesn’t know that he can trust. To grow and mature as human beings, we must all have three important things: respect, love, and trust from those that matter, especially when we, inevitably, make mistakes. Though I do not know Aaron very well, I can tell that he has made mistakes, but has yet to learn from them, as a man does and should.” He turned to the witches and declared, “Thus it falls upon all of you to aid him in this endeavour, to give him the strength to rebound from his errors so that he may become more than what he is now. Aaron, in my eyes, is a unique individual, not so much in that he should be treated differently than the rest of us, but in that he realizes that he isn’t perfect, that he is fallible, that he has much to learn. It isn’t often that you encounter someone who, while realizing who they are, is cognizant of who they are not. A gifted person such as him should be given the benefit of a doubt, lest all that he could be will become the stuff of what might have been.” He bowed to Aaron who returned the gesture with a gracious nod before returning to his seat.

“If that man survives the war and doesn’t become a politician or motivational speaker, than his penchant for oratory will be wasted.”

“Is there anyone else?” Minna asked as Hajikata sat back down. After no one else spoke up she regarded Aaron. “You may now make a statement on your behalf.”

Aaron got up from his chair and picked up the book on the table. “As I have stated previously in Commander Wilke’s office, I want my stay here to work, that I want to trust you all and for all of you to trust me. To aid in that, I offer you all this.” He held up the tome in his hand, a leather bound book as thick as a phonebook with a metal magnetic clasp on the right side, a symbol of three triangles embossed in the center. “This is my personal diary, one that I’ve kept since Christmas Day of 1939. It contains everything; what I’ve seen, what I’ve said, what I’ve done, even what I’ve thought during the time from then til now. If any of you wish to read its contents, I’ll gladly allow it.” Then, he took the piece of paper wedged inside the diary and held it in his right hand, his left placing the record of his life down on the table. “With a show of hands, how many of you have overseen an evacuation or had to be evacuated?” he asked. Nine of the eleven witches, Domino, Hajikata, and Aaron all raised their hands, Yoshika and Lynette the only ones innocent of those conditions. “As part of the conditions of my enlistment with the Allies, I was granted access to the record archives. These libraries, hidden at a location that I cannot divulge, run for miles upon miles of ledgers, pamphlets, photographs, and top secret documents, the likes of which haven’t seen the light of day save for the brief time they spent in the hands of some of the free world’s most powerful leaders. I sought out this one in particular. This is a copy of Evacuation Efficiency Report 216-059, final draft, which reads thus: In conjunction with the Ministries of all the Allies that engaged in evacuations of key personnel and materials (Great Britain, France, Belgium, et al), the figures for all operations conducted ran at 87% efficiency with a plus minus of 1.6%. The number of civilians rescued run roughly 35.7% with a plus minus of 2.8%. The number of incidents that required the removal of evacuees lie somewhere within the range of 10.3%.” He regarded everyone in the room and stared them all down with the glare of a state prosecutor. “For those of you that aren’t used to such euphemistic language, that last sentence means the number of people who were shot dead for trying to break past the barricades to safety was 10.3% of the total evacuated population.”

The 501st members that raised their hands all looked down or away in shame, Minna placing her
hands near her mouth, looking like a contemplative administrator. “With a show of hands, who saw such things transpire?” Aaron pressed. Again, the same number of people raised their hands. “And what did you all do?” Divale queried. No one answered his question and Aaron’s eyes glowed orange, the reptilian resemblance taking hold once more. “Judging by the 59,104 dead men, women, and children, who were quote, denied entrance, the answer seems to be a fuck load of nothing!” he screamed, slamming the paper down on the table, causing some to wince at the violent sound. “The scrapbook that Lucretia showed you were those that saw the light and reached for salvation, but you have no idea how many refused my offer! I kept on hearing the same thing, they don’t want us, or, they’ll shoot us like such and such at such and such a place! You all swore an oath to fight the enemy until death or dismissal, the same as I, yet you all seemed to have forgotten the unwritten portion of that vow, which is to protect those that cannot protect themselves! How could you go back on your word, your promise to those whose lives that were wasted for others that were deemed more worthy of saving?! How do you justify the hopes and dreams you shattered for the sake of the cause?! How do you explain why to the orphans and widows of loved ones that won’t be coming home?!”

Minna found it very hard not to cry, but she maintained her composure all the while. Over Aaron’s tirade, she could hear subdued sobs. “There are protesters out in the streets that rail against this!” Divale continued on, walking towards the group, his dander up beyond all comprehension. “People who accuse you all of being custodians to murder, or even active participants of the killings that ensued! And if you all think that this will be swept away under the rug under the guise of national security, think again! When this war ends, and it will, these records become public domain after twenty five years, able to be accessed by any who wish to know of their contents! Your legacies, your reputations will be the subject of ridicule, debate, and judgment, tarnished with a stain that rivals mine for all the right reasons!”

At this point, Aaron stopped, mere feet away from the squadron, and breathed, catching his breath from shouting so much. His eyes returned to yellow as he began anew, solemnly stating, “Yet they, like me, are wrong for doing so. Many of those that seek to besmirch your good names were not there, ignorant of the realities of war and numerous desperate circumstances that forced your hands into doing something that many of you found repulsive, disgusting, yet painfully necessary. Who are they to protest events that transpired far away from their frame of thinking? What right do they have to call you baby killers, murderers, and all manner of scurrilous designations? Who are they to judge you? As far as I’m concerned, all of you here are above judgment.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a butane lighter, flicking it open. “Yesterday, I heard some sage words by a complete stranger that made more sense than any text that I’ve read or statement that I’ve heard. Warrant Officer Hajikata Keisuke told me that to judge one on the basis of the past is dishonorable and wrong, a sentiment that I wholeheartedly agree with.” Looking over at Hajikata, Aaron nodded, the officer’s aide’s chest swelling with pride and admiration. He struck the lighter as he walked to the table and snatched the report, yellow orange flame erupting from the marriage of spark and fuel, placing the document to the flickering blaze. The flames licked the parchment and spread like wildfire as it burned to ash in his hand. “The past is just that, the past. No amount of hand wringing or woe is mes will ever change what happened. From here on out, you are all tabula rasa, blank slates, in my eyes. It is my hope that you will give me the same courtesy that I have given you.” Aaron intoned, casting the last vestiges of the flaming paper into the air, buring into nothingness.

Minna watched all of this and took her hands down from her face, revealing a smile, a genuine smile. She started clapping in approval and soon, everybody in the room joined in. Aaron acknowledged his peers with a nod and raised his hands, quieting the applause. “Since I revealed something that you can be judged on, I must now show you all something that I can be rightfully condemned for.” He stepped back and sat down on the cold concrete floor, crosslegged like an Indian, his arms away from him, palms open. “For your own safety I must tell you all to not cross the seal that will appear. I
will remain within the circle so that I can control what is about to be revealed before your eyes.” Divale closed his eyes and breathed deep, his exhaling seen by all as vapor. The room began to grow cold and ice crystals formed on his skin, a thick of frost. Soon a white mandala ring, inscribed red runes, revealed itself, circling around the floor wildly, encompassing everything up to a few feet away from the seated squadron proper. Aaron’s veins started to glow blue green and he was lifted up from the concrete by an unseen force, raised by the chest, leaving his arms limp at his sides, like a soul being taken to heaven. His mouth opened, and out from the maw came a black gem, tinkling to the floor and rolling away until coming to a rest four feet to Aaron’s side. Suddenly, it exploded, covering the immediate area with midnight that no one, not even Mio with her third eye, could pierce.

Minna steeled herself for what she was about to see and turned to the rest of the group, “Remember what he said! Stay far away from the seal and be brave witches!” she proclaimed. Aaron then began to drop down, released and left to fall gently as a feather on his feet. His shoes didn’t make a sound as he reintroduced himself to terra firma, but something else did. Within the abyssal shroud, one could distinctly hear a woman’s voice humming away a tune, slow and droning. It didn’t take long for everyone in the room to recognize the note scheme. A dirge.

“Ismenoth,” Aaron called out, facing the veil of night without fear, “come on out.” His words were the winds that swept away the darkness, illuminating what lay beyond. It was an alabaster bathtub, non curtained, motifs of flaming horned skulls carved along its sides. Water could be heard swirling with the vessel, a liquid that gave off the smell of frankincense, myrrh, and aniseed, that did not fully mask another odor, a cloying earthy aroma that Minna couldn’t identify.

“Oh, it’s you again Aaron.” Ismenoth replied, relaxed and satisfied. “After last night, I didn’t expect you to be back so soon. You’re stamina surely has grown.” A yellowed hand with grey fingernails extended out from the liquid, one that now could be plainly seen as thin blood, droplets hitting the floor and evaporating with a tiny hiss, soon followed by the other hand. They both clutched the sides of the tub and the muscles tightened a tad, lifting something more from the depth of the crimson water. Aaron watched with revulsion as the head of Ismenoth emerged, vitae cascading down her face and hair. Her eyes were open and her grin was a mile wide. She sat up, the water line barely covering her bosom and she beckoned Divale to come closer with a crooking of her left index finger. “Come on in and join me,” Ismenoth cooed, “the water’s fine, and the company that much finer.”

Aaron gestured with his head towards the squadron and Ismenoth turned her head. Sadistic joy lit up her face as she twirled around and looked at everyone with those dusken orbs of hers, giving everyone the chills. Minna got up from her seat and gazed in wonder at the demoness, trying her best to show no fear in the face of such evil made manifest. Slowly, the fiend began to count everyone in the room with a sing song manner. “Twelve women and one man!” she declared with finality. She looked over at Aaron, who turned away lest his gaze fall upon Ismenoth’s posterior, and mocked, “You dog you.” Regarding the squadron, she waved in greeting, though it was far from a warm one. “I’ve heard some people wishing to talk about my favorite warlock, saying a few words before his final judgment. Well, I think I should add my three cents. Why three cents? Because my word counts for more than any of yours. After all, I’ve known him the longest.” With a wave of her hand, a tear in the fabric of reality opened up, revealing a cacophony of sounds and colors that made Minna sick just by being in its presence. “Would you be a dear, my wonderous companion, and fetch me my robe?” she asked gently.

Divale reached into the open wound of a hole and rummaged around, his hand departing this world and venturing into realms of existence unlike any ever imagined. After a few seconds, he pulled out a cherry red robe, reminiscent of a kimono, with swirling smoke grey images of faces contorted in agony, moaning in pain, traveling the length and breadth of the dressing gown. It was at that point, Ismenoth switched up her position in the tub and stood up, giving the world her right side, covering
her breasts with her tattooed right arm. Minna, out of curiosity’s sake, tried to crane her neck to get a better glimpse of the tattoos that Ismenoth sported, but stopped when the demoness pointed a finger at her with her left hand, eyes trained on her soul. “Tut, tut, tut.” she tisked, wagging her finger. “Don’t peek, or it’s six feet under you seek.” Aaron wrapped the robe around her and tied the sash, the color of a human vein. “Thank you my pet.” Ismenoth said and gave him a kiss on the forehead, a gesture that made him cringe as if in pain. She then walked over to the leather revolving chair and sat down, legs uncrossed, the negligee barely coming below her maidenhood, if such a thing ever existed at one point and time.

“So my friends,” Ismenoth began with a flourish, “my name is Ismenoth. Some of you I know, and most of you I don’t, but don’t worry, I’ll know you all eventually, one way or another.” She looked at her robe and pointed at the images, the lamenting increasing as they scurried away from her loathsome touch. “Each one of these is a soul that I have taken, men and women all, so sure of themselves and their dreams, yet all slaves to my power in the end.” Regarding Aaron she added with relish, “I have a special place for you my friend all picked out.”

“Like hell you will!” Lucretia yelled, getting out of her chair.

Ismenoth gave Domino an acid stare and got up her seat as well. “Oh, you.” she acknowledged with distain, “I recognize the stench of a whore anywhere.”

Lucretia ventured at the quick step towards the seal and stopped inches away. “Say that to my face demon,” she challenged, “or are you afraid of me?!”

Ismenoth got up to the seal boundary and looked Domino up and down. “This one has a backbone.” she determined. “No wonder to you took her to bed.” The demoness pressed her face to the wall of magical energy and remarked, “Remember mortal, no matter how much you hold or love him, he belongs to me, as is my right. His soul was promised to me long ago and no one, not even you, is going to stop me from taking what is rightfully mine. When I do take him in my embrace for all time, I’ll love him far better than you could.”

“You’ll never have him to yourself.” Domino railed. “I will find a way to rid him of your foul malignancy. I’d rather die than have him suffer that fate.”

Ismenoth chuckled, backtracking to the revolving chair. “Be careful what you wish for,” she warned, “lest the black widower find you.”

“Enough!” Aaron shouted, bring the tit for tat to a complete halt. “Say your piece Ismenoth and leave.”

She shot him a spiteful glare as she sat back down. “Very well,” Ismenoth groaned, as if bored by the state of affairs, “I’ll do my best.” She looked at the squadron and expounded, “Aaron is unlike any that I’ve encountered in my entire life. I’ve seen mighty kingdoms rise and fall, I’ve seen men of honor turn to villainy and the lowliest peasant become a just ruler, but nothing compares to him, the last warlock. A truly unique individual, capable of doing incredible things. Speaks many languages too, but the one language that he’s most fluent in is death. All that he knows her learned from me. I’ll never forget the first lesson: how to disassemble and reassemble a Kar 98k rifle, blindfolded, upsidedown, underwater, with explosions going off around him, in one breath.” She paused thinking about the past and smiling. “Good thing he was a fast learner. Over time he became a trained killer, taught to eliminate enemy personnel with anything and everything at his disposal: guns, blades, explosives, his bare hands, hell, I’ve seen this man bash someone’s brains out with a chamber pot and garrot another with a pair of panties. Was quite fun to watch to be honest, highly entertaining.”

Pointing at Minna in particular, she uttered, “You fear him don’t you?” she asked.
“Yes I do.” Wilcke answered. “We all do.”

“And you should,” Ismenoth remarked, “for he is power incarnate. What you saw when he faced
down one of your best pilots in unarmed combat was him being irritated. What happened with that
mock exercise in Vienna was him being annoyed. Imagine for one brief second what would happen
if he ever got angry enough to the point where he let his rage go. It would be like the finger of God,
sweeping away all from sight. Unlike you, his magic knows no bounds. With a simple word, he can
pull out your intestines from you throat and hang you up on a tree, with a deft gesture, he can split
the mightiest vessal down the middle like a twig, and with a mere thought can level a city like your
beloved Berlin, its lands burned to cinders, its people and history reduced to ash, the river and lakes
boiled away, the verdant fields where the living once toiled nothing but glass craters.”

She turned and looked at Aaron, shaking her head in bitter disappointment. “Yet, despite all this
power, all this might, he refuses to use it. Such blindness on his part. What do you hope to
accomplish by holding back? You could end this war in a week if you had the balls.”

Aaron returned her stare with one of his own, “No power is worth using if the costs and
consequences do not validate its application. Maybe I could end this war in a week, but doing so
would render Europe uninhabitable for centuries. I will never give in to such wanton usage at the
expense of innocent lives and futures.” He paused before added with malice, “Plus, unlike you, I’m
not psychotic.”

“Damn you Aaron and your human heart.” Ismenoth cursed. “That’s always been your greatest
weakness. You sacrifice so much to save others, give up anything of worth to give them a fighting
chance of survival, and punish your mind, body, and soul to show them your worth, yet in end, you
are rebuffed, time and time again. And like Icarus reborn, you reach for the sun once more, knowing
that to do so will hurt you more than it helps. You didn’t have to save that Frenchie in Bedgebury
Woods you know. She hates you and will never treat you with an iota of respect. Should’ve left her
to die, but no, the Sir Galahad within you had to rise to the fore and do the right thing. Makes me
sick thinking about it.”

Ismenoth got out of the chair and curtsied before the 501st with exuberant flair. “In parting, I will say
that you should give Aaron a great deal of respect. Many haven’t and none live to tell of it.
Goodbye.” In a blinding flash, the seal broke and the demoness, the tub, and the mandala,
disappeared with the sound of wind chimes. With downcast head, Aaron walked to the empty chair
and sat down, pressing his hands together, looking like a loved one awaiting news of a risky
operation.

He sat there unmoving for a good minute before Minna asked, “Aaron?” He looked up at her,
shamed and guilt written all over his face. “Was she telling the truth?”

“Even in a desert of lies,” Aaron answered with a sigh, “grains of truth can still be found.” He leaned
back and said, “If I may, I’d like to say something before the round of questions commences.”
Wilcke nodded silently in approval, and Aaron went on, “I have no intention of lying to any of you
today or any other after this. All I have with me is the truth, and I will use the truth to tell you all
what happened not as it should’ve been, not what it could’ve been, but as it was. However, the truth
is hard to take, especially if it goes against common thinking and expectation. I will not hold back in
my answers. There will be no sugar coating, no beating around the bush, and no subtlety. What I
have to say will hurt some of you, but if this is what I must do to show you all that I have nothing to
hide, so be it.” He stretched his arms and cracked his neck before adding with the enthusiasm of a
circus ringmaster, “So who wishes to go first?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Perrine Clostermann receives answers regarding Aaron’s nefarious origins.

Chapter VIII: The French Connection

My first thoughts regarding Lieutenant Perrine Clostermann were reinforced during the coven. She is a brownnoser, somewhat arrogant, a lone wolf, and, when it comes to me and me only apparently, prejudiced. However, the lone wolf thing I understand from personal experience; we both lost something we deeply cared about in the war and will do anything it takes to get it back. Out of all the things that I don’t like about her, I do appreciate that she’s a caring person underneath that ice queen shell of hers. I humbly doubt that care will extend to me, but, hey, I’ve been wrong before.

Diary Entry March 5\textsuperscript{th} 1944

“We decided by lot who would go first,” Minna announced, “and the lucky number one is Perrine.”

I claim rigged as fuck. Aaron looked at Clostermann, her right arm tucked into the sleeve of a brown leather bomber jacket, a white T-shirt visible from the neck line. Her cross chain could be seen around her neck and it moved as she stood up, shooing away a helping hand from Yoshika. Picking up her chair with her sole good arm, she walked awkwardly to the table like a punch drunk. As Perrine got closer, Divale could see beads of sweat on her forehead and a partly glazed look to her eyes. Doped up on morphine. How much pain was she in? She set the chair down and sat, closing her eyes at the conclusion of the move, rubbing her temples. “You okay Perrine?” Aaron asked with concern. “How do you feel?”

She breathed in deep and opened her eyes, answering, “I’m fine, though I can’t feel very much due to the morphine.”

“Chest wounds are the worst.” Aaron admitted, placing a hand to his chest. “Believe me, I know. Glad to see you’re okay.”

“I’ll bet.” Perrine stated, reacting as if what Aaron said was high sarcasm. “I have quite a few questions for you, the first being, where did you manifest?”

Not this shit again. “I’ll state this once more for the record and move on: I did not manifest.” Aaron replied, clearly annoyed that no one seemed to get it the first time.

Perrine turned to look at Minna who returned it with a shake of her head no. It’s the truth? But how? “Then how are you here?” she asked.

“It is said that to understand where you are, you must go back to where you’ve been.” Aaron began. “This may be a bit tedious, but everything I will touch upon is important. When the last warlock stronghold was found and destroyed, its occupants put to the sword and torch, witches at long last
eliminated an enemy that threatened mankind. In thanks for their aid, humanity created something known as The Sentinel, to stand watch over them, letting them know when a grave threat occurred once again. While meant as a sincere gesture of gratitude, mankind had wished it to bring their magical allies to some sort of defensive alliance against aggression, particularly against other human beings. Seeing through the ruse, witches largely withdrew from the affairs of man, leaving them to their own devices, unless The Sentinel rang its clarion. They had hoped that such interdependent actions would’ve made humanity understand the benefits of working together, not against each other.

That hope was in vain, as war, as it always seems to do, rose time and time again, each flare up ramping up the destruction and loss of life. Witches the world over found it very hard to not intervene, but maintained their neutrality, until The Great War happened. That conflict changed the rules of war forever. Gone were the days of aggressive restraint, engaging the enemy and largely leaving the population alone. In its place was total war, where everyone, both soldier and civilian alike, had targets on their backs. To them, they reasoned that to win the war faster, they not only had to kill young John Doe, but the baker who made the bread that John Doe and the rest of his friends put in their mouths everyday. It broke the will of the witches, and they decided, at a coven much like this, shortly after the armistice was signed in 1918, that from that point forward, to each their own. Everybody now had free rein to involve themselves anywhere at anytime.

This gave the world pause, a very uneasy pause. For you see, The Great War heralded changes that increased the killing power of armies; the machine gun, poison gas, airplanes, tanks, flamethrowers, but all of that was rendered moot when the non interventionism of witches ended.”

“You make it sound like they were afraid.” Perrine reasoned. “Why would they be afraid? Wouldn’t they be thankful?”

“On the outside looking in yes, but I’m talking about the inside looking out. Imagine yourself as a mortal, no magic, just your kit and rifle. You’re charging across some bloodied field of horrendous carnage and in your way, through the haze, you see a witch standing in front of you. How would you feel?” Aaron countered.

Perrine thought about it and admitted, “I’d be scared.”

“Indeed,” Aaron agreed, “because against such a foe, you can’t win. Ninety nine point nine percent of the time, you’d end up dead. Against a magical being, how can a mortal stand to win when the witch can fly, stop bullets from hitting them, or shoot lightning out of their hands? Militaries the world over confronted a grave dilemma: any future conflict would not be decided by how many men, how many guns, how much equipment, or how easily one can dominate the skies or seas, but by the number of witches you could count on to come to your side.”

“Then this would create a situation of haves and have nots.” Perrine deduced.

“Correct,” Aaron approved, “and those have nots began to try to find something, anything to at least make the odds against them manageable at best. However, there was another problem: the only way to effectively combat a witch was through magic, but with the extinction of the warlocks, there were no other magical beings. So, they turned to science as the savior to increase the capabilities of man to deal with these circumstances.”

“Did this research lead directly to you?” Perrine queried.

“Not at first.” Aaron acknowledged. “They started out with the basics, better nutrition, new training methods, and improved weapons and tactics to match them. Further down the line they tried eugenics, selecting individuals who would be charged with creating an elite soldier class with hypnosuggestive therapies in utero during pregnancy. Then sometime after that, the date isn’t known
exactly, a group of scientists made up of those whose ideas ran counter to mainstream thinking, morality, or sanity, came together and created a program. They decided that science wasn’t enough to level the playing field and that magic would have to be used.”

“That’s impossible.” Perrine retorted, shaking her head wildly. “Magic in man cannot be done as the flow of aetheric energy stagnates rather than runs. It would immolate them alive if they so much as tried use something as simple as a shield.”

“Unless,” Aaron pointed out, “they found a way to do it by copying what the warlocks did centuries ago, transferring their powers into favored mortals that served them.”

“No such things exist!” Clostermann shouted, nearly getting out of her chair, “The Knights of Saint Michael made sure that any artifact of power was destroyed!”

“No such things exist!” Clostermann shouted, nearly getting out of her chair, “The Knights of Saint Michael made sure that any artifact of power was destroyed!”

“Your order did, but can you say the same for the others that were there?” Aaron conjectured.

Perrine made to answer, but nothing came out as a sinking sensation overtook her. What he’s insinuating cannot possibly be true. That would mean that our resolve was undermined. How? Why? “Do you know something I don’t?” she asked, calming down from her outburst.

“One of the deepest questions that humanity has ever confronted is; if you know nothing of evil, how can you defend against it? The Vatican, the bastion of faith that unites all, theorized that you can’t, and during that time frame, collected a vast repository of arcane artifacts with the intent of sealing them forever inside a restricted archive, one which somehow this new research group, broke into and looted.” Aaron explained.

Perrine’s eyes bugged out. They broke into the Vatican and stole those artifacts! Mother of God! She leaned in close and uttered, “Tell me everything you know.”

“The experiments were codenamed, Operation Reciprocity. With the relics, one of which was a warlock tome called Apotheosis, they conducted rituals, bizarre rituals with the intent of imbuing within a human being a warlock’s power through the usage of incantations, runes, sigils, oils, and transmutation. Thankfully for all of us, the book was never finished and much of it was missing. They tried, at first, to use fully grown human beings, but, as you said, the energies consumed them, warping their minds and bodies to the point that they were disposed of. However, by decreasing the age range, they found that the flows and the numerous alterations to the human form and mind could be controlled. So they went younger, and younger, and younger, until they settled on using infants.”

Aaron expounded. Gasps of horror circled the room, the sheer inhumanity too much to take. “There were incinerator rooms that ran night and day, Perrine,” Aaron continued haltingly, “filled from floor to ceiling with ash filled urns. The exact count will never be known, but conservative estimates run upwards and onwards of seventy five thousand.”

Perrine herself was shocked numb, left hand pulling out her cross, rubbing her thumb and forefinger along the metal in an effort to help bring her back to reality. She looked at him and, probably for the first time, actually felt something akin to pity for Aaron. An unwilling child soldier, twisted and tortured into a weapon. No one deserves that, not even him. “How did they bind the demons to these people?” she pondered, trying to get her mind off the subject.

“They summoned them and asked for their service in exchange for our souls.” Aaron answered.

“You mean to say that they volunteered rather than be bound against their will?” Perrine asked incredulously.

“Of course they did. Think about it.” Aaron responded. “Demons and angels are in a constant
struggle for the souls of humanity, gathering up their loyal following before the End of Days and The Last Judgment. The Neuroi care not for anything except the complete annihilation of mankind. If they succeed in this endeavour, what good would the demons and angels be? What purpose would they serve? Out of a sense of their own preservation, they pledged their services. However, the researchers neglected to tell them that the rituals would turn these would be masters into slaves, binding them to the warlock’s will and insulating them away so if they did die, their souls would instead go to Purgatory, rendering them incapable of being recruited to their side."

“Now,” Perrine gathered, her hand twirling the cross in her fingers like a bar room dart, “the project didn’t just bring you into this world am I right?”

“Yes.” Aaron admitted, “By the time the project was discovered in November of ‘39, there were one thousand of us, including me.”

One thousand warlocks! Inconceiveable that such a thing could’ve been under our nose for so long. “Who discovered this project?” Perinne asked.

“For all of their tricks and vetting to ensure their secrecy,” Aaron replied, “they neglected to take in to account the Vatican’s pursuit of the stolen relics. A double agent named Olav Monterrey infiltrated the organization and fed them with the location and what was going on. When Italy joined the Allies in September of 39, shortly after the Neuroi invasion, all documents relating to Operation Reciprocity were turned over to the Allied High Command.”

“What!” Perrine screamed, jumping out of her seat. “You’re telling me they knew about you and yours for over four years and they didn’t tell us!” She pointed at Aaron with her cross and demanded, “Why!”

“If word of this got out, Italy would’ve never been able to join the Allies for such a crime committed on her soil. Plus, it would’ve create division within the Allied ranks at a time when it couldn’t be afforded and hampered any operation to retrieve us.” Aaron explained, imploring with his hands for her to calm down and return to her seat.

Perrine ignored his pleas. “Retrieve?!” she shouted. “I would’ve had you all shot dead being the monks-”

Aaron lost it and rose from his seat so fast that the chair flew across the room, hitting the wall with a crash. His eyes went orange and his wings unfurled, blazing yellow flames rippling across the limbs. The rest of Perrine’s tirade went away and she scurried out of her seat in fear as Divale lashed out, standing completely still, "Yes! Yes! Almighty God yes! I know what I am Lieutenant Perrine Clostermann! I’ve been reminded of it since I got to this island, I’ve been reminded of it since the day before yesterday, and I’ll be reminded of it until the day I die! I’m sick and tired of hearing it so shut the fuck up god damn it!” The room was silent save for Minna and Mio both getting out of their seats, ready and willing to intervene. Perrine looked on, terrified as the warlock stood there, eyeing her with hate. Suddenly, the anger within him vanished and Aaron returned to normal, his glowing yellow eyes brimming with tears. He started sobbing and fell down to his knees, crying into his hands. Admist the heaving sobs he choked out, “Do you think I wanted to be like this? Do you think I was given a choice to be who I am? I hate myself so much. Everytime I look in the mirror, I’m reminded of what I’ve lost, what this damn war has taken from me. Why do you delight in reminding me? Do you get some sort of sick pleasure of watching me suffer more than I’ve already have? What have I done to you, any of you?” Perrine looked behind her and saw the looks of disgust and indignation that squadron gave her, Mio, her idol, included. The disapproving glares spurred her to action. In a gesture of regret and forgiveness, she pushed her chair aside and walked towards him but Aaron growled, “You stay away from me you prejudiced bitch.” He rose back to his full height, eyes
red and face like stone. “If you can’t do what your doing now out the sympathy of your own heart, then fuck you.” he said, putting up the middle finger on his right hand before turning away to retrieve the chair. It didn’t take him long to do so and he set it back to where it was and sat down, jaw clenched, bidding Perrine to do the same. Stung by his words, she gave him a venomous stare, yet sat down.

“To go further along,” Aaron began again, “I’ll answer the next question that you would’ve asked which would be why were you retrieved and not destroyed. Well, while the project was inhumane and rightly condemned, it worked nevertheless in creating a viable deterrent to the Neuroi. The Strikers themselves were over a year and a half away so they figured, why not, liberate them and give them their marching orders. To do so, they couldn’t do it along standard lines. The operation required a cloak and dagger approach, so they reluctantly called upon the services of the Thirteenth Legion to get us out of there by Christmas Day, an action that was codenamed Operation Yuletide.”

The glare vanished from Perrine as the name hit her like a ton of bricks. The Thirteenth Legion! Those were the soldiers from The Great War that relished in the violence. My father told me stories about them, men and women so bloodthirsty that they gave their allies more chills than the enemy when they marched upon the field. When the war ended, they banded together and plied their trade as mercenaries. “Those poor people.” she muttered.

“Do not even dare say they were poor people.” Aaron warned. “They were butchers, kidnappers, and murderers. What the Thirteenth Legion did to them and the research facility was nothing short of divine justice. They got what they deserved.”

Digesting the hard facts, Perrine ventured, “How did they convince you to join the war effort?”

“It wasn’t that hard,” Aaron recollected, “considering the circumstances we were in at the time. We were freed from a lifetime of captivity and told about the Neuroi and the threat they posed. They promised us, a grand lie in retrospect, that we’d be compensated for our service through acceptance and a parcel of land somewhere where we could live in peace for the remainder of our natural lives. Plus, they did raise a good point; the world would not accept us if we were discovered now. Besides, we knew what we were getting into, what was being asked of us all. We all knew we were being sent off to die. So, faced with the prospect of dying from the sword or shield, we chose the former. We accepted the offer and were fed, clothed, kitted, named, and sent off to Russia to delay the advancing enemy for as long as possible so that they could develop new weapons and prepare for the coming tides of darkness.”

“How did you find out so much about Operation Reciprocity?” Perrine asked. “Did you intentionally seek out the records in the Allied archives?”

“Yes I did.” Aaron admitted. “Though there were minders that attached themselves to Operation Yuletide to collect records, The Thirteenth Legion were very thorough in ransacking and burning the place. When I found the what survived, it was in a shoe box sized container. Held nothing of real value for me.”

“What did you intend to find?” Perrine queried.

Aaron put on a hurt expression, like he might cry again. “I’m actually jealous of you Perrine, because you know where you came from, who your parents are, your true name. I wanted to find out something about me, a link to the life I once had, one that I should’ve had, but was cruelly taken away and cast to oblivion.”

Again, Perrine felt pity for him. “Aaron, I’m-” she started, but she couldn’t bring herself to say the last word. “I’m glad you have maintained your faith during those days. What happened to you
would’ve broken any normal man in minutes.”

Aaron cocked his eyebrows, faintly surprised that she even got that close to saying that she was sorry and added, “Thankfully for me, I’m not human.”

Perrine shifted in her seat a tad and looked at the calvados bottle. “Mind pouring me a drink?” she asked.

Aaron nodded and pulled out the stoppered vessel, the cork pop sounding like a stone dropped in water. He poured the liquor into the glasses up to halfway and reattached the seal. Clostermann made a move to reach for her drink but Aaron stated, “Not yet.” Puzzled, she watched him take the tip of his finger and insert it into the liquid, breaking the surface by the tiniest of degrees. Withdrawing his finger and holding it off to his side, a drop could be seen twinkling like a diamond before falling to the concrete floor, its demise muffled completely.

“What was that for?” Perrine asked, not getting the gesture.

Divale gave her a somber look and explained, “It’s for those who can’t be here.”

Thinking about it, Clostermann nodded and repeated the ritual that Aaron started, before taking her glass. He took his and offered a cheers which she executed with the proper protocol, the crystal tingling like alms bells. They both took a sip and set them down, relishing the apple infused liquor. The Norman contribution. I haven’t this in a long time, not since Amelie and I… Perrine winked away the memory before she started crying and looked at Aaron, who decided to pick up his glass again. She asked, “Speaking of those who couldn’t be here, I haven’t set foot in France for over half a year now. What has become of my country since then?”

Aaron drank again and began, “Major centers of population, resupply, and communication were hit the hardest. Paris, Calais, La Harve, Breast, all those types of places, gone, just gone. Secondary gathering points were struck too, but only suffered moderate damage. The enemy bypassed many of the outlying villages and hamlets, leaving vast swathes of land intact, it’s survivors left alone to face the occupation. The locals rallied around power figures, constables, politicians, old war veterans, and the like, and banded together to form underground communities, digging out cellars, or setting up shop in old deserted bunkers. To start, they stayed down by day as a general rule, only moving around during the evenings. Still had to be careful though as the enemy deployed hunter killer squads. Whenever they found the Neuroi skulking around, they wiped them out on the spot. However, once they realized that their actions would only trigger a larger investigation, they decided to watch instead, plotting movement schedules, rotations, marching pathes. Within a month, they figured out that they could go about their lives, despite the constant threat to their survival, arranging their affairs to the note of enemy arrival and departure.”

“Since you are the Saint of Calais,” Perrine commented, taking a sip, “you helped my people out.”

“Like hell I did.” Aaron agreed, “I helped them establish a communications network, running the whole length and breadth of France, dozens if not hundreds of cells in constant contact, relaying information that could prove vital to themselves and to the eventual liberation of the continent.”

“Were there problems in adjusting to the new situation?” Perrine queried.

Aaron was about to take another drink and stopped midway from the lip of the glass, clearly thinking about the answer he was about to give and lost in his memories. He cleared his throat and answered, “The presence of the Neuroi shrouded the landscape with a thick cloud cover, that made the land seem that it was covered in perpetual late afternoon. Nights were almost pitch dark, no moon to light your way, no stars to guide you. A sense of dispar overtook quite a few people and they did things
to themselves and others to try to get some sense of joy or purpose out of their lives.”

“What did they do?” Perrine asked with concern.

“Some took their own lives.” Aaron replied. “Others lost themselves to sin and vice, killing people, pillaging survivor camps, raping women, and enslaving children. I personally took it upon myself to curb these groups, exacting vengeance for what they did.” He looked at his hands and added, “I regret none of it. Any who punish the innocent just because they can isn’t worthy of mercy or forgiveness in my book.”

Perrine looked down, overwhelmed by the facts. My people do that to themselves? Why? What could compel a sane human being to do that to another? “Yet all that wasn’t the worst thing I encountered on the continent,” Aaron went on, “not by a long shot. For some reason or another, Neuroi trigger a series of events that result in the the fissure of magical flows and safeguards within the earth. Their presence infects the aetheric energy with an abnormality that causes it to manifest in entities akin to will o’ wisps, invisible to the human eye, but visible to magical beings like us. These energies leak out into the material realm, seeking a host. When they come into contact with a mortal, they subsume themselves into the person, like a wasp’s eggs. It lies dormant for a bit before strengthening, leeching the life and will of the poor victim away until, out of pain, they submit, allowing the magic to take control completely, turning them into creatures that…”

Perrine caught Aaron trailing off, as if unwilling to finish what he started. “Turn into what!?” she anxiously pressed. “Tell me!”

“Into creatures that just don’t make any sense.” Aaron described, fumbling around in his head for the right words. “Everyone of them is different, yet all are hostile to human life. When they appear, there’s a shimmer to them, a blurring effect making them seem like they’re fading in and out, as if reality can’t contain them due to how wrong they are.”

“Did you destroy any of them during your stay?” Perrine pondered outloud.

“Conventional weapons were next to useless against them.” Aaron reported. “I could fire a full clip into one and it would just smile and keep on coming. The only things that seemed to work effectively were stabbing or bludgeoning weapons, which made the situation even more frightening because you then had to get in close.” Aaron took another sip from his glass and nodded to himself, admitting, “But I did it. Each fight could’ve been my last. I was scared every time I went toe to toe with one.”

Marauders, rapists, thieves, murderers, and now these magical aberrations? What the hell is the world coming to? Which side is God on? Speaking of… “How did they react when you revealed yourself to them?” Perrine asked.

“I expected them to run away screaming like everyone else that sees my true colors.” Aaron acknowledged, “You could only imagine my surprise when they stood their ground, not only being unafraid, but accepting of me. I’ll never understand why, maybe they thought I was an angel or something like that, sent from above to help them. Over time, as I aided them, I became revered, hailed as a hero.”

“Did you believe you were a hero in their eyes?” Perrine asked cocking an eyebrow.

“No,” Aaron answered immediately, “I was no hero over there Perrine. A hero would’ve done more, done better. I was just being me, trying my best to stay true to what I am deep down within my core, a good man. I will go on record and say that I didn’t rejoin this conflict to win medals, praise, acclaim, accolades, glory, fame, or fortune.” He pointed south, beyond the Channel, with an outstretched hand, holding the glass away. “I joined for them, to fight for them, bleed for them, and,
Perrine couldn’t help but have admiration for what Aaron said and smiled, drawing a look of sheer amazement from the warlock. As did I and still do. “I have one last question Aaron,” she stated, rummaging around within the folds of the bomber jacket’s inner pocket. After a few seconds, she produced a white stone with the cross of Saint Michael etched on one side, painted red with black lines, seven gold crowns circling the holy icon. “This is a badge of office within the Knights of Saint Michael, but I never saw one like this before. My grandfather and father held the title of Grandmaster, yet even they had only five gold crowns. Where did you get this?”

“The Sentinel gave it me.” Aaron proclaimed.

Perrine whipped her head around in disbelief. Behind her, gasps and loud whispers came from every quarter. Minna too was dumbfounded as she shook her head no. The truth?! Stammering like a child caught with their hand in a cookie jar, she asked, “H-How? The Sentinel isn’t a person.”

“I know,” Aaron agreed, “which makes what I’m about to tell you even more incredible. It was early ’41, when we were fighting along the Carpathian Mountains, holding the line against wave after wave of Neuroi. They were trying to break through the Black Sea river valleys into Varna, but we held them off for months. Fighting was brutal and nonstop. Combat fatigue was rampant, but we couldn’t rotate people in or due to losses and being pressured from other positions as well. One day, after being on the front lines for twenty hours, I was physically pulled off and ordered to get some food and sleep. So I did. Moment my head hit the earth I was out.

Strangely enough, I had no nightmares that night like usual, just a weird dream. I was flying over a stretch of water, islands dotting the surface like raised rocks in a stream, the stars overhead in the clear night sky, the air cool. I felt this pull towards an island, a small rocky bulge just south of Sicily, Malta I presume. Instead of landing on the land, I dove in the water near the eastern end right by the coast. Underneath the waves, I happened upon a barred gate of a drainage duct. I pull it off and swim up the pipe, emerging a few moments later in a pool of water deep within a large cave, the surrounding area lit by witchfire. Getting out of the water, I could see that the cave was big, unnaturally big to the point that I couldn’t see the ceiling at all. Curiosity overtook me and I walked further on. As I ventured deeper into this cavern, more torches lit up, guiding me to what ended up being a raised black marble dais with seven steps, strange symbols carved into the center of each one that I couldn’t begin to identify.”

“The Seven Judgments!” Perrine exclaimed in a low voice. “They are used for initiation into the order. Each step symbolises a tenant, one in with the would be initiate must ascend to reach the top. It is said that the steps themselves can judge the character of any who set foot upon them. Any weakness is met with pain, one that that intensifies the higher one goes. If the pledge fails to reach the top, they are denied membership. What happened next?”

“I then heard this voice,” Aaron recollected, “a woman’s that said, ‘Come forth and be judged’. I felt fear then, but I went on, walking across the chamber and placing my right foot on the first step. The moment my toes grazed the stone, I felt this burning sensation all over my body, like I was being raked over a bed of hot coals. My next step felt like corkscrews were being drilled into my bones and wrenched out, the third, the muscles in my legs ripped, the fourth, my teeth exploded in my mouth, my fifth, my eyes went blind and boiled out out of their sockets, the sixth made me vomit blood all over the steps, and finally, the seventh came, and my heart stopped, causing me to fall forward on my knees, world blacking out as death sought to claim me. Suddenly, a white mist appeared out of nowhere, and, though it had no arms or hands, lifted me up and banished the pain that I felt. It then spoke, ‘You have come at last my wayward son. Heed my words, for our time is short. Your future stands on the edge of a knife; one mistep, and all that you were, are, and one day will be, will be lost
forever to evil. Be strong warlock and look to your heart and friends for guidance, for you will need both in the coming days.’ I asked her, my voice barely above a whisper, ‘Who am I?’ It replied, ‘You are a soul in need of saving, a heart in need of mending, and a mind in need of focus to combat the darkness that threatens to consume all. Now, go my child, and may heaven help you.’

Then wake up in my tent, the sounds of footsteps outside, gunfire booming a long ways off. I breathed in deep, thankful that it was just a dream, but when I raised by right hand to rub my eyes, I was clasping that stone and my uniform was damp from saltwater.”

Perrine gulped down a large swallow of calvados and put her head in her hands, trying to make sense of it. *He passes all seven steps, speaks with The Sentinel, and receives this along with words of warning about a future? Why?* “I have no further questions for you,” she stated, “but do you have any for me?”

“Only a few.” Aaron answered. “Starting with when did you join the 501st and why?”

“I came into the fold in mid 42,” Perrine explained, “about the same time as Lucchini. It happened when I was still with my old unit, the 602nd. The day began like any other, launching reconnaissance and harassing sorties into Germany. I was not included in the fighting due to a Striker malfunction, which ended up being a blessing in disguise because that was when I saw Mio for the first time. To be completely honest, the first meeting between us didn’t go so well. I thought she was very aloof due to her country not witnessing the effects of the Neuroi invasion, and I’m pretty sure I came across to her as rude and arrogant. Words were exchanged and tempers flared until I challenged her to a duel with swords.”

Aaron cocked an eyebrow, and inquired, “You challenged a Japanese officer to a sword fight?”

“Yes I did.” Perrine boasted. “I was no slouch myself with a blade. If it weren’t for the war, I would’ve been on the fast track to representing my country on the French fencing team.”

“And despite that training, she trounced you didn’t she?” Aaron stated, nodding.

Perrine nodded, reluctant to admit the past. “She beat me decisively, but I didn’t give up and challenged her again. Fifteen times we battled, and she won every single one. I passed out due to exhaustion and woke up in medical. Mio took me there and when I came to, she told me that I was a very gifted fighter and that there was JFW out there that could use my talents. So, I joined up.”

“It must have hurt though,” Aaron pointed out, “leaving your comrades to fight elsewhere. I may not be the most observant man out there, but I can tell that the lose of France hit hard.”

Again, Perrine took a big gulp, almost draining the last dregs of the glass, sniffing away the coming tears. She merely nodded, not giving voice to his answer, for none was needed. *That explains why you were a lone wolf during the training exercises. You’ve turned your grief into a dogmatic commitment to free your homeland. You legitimately care about them and probably the rest of the squadron too, though you may be too proud to admit it. I can’t fault you at all on that front.* Aaron breathed in deep and asked, “After all that you’ve heard me say to you today Perrine, can there be a coexistence between us, or some measure of mutual respect?”

The question gave her pause and Perrine furrowed her brow in thought. “You have told the truth to me, which took courage to do. I’ll grant you that.” she replied. “I’ll also give you the benefit of a doubt when it comes to your intentions and wishes to make amends, but you have a long way to go to get me to respect and amicably live alongside you under this roof. I still don’t trust or like you Aaron Divale.”
“The feeling is unfortunately mutual.” Aaron admitted, extending his hand. “That will be all from me. Good talk.”

Perrine stared at his palm and drained the rest of the calvados, before getting out of her seat. “Oh!” Closternmann started, remembering something. She reaching into the bomber jackets’ interior pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper, and handed it to him.

“What was that you gave him Perrine?” Minna asked, demanding to know.

“Her measurements so I can get a replacement overcoat made for her at Gieves and Hawkes.” Aaron answered.

“I thought they did only men’s clothing.” Minna replied, a tad confused.

“Everybody’s got a price Minna.” Aaron explained. “Even them.” He wiped out Perrine’s empty glass with a hankerchief that he extracted from his breast pocket and asked, “Who’s next?”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Lynette Bishop learns how to break and enter, and that even warlocks have hopes, dreams, and idols.

Chapter IX: Johnny Come Lately

Sargeant Lynette Bishop strikes me as someone who has had a hard time fitting in and is constantly overlooked, something I can relate to in spades. She also appears painfully shy in front of new people, almost as if she hasn’t had much contact with them. Despite her domestic past and finding no joy in this war, she wants to do her best, to be of benefit, but there is a lot of soul crushing pressure on her to perform, considering that her homeland is now the first, last, and maybe the final line of defense the free world has. Still, there is a spark of self confidence in this one, it just needs a little fuel.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

“Next up is Lynette.” Minna answered, motioning for the sargeant to get up. Lynette rose from her seat, taking it with her, and proceeded to walk slowly towards Aaron. She looked at him as he sat there, looking at her with his eyes and she felt scared. *I hope I don’t get him angry like Perrine did. I don’t think I could stand- Suddenly, she tripped while lost in her thoughts, her shoe grazing the floor a bit too much. Bishop lost her grip on the chair and it fell with a crash and she proceeded to descend forward, face first. It happened so fast that she didn’t have time to put her arms under her to protect herself, but Aaron had more than enough time to do something about it. He unfurled his wings and caught Lynette with his left, interposing it between her and the concrete with barely a hand’s width to spare. She landed with a soft puff sound, like a head hitting a pillow.

“Are you alright Lynette?” Divale asked. Bishop looked at Aaron and nodded yes, silently thanking him for his quick thinking. She got her feet under her and propped herself up, Aaron retracting the wings as she stood. Picking up the chair, she placed it near the table and sat down. The two stared at each other for a good few seconds. *This one is very shy, introverted. Let’s see if we can crack that shell.* “So, what do you want to know about me?” he asked her, draining the last of his calvados. Bishop tried to form a question or even a coherent thought, but nothing came. “Um,” she started, “How- How are you?”

Aaron chuckled, slapping his right hand on his right knee. Lynette turned red with embarrassment, cursing herself for being so shy. “If these are the types of questions you’re going to ask me,” he stated, getting his laughter under control, smiling. “then I have nothing at all to fear.” He gave her a gentle look and added, “Don’t be afraid of me Lynette, I don’t bite, not hard at least.” The statement made Bishop go rigid with anxiety and Aaron hastily clarified with a grin, “That was a joke.”
“Oh, sorry,” Lynette apologized, laughing a tad, “I’m just not used to talking to people like this at all.”

“Oh, like me for that matter.” Aaron remarked. “Take your time. I’ve nowhere to go anytime soon.”

Bishop smiled and thought about her first real question. "Hmm. What would make a good ice breaker? Oh, I know! “You said that you usually have nightmares earlier. Why?”

“War changes a person,” Aaron explained, “changes them in ways that they never would’ve imagined. I’ve seen terrible things in my time in Europe, things that even with Doctor Domino’s help, I find difficult to shake or reconcile. The nightmares are part and parcel of post traumatic stress. There’s no cure for them, but there are treatments available like meditation and mental activities that take one’s mind away from the triggers.” He furrowed his brow in thought and stated, “I was a lot worse back in the day, before I met Lucretia. Most nights, I would barely get four hours without waking up screaming. I still do sometimes, but those are rare now.”

“Have you ever had a good dream?” Lynette pressed.

“Surprisingly yes,” Aaron answered, “and it was due to Ismenoth of all things.”

“Really?” Bishop asked in disbelief. “I find it very unlikely she could ever be nice.”

“You see Lynette,” Aaron explained, “in order to train a body, you must first train the mind, fill it with pertinent information before giving complex instructions, or else the whole thing goes to pot. So, what they did to me was put me in an induced coma and gave her free rein to educate me, while they worked on other things. At first, Ismenoth put me through the basics like speaking and walking. As I got older, the lessons got more in depth, which then required supplementary information. To that end, she let me see what the world was like, saying, ‘Go and know your future home and tomb’. I traveled the globe in a spirit like state, witnessing the interplay between humanity and the environment. While yes, I saw the barbarity, the cruelty, the despair, and the indifference, I also saw the charity, the honor, the sacrifice, and the love that can only come out from those that know and feel for their fellows. That was probably the best series of dreams, I’ve ever had.”

“How long were you asleep?” Lynette asked.

“Roughly from birth to when I was liberated.” Aaron replied.

Bishop’s eyes bugged out. "That would mean that he was in a virtual coma for fourteen years and then set loose, just to fight! That’s horrible! “So you never really experienced the world except through the view of a soldier.” she deduced.

“Yup, a lifetime of war.” Aaron agreed. “I suppose you’re going to then ask what was the worst dream I’ve had?” Lynette nodded and he continued, ‘I’m walking down a dirt road alone. The day is hot and humid and my body is dripping with sweat, the heavy starched uniform soaked clean through, the medals on my chest feeling like molten lead. My machine gun trails behind me, the tip of the barrel carving a deep fissure into the ground like a farmers plow, hindering my progress. My strength is gone and I can’t lift it and my hand won’t let go. A newspaper whizzes past me, my eyes barely catching the headline: WAR OVER! V-N DAY DECLARED! Then, I hear a woman’s voice off in the distance, calling my name. I look and there she is, a beautiful angel of a woman standing at the end of the road, with a child in her arms, a boy, a silver ring on her finger, looking at me with love in her eyes. She is my wife, holding my child to her chest. The sun begins to set and I’m overcome with the sense that my time is running out, so I struggle to get to her, my wife, my son. The gun barrel goes deeper into the earth and my legs give out, yet still I go on, clawing my way forward, my hands and fingernails ripped and bloody. I call out to her, imploring her with tears in my eyes…’
eyes, ‘Help me! Come to me’! All in vain, for she is deaf to my words. The sun continues to descend
ever the horizon behind them and the sky turned to gold then red. Slowly, she starts to face the
coming dark, no sign of wings from that angelic figure as she turns her back on me. I’m shouting,
‘Don’t leave me! Don’t go!’ I try to rip off my medals, but they won’t unclasp, fused shut by the
heat. I try to tear my uniform into shreds, but it clings like a leech to my flesh. Frantically, I slam my
fist into my other hand, trying to break my grasp on the weapon, breaking my fingers to shards of
bone, but they remain clenched. Then, the sun vanishes from sight and the world goes dark. She
disappears, and I am alone.” He sniffed away some tears and rubbed his eyes. “It represents many
things, the inability to let go of my past life, my futile attempts to be something greater than what I
am, and having no way, despite my efforts, to achieve any semblance of peace, redemption, or love.”

“You have Doctor Domino.” Bishop pointed out, gesturing to Lucretia. “There’s love there Aaron.”

Divale looked at Lucretia, and she looked him. He smiled and nodded. “That there is Lynette.” he
acknowledged, his voice cracking with emotional pain. “That there is.” Domino smiled back, tears of
compassion beginning to well up. “But, I can never give her a child. The process robbed me of my
ability to have children, to leave descendents, a legacy can redeem me in the eyes of the world.”

“Va bene amore mio. Ti staro ancora vicino. (It’s alright my love. I will stand by you.)” Lucretia
sobbed.

The floodgates burst and Aaron cried silent tears that cascaded down his face like crystal rivers, chest
and shoulders heaving. Bishop got up and went over to him, seeing him in agony and gave him a
hug of support. Aaron held her as he wept into her stomach. *So much pain. It's not fair that he
should suffer like this.* Gradually, the wracking sobs ceased and Aaron withdrew from her. “Thank
you.” he said sincerely, regarding both Lynette and Lucretia.

Content that she had done good, Lynette sat back down. “I think I know what your hopes and
dreams are Aaron.” she observed. “You want to be human, to live as we do.”

Aaron nodded. “Yes I do.” he stated emphatically. “I want to walk down the street and not have
people scream and run away in horror when I have my glasses off. I want to leave this life I’ve been
pigeonholed into and be someone other than an unwilling child soldier. I want to have children and
help raise them, to teach them, to guide them to a better future.” He paused and took a few breaths. “I
would do anything and pay any price to live as a mortal, even if I had to fly into and through the
depths of Hell in exchange.”

“Even your own soul?” Bishop asked.

Aaron looked down and thought about it for a long drawn out moment. He looked back up at her,
eyes locked with hers. “I won’t give up my immortal soul,” he answered, “but I haven’t been in a
situation where that resolve was truly tested.”

“Even if you don’t achieve your dreams, life does go on.” Lynette assured. “When one door closes,
many more open. All you have to do is find them and have the courage to walk through.”

*Sounds so simple in principle, yet in practice...* “Any other questions for me?”

“I think one more before I go into the object that I found.” Lynette answered. “If the war ended,
what would you do?”

Aaron opened his mouth to answer, but closed it, unfamiliar with how to phrase his thoughts,
looking like a fish gulping in water to absorb oxygen before expelling it from its gills. “Damn,” he
muttered out loud, “that’s a very good question. Fuck me. Umm... well, I’d be with Lucretia and
probably go north to Scotland, maybe on the outskirts of Edinburgh where it’s peaceful and quite. Would make a home and living with my own two hands, being a gentleman farmer, doing honest work that doesn’t involve violence."

“I think you’d be better as a teacher Aaron.” Bishop remarked. “You have the demeanor for one. I saw it before you and Perrine went to the ground phase of the exercise the day before. Your explanations were short and to the point and you answered questions with confidence in clear concise language.”

Aaron politely scoffed, “Me a teacher? Do you really think I can get up in front of a classroom of kids and teach them?” He shook his head in wonder. “Then again, dreams do change and dreams do move on if you wait too long. Who knows?”

It was at that point that Lynette reached into her front right pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, yellowed with age and heavily creased. She placed it on the table and laid it out flat, revealing a picture of bullet schematics, each one with something added on, notes in pencil lining the margins. “My father, a merchant, taught me how to read various reports before I was transferred. Most had to do with business and marketing, concerning how to gauge a prospective invention, whether it could work, and if so, whether it could be utilized cheaply and efficiently. I’ve never seen projectile designs like this before and I doubt anyone else has. The dimensions are all technically sound but,” Lynette began, pointing around the sheet, resting on ends of the bullets in turn, “there is no casing. Why?”

*Oh boy, this can of worms again.* Aaron leaned in and gave her a serious look before asking, “Do you really want me to answer this question?” Bishop nodded and he sighed. *Well, I did warn them.*

“These experimental rounds were developed to address weight issues and supply problems. We theorized that if we could shave off even a few ounces of brass from the casing or even the whole thing, we could lighten the weight of all ammunition by as much as fifteen percent. This raised the immediate problem of what is now going hold the propellant in place, since that is the casing’s function, to house the powder charge. I heard numerous suggestions, but the way forward, in my mind, was to make the round caseless and completely solid, drill a thin hole in the center where you could fit the propellant, and dam it up with a thin plate of metal. To add to it’s destructive capabilities, we fashioned a detonation cap using magic, basing it off a HEAT shell.”

“That’s amazing!” Bishop exclaimed, taking aback by the tale, holding her head with her left hand in wonder. “You decreased the size, adding a marginal amount of weight back, and significantly upgraded the killing potential! That would almost guarantee a Neuroi kill in less than a few shots at most if you could locate the core!” Her happy expression turned to one of concern as Aaron looked down at the paper, like he just received some bad news. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Aaron looked up at her and replied, “These rounds weren’t originally built to combat Neuroi, they were developed to deal with witches.”

Lynette went shock white and stiff. Her hands started trembling and her breathing became shallow, making a sound that one would be hard pressed to hear. “W-What do you mean?” she stammered, her mind too astonished to let her mouth articulate itself. “Were you going to kill us?”

Aaron raised his right hand and pleaded, “Let me explain.” As soon as he had Lynette’s full attention he began, “We always made sure that we covered our tracks in order to avoid discovery, by both man and witch. For the most, we felt safe, but all that came to an end when we saw the Strikers for the first time in Warsaw. Though they were crude at first and highly haphazard, we knew that it was only a matter of time before the technology was perfected, and that scared the living daylights out of us. After the battle, I met with my company commanders to decide how to deal with this new
“You mean that you were in charge of all this?” Bishop queried with concern. “This was your brainchild? A means to—”

“Listen to me.” Divale interrupted. “Think of it from my point of view here Bishop. Like Minna, I was in charge of making sure that my boys were protected from all threats, both foreign and domestic. We already had one enemy in front of us, we couldn’t afford to have two more crop up in our rear. If the worst case scenario happened, and we found ourselves in a vise, we had to have a means to defend ourselves, to even the odds.” He paused and took her hands into his, the tiny limbs engulfed by his calloused palms. “If you’re wondering if we would’ve used them wantonly, to shoot you all on sight, you’re wrong. I gave out strict orders that those rounds would only be used in self defense. Plus, we really couldn’t get them to work right anyway, so we scrapped the project entirely, instead relying on changing our tactics and becoming versed in takedown spells. You have to believe me, I didn’t want to do this, but I had a responsibility to my men. Please understand that.”


“The hole that was to be drilled into the bullet was thin in order to maximize knock down potential, but the amount of powder needed to reach the target with maximum velocity far exceeded what could be loaded in. We experimented with numerous mixtures, adding magic in order to help find a breakthrough, but nothing worked. The closest thing we had to a near eureka moment was when, after burning my fingers and singing parts of my eyebrows off for the umpteenth time, I thought to myself, ‘Great minds think alike. Someone somewhere must have had this epiphany’. I ordered my code breakers to listen in on all broadcasted frequencies, no exceptions. Took us a few days to find them all and sift through the chaff, but we found the kernel of hope.” Aaron responded. He turned to look Minna who was watching all of this in silence and asked, “Are you a believer in ex post facto justice?”

Minna gave him an odd look. “No, why?” she conjectured.

“Because we traced a signal, coming from a research base specializing in developing experimental weaponry, to somewhere a few miles south of Ryuken Norway.” Aaron answered.

Minna’s eyes lit up like a fireworks display as the name resonated throughout the room and she leapt out of her seat. Some member of the squadron followed suit but she called out, “Hold it ladies!” Everyone looked at her, waiting for her order. “Back off.” she commanded. Those that stood up slowly sat back down. When everyone had complied, she turned to Aaron and asked, “You were responsible for The Ryuken Break In?”

Aaron reacted by shrugging his shoulders in helplessness and defense of his case. “Like I had a choice in the damn matter.” he reasoned. “If the roles were reversed and it was you in my shoes, where I stood, you would’ve done the same thing Minna.”

Commander Wilcke gave him a hard stare. *Doesn’t mean I like what you did Aaron. You caused that facility to be moved further away from the front line, hampered research, and hindered our ability to get better weapons for I don’t know how long. Bastard is right though. A good leader uses his army to fight and win, but a great leader makes sure that he preserves his army while doing so. She sat back down in her chair and bade Lynette to continue with her questioning with a gesture of the hand. “What does she mean by a break in?” Bishop asked.*

“As this whole enterprise was my idea,” Aaron continued, “I took it upon myself to investigate alone. Left camp at late noon and got there at around nine o clock in the evening. Using the cover of
darkness, I circled the site, keeping low in case they had radar. It didn’t look like much on the
outside, a rundown hydraulic plant with rusted out machinery and complete with chain link fence
walls that had holes so big, I could drive a KV-1 through. However, there was an airstrip near the
rear of the building, one that didn’t match the dilapidated exterior, and there were no roads
whatevever leading to the facility. Surrounding the immediate vicinity were the tell tale bumps of
mines under the snow. At that point, I asked myself, ‘What kind of broken down piece of shit place
has a pristine runway, from which to get supplies no doubt, and is protected by a minefield’?

“One with something to hide.” Lynette answered, as if the question was meant for her.

“Exactly.” Aaron agreed, nodding. “Going in through the front door was a no go. Too heavily
defended and risky. Topside had no visible entry points except for one. Along the other side of a
large building was a heavily barred sewer grate, pumping raw sewage into a long trench that ran
from that area to a lagoon.”

Lynette put a hand to her face. “You mean to tell me that you crawled into that?!” she asked in
disbelief.

Aaron nodded. “Ripped the grate off, vomited, and minimized my size through magic to get in. Left
my clothes outside. The pipe was well kept and scrubbed, but it was, pardon the expression, the
shittiest time I had up to that point. On my hands and knees, I crept through three hundred yards of
some of the worst things you could ever venture through. Had to stop at certain points to vomit again
or hold on as the pumps activated, driving the contaminated sluice through. Finally, after what
seemed like an age, I popped my head out of an old fashioned outhouse seat, now fully integrated
with the benefits of modern day technology. The area was a combination latrine, shower, and
laundry room. After making sure that no one was around, I leapt from the commode, dripping pearls
of wisdom all over the place and landed in a vat of laundry that was soaking in soap. I washed
myself off from the waste of yesterday and put on the only other piece of clothing that could fit me in
my present state: a pair of white panties, still damp.”

The room was soon filled with peals of laughter from everyone and all Aaron could do was shake his
head, red with embarrassment. Lynette was rocking in her seat with laughter, holding her sides. “I
can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.” she wheezed. After regaining her composure, she regarded Divale and
asked with a slight chuckle, “So what happened next?”

“I made myself invisible and wandered about the interior which was a daunting task. It was like I
stepped into a labyrinth of epic proportions. The guards, who were packing some serious firepower,
blabbed incessantly, and through them, I learned that I made a crucial error. This facility apparently
ran five levels down into the earth. It was completely self sustaining with its own dormitories,
kitchens, supply depots, radio rooms, command bunkers, and water cisterns. A full garrison force
could stay down there for weeks, even months at a time. The research portion of the site was bound
to be the lowest level. Thankfully, there was an elevator, but you needed a key to activate the damn
thing. So I waited until a person got into it and rode it down to where they wanted to go. The whole
process must have took at least two hours because people were coming and going all the time, going
up and down and all around, but I finally got to where I needed to go.

I didn’t know what to expect, so I guarded myself for any possible outcome. You could only imagine
my surprise when all that awaited me when those doors opened was a group of scientists in white
coats debating amongst themselves. I slid around them before the doors closed and found myself in a
large well lit room with bench after bench filled with people looking at slides through microscopes,
assembling and disassembling machines and weapons, combining chemicals, conferring with their
superiors, everything you’d expect a scientist to do. The guards were on raised platforms,
overlooking the brains like convicts in a prison, making rounds. I was overwhelmed at first, but I was
determined to get what I was looking for. After some searching, I came across a chemical formula for a liquid propellant dubbed ‘Rocket Engine Prototype Fuel: Version Alpha’. Convinced that this was what I was looking for, I committed the recipe to memory, but it wasn’t enough; I had to have a sample. Stealing away with a long test tube, a cork, and a pipette, I removed the stoppers and took as much as I could get from the main batch. Unfortunately, the working prototypes were on pressure sensitive alarm system plates. Red lights come on, klaxons scream, and the guards order everyone to stop what they are doing and remain calm. All the while, I’m thinking to myself, ‘Oh fuck! They’re going to seal this place until they figure out what’s wrong! I need to get out! Without really thinking, I unfurled my wings, flew to the other side of the room, and, using my wings to shield me, drilled through tons of concrete and frozen earth to freedom.”

“In nothing but a pair of panties.” Bishop remarked with a smile.

More chuckles came from the peanut gallery and Aaron exhaled in a not too proud way, “Yes. I got a fair bit of ribbing when I arrived at camp, not to mention a rather horrible rash from whatever that underwear was soaking in. Had to be hands off when it came from using the restroom, if you know what I mean.”

“Yet,” Bishop asked, a bit puzzled, “you implied that it didn’t work?”

“No it didn’t.” Aaron replied dejectedly. “It worked too well. Even in miniscule amounts, the sheer explosive force caused irreparable damage to the internal firing assembly of any weapon we had, and the exiting muzzle velocity was so intense, that it stripped the rifling from the barrel, turning an accurate firearm into a smoothbore musket. So, I scrapped the whole thing.” He furrowed his brow in thought and added. “Maybe in time when technology catches up, these might become a reality, but not today. Anything else?”

“Nope.” Lynette answered. She gestured with her right hand and offered, “Your turn.”

“You strike me as someone who has a hard time fitting in, almost as if you’re overlooked.” Aaron stated.

“Well, that’s quite true.” Lynette admitted. “It was mostly due to my upbringing. I was the middle child of eight and my older sister Wilma was a retired witch of some renown, so she got all the attention. As for me, I just concentrated on making sure my brothers and sisters were cared for. Learned how to do laundry, cook, all the things needed to help raise a family.”

One of eight kids. And I thought Catholics had big families. “That explains the latter, what about the former?” Aaron pressed.

“My father was a wealthy merchant and my mother fought in The Great War. His money helped pay for my education at a boarding school for young girls in London. Didn’t have many friends because I really had nothing in common with them. Most were daughters of the military elite and business magnates, while I was a largely domestic country girl who, in their minds, got lucky.” Bishop answered ruefully.

“Your mother fought in The Great War?” Aaron queried, very curious. “What’s her name?”

“Minnie.” Lynette answered.

Aaron’s jaw hit the floor and his eyes opened wide. “Hold on.” he said, emphatically making a T with his two hands, gathering his wits back. “Are you telling me that your mother is Minnie “The Lioness of Flanders” Bishop?”
“Why, yes.” Lynette replied, flabbergasted. “Do you know of my mother?”

“Know her?” Aaron answered in astonishment. “I’ve heard enough things about her during my stay in London over the past three months to write an authorized autobiography. When I was being trained, Ismenoth told me all about her too. I was spellbound when I heard about her exploits in Belgium, about her almost single-handedly keeping Belgian ports free so that supplies and reinforcements could get in. Without her, The Great War would’ve probably ended a bit differently. She’s a living legend in the eyes of all who live here and in mine. You should be proud of her.”

“I am,” Bishop began, “but I’m not a soldier Aaron, not like her or my sister. To me, there’s no joy in war. Even after all this time since my enlistment, I still feel that way.”

“If that’s the case,” Aaron countered, “what caused you to join up in the first place?”

“I wanted to help protect my home. When France fell, I talked with my mother about enlisting, to fight for my country. She wasn’t too happy about it, saying that since she had served and Wilma served, our family did our part. Almost prevailed on me right then and there, but I dug my feet in and faced her down. We argued about it for hours, but, in the end, she allowed it, but made me promise that I would be attached to a support squadron. My basic training occurred during the Dunkirk evacuations so I didn’t participate in those. After I got assigned to the 610th, Mio came up to our headquarters in Coventry, asking for me personally.” Lynette explained.

Aaron gave Mio a puzzled look, a look that plainly broadcasted, ‘What in the hell are you thinking taking a rookie straight from boot and putting her with such an elite group of pilots’. “Out of all witches that submitted their sharpshooter scores to the Allied Command, Lynette scored the highest.” Major Sakamoto responded. “Our front line at the time was fully fleshed out. All we needed was a support line and Bishop fit that bill.”

Aaron regarded the English witch in front of him and noticed that she was uncomfortable. “The pressure on you to perform must have been great. Not only being good at what you do, not only continuing a legacy, but also being a defender of the front line.” he observed.

“Soul crushing pressure to be exact.” Lynette agreed. “I helped the 501st during The Blitz and I just couldn’t do a thing right. In training, I was superb. I could hit a sparrow in the eye at eight hundred yards in hurricane force winds, but the moment I got in the air and the combat was real, I seized up due to stress. Got me into a lot of trouble, so much so that there was talk of kicking me out of the squadron. When Yoshika arrived, I thought my days were numbered. I grew depressed, but instead of trying to aid in my departure, she impressed upon me to stay, to continue to be of service. It gave me hope and it really served me well when Dover Castle came under attack.”

“What happened?” Aaron asked, interested.

“A large group of Neuroi came up and a majority of the squadron was dispatched to fight them off. However, they were just a diversion, to draw our attention away from the real threat: a low flying variant that traveled at high speeds with the intent of colliding with the city of Dover. They couldn’t make it back in time, leaving just Eila and Minna to face it. Yoshika volunteered, but was shot down, told that she wasn’t ready. Filled with admiration for such bravery, it made me realize what I had to do, so I volunteered too. It make Minna agree and we moved to form a defensive line while Minna and Eila tried to take it out. Things looked to go in our favor, but the enemy jettisoned most of it’s rear armor, gaining speed. It outpaced Eila and Minna, leaving me and Yoshika to face it alone. I tried to bring it down myself, but I kept missing and the more I missed, the more I panicked, until Miyafuji steadied my aim, giving me confidence. Using her as a distraction, I made the Neuroi bleed off just enough speed to line up a killing shot. I hit dead center and it died. It was my first aerial kill.”
Lynette recounted with pride.

Aaron smiled and clapped gently. “Good for you.” he sincerely congratulated. “Did that help your case for belonging here?”

“I think so.” Bishop remarked. “But, I’m still afraid that it could happen again, that I’ll freeze at the worst possible time.”

Self confidence then. “I have a riddle for you Lynette.” Aaron announced, holding up his two hands. “Which of these hands is important to others?”

Bishop furrowed her brow and thought about it. “Umm, the right?” she guessed.

“Nope,” Aaron declared. “and it isn’t the left either.”

“I don’t quite follow what you’re saying.” Lynette acknowledged.

“If you wish to contribute to a cause, a purpose, you cannot do it through the hands of others. They may look small and frail, but those are strong steady hands that will defend, that will support. You protected your country, you supported your friends by destroying that Neuroi, by thwarting its attack. You will not freeze up again Lynette, because you have demonstrated that you can contribute in a meaningful way, that you have confidence in yourself to know what to do and when. Don’t get me wrong, there will come times that your faith in yourself is tested, and you will have detractors and obstacles that will try to hinder you, to bring you down, but they all can be surmounted, no matter how invincible they seem. There is always a way to win. Keep you chin up and never let their words or deeds get to you. You’re a hell of a lot stronger than you or anyone else thinks.” Aaron expounded.

Lynette’s lips quivered and she began to cry tears of happiness. Like what she did for him, Aaron got up from his seat and gave her a hug of support, getting on his knees so that she could weep into the crook of his shoulder. “When I first saw you, I was scared of you Aaron.” Bishop admitted as her tears seeped into his pink shirt.

“And what do you think now?” Aaron asked as he let her go, her sobbing coming to an end.

After drying her eyes with her sleeve she responded, “I think you’re a good man once one actually sits down and talks with you.”

Aaron smiled and offered his open hand, “I get that a lot. No further questions. Good talk.” Lynette shook his hand and picked up her seat, returning to the circle. Alright two down, nine to go.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Shirley finds out how Aaron got command and the perils that go with it.

Chapter X: The Queen Of Speed

Even before the coven, I knew from experience that Captain Charlotte “Shirley” Yeager was a thrill seeking speed demon of the highest order. She’s always remained focused when it mattered the most though, and, with her being kind, patient, generous, and loyal, Shirley could become friends with just about anyone. At times, she can be reckless, using her knowledge of machines to push the limits of pace and maneuverability to dangerous extremes. Reminds me a lot of myself when I was younger, back in the day when I thought I was invincible, that I could take on the whole world and win, before it got kicked out of me in the worst way imaginable.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

“You’re on Shirley.” Minna announced, and Yeager picked up her chair and moved to sit in front of Aaron, her trip over far less dramatic than Lynette’s.

“Is that stuff any good?” she asked, gesturing to the bottle of calvados as she sat down.

“If you like apples with a hint of cinnamon,” Aaron answered, “then this is for you. Just be careful, it’s like absinthe in that it creeps up on you if you’re not too careful.”

“Order me up then.” Shirley ordered, picking up one of the glasses and holding it out to Aaron. He opened the bottle and began to pour. A bright light and the room gets darker, but not to the point where one had to strain their eyes to see anything of note. Lights in sconces line parts of the blue wallpapered walls, casting floral patterned illumination, revealing tables filled with people, drinking, laughing, talking. Vision looks down at a pair of hands working feverishly behind a long bar counter top, rinsing three rocks glasses in a basin of soap and water. Plop, plop, plop go the drinking glasses, turned upside down to dry on a towel, parts of it drenched already from having been the recipient of many a sloppy impact. The left hand reaches under and pulls out a bottle of wine, a three year old chardonnay, and the right reaches for a corkscrew lying nearby in a recessed pocket carved into the waterproofed wood. Flicked open with a hard motion of the wrist, the pigtailed metal tip is twisted into the cork, one, two, three full turns. A hard pull from a strong arm and shoulder triggers a loud pop as the stopper is extracted. Without ceremony, the corkscrew is causally tossed into the wash basin and the now free right hand reaches up above an unseen head, and grabs three wine glasses suspended on an overhead rack, held by brass chains. The wine glasses are placed on the table carefully and the wine bottle is tipped, filling each one a thumbs width away from the top with yellow liquid. With the task completed, the cork is tamped down with a modest slap of a hand and a voice rings out...
“I’m good there Aaron.” Shirley remarked. Her words made Aaron realize that he had over poured and he yanked the bottle away, looking like a man trying to get rid of an achy tooth with a line of string.

“Sorry about that.” Divale apologized, pouring himself a generous helping. “Just got lost in my memories again.”

“What kind?” Yeager asked, intrigued.

Aaron, as he did with Perrine, dabbed his finger into the calvados and took a drop of alcohol with it. “Thinking about the last time I poured drinks for someone other than myself.” he replied, watching the droplet fall to the concrete. He then took a sip and began his tale. “It was in mid August of ‘43, shortly after Abbeville went down. What remained of my command were resting and getting ready for the next sortie, trying to see if we could get it back. Wouldn’t happen though, the writing was on the wall, plain for everyone to see. With Abbeville taken, the enemy successfully bisected west from east, a bulge from Paris extending all the way to the Cotentin Peninsula, lacking in heavy weapons and armor that the other section, from Berlin to Dunkirk had. It was only a matter of time before it got rolled up and the Neuroi would turn on the other end. It was a Sunday and every Sunday we had a drawing for R&R. We had this clay urn that contained a white stone for each of us, and a black stone for the lucky winner. As I sat there with it, tossing out extras that I didn’t need anymore, the whole situation hit me like a tank round to the chest. It was over, everything we had tried to do had come to this, these tragic last days. Decided that since the end was near for all of us, all of us should take the time to be together, to be happy one last time. The drawing for the prize went the way it always had, each man in turn going to the urn and drawing out one stone, not revealing it until all had gone. When they opened their palms, they were all shocked at first that they all had a black stone. They soon realized why, they weren’t stupid.”

“Where did you go?” Yeager asked, drinking from her glass.

“Though the enemy was scarcely thirty miles from the capital, Paris was the best choice as it would be deserted and not draw a lot of attention to such a random gathering of such motley characters. On our way in, we saw that the roads leading out were literally choked with people, civilians and soldiers alike, loaded in whatever could get them to safety that much quicker, cars, horse drawn carts, legs, and we were the only schmucks trying to get in. The city itself was dark, mandated power outage in effect, saving the precious electricity for the military. We landed along the Champs Elysees, most of the shops all boarded up, their owners fleeing with rest. The place was a ghost town with nothing but the sound of the wind rustling loose papers along the avenue and toppling abandoned luggage cases along the sidewalks, the only evidence that it had ever known habitation. It looked to be a fools errand that we were on, wishful thinking that failed to yield any fruit, until we came across a rather non descript bar called La Rose Bleue. Didn’t look like anything special with its low hanging roof, blue rose sign with gold lettering, and red brickwork, but the moment we got inside, it took our breaths away. Blue wallpaper lined every square inch of the walls and the ceiling was white tile with beautiful crystal chandeliers. Faux gold molding lined the edges, stamped with the fleur de lis and quatrefoil. Luxurious burgundy red carpet made the empty white linen tables stand out like black squirrels in winter snow. It was dark like an Irish pub, but we could still see at the end of the room a long bar top with the bartender, a short middle aged man dressed in a blue vest with gold buttons, white dress shirt, and black trousers, polishing a wine glass.

He looks up at us a bit confused, for he undoubtedly thought that everyone worth their salt and intelligence had packed up and left. We all walk up to the bar and he asks us all, ‘What are you doing here at such a late hour’? I tell him, ‘We want to spend our last moments on earth together as friends, to enjoy each others company’. I reach into my back pocket and pull out a billfold as thick as my wrist with francs, adding, ‘However much is here, is how much I want’. He takes the overstuffed
wallet and opens it up, taking out the wad money and counting. His eyes bug out as he realizes that there was over six thousand francs in his hands. Placing it all on the bar top he says, ‘You are entitled to anything you want as long as you help me serve your men’. I agreed and all hell broke loose as the boys start ordering left and right. Though I was fast, the sheer volume of work was taxing my abilities, but the bartender was gracious enough to teach me some tricks of his trade, helping me shave off precious seconds. Soon, I was getting the hang of it and my compatriot was moving like greased lightning, hands darting this and that so fast, I didn’t think he was real. Took us a good ten minutes to get everyone served and to pour refills to those who had finished in the meantime. I was sweating like a pig when it all stopped and the bartender, drier than the Sahara at high noon, personally cracked open a bottle of cognac and poured me a drink out of gratitude. We drank, laughed, sang, and talked from five o’clock in the evening to three o’clock the next morning. From time to time, the bartender himself would play the piano. All of us had fun, swapping stories about the past, the triumphs and tragedies, old friends long gone.”

Aaron paused and he looked down and away, looking like he was peering into an unseen distance, parting the realms of reality and illusion in his quest for an unknown answer. “Towards the morning,” he continued, with sadness in his voice, “things took on a somber tone. There were a lot of tears shed then. The boys all gave the usual platitudes to each other, the good lucks, the be safes, the see in you in hells. I was nursing a glass of wine in the corner alone when they all came up to me, asking, ‘What do we do now boss’?”

“What did you say to them?” Yeager queried, fully absorbed in the story.

“I told them, ‘Europe is going to fall and there’s not a damn thing we can do about it, except buy time for the Allies to get out. However, we all have a choice to make. We can either make our last stand here, or go over to Great Britain to continue the fight’. When it came to a vote, they all chose to stay, myself included. Before we all packed up and left, the bartender came up to me and handed me what remained of the francs for, apparently, I had overpaid. I let him have it as a tip for being such a gracious host. Didn’t help him in the end though. I found him later on, or at least what the crows didn’t like, a bloated corpse along the Normandy beaches.” Aaron recollected.

“Looking at from my perspective,” Shirley observed, taking another drink, “the choice you gave them wasn’t much of one at all. If you went over here, your odds of being discovered would’ve skyrocketed. You would never put them in a situation where they could get hurt, so you paired a solution that they would never do with one that they would.”

Aaron sighed and nodded. “Even if I didn’t suggest those courses of action, it would’ve been the same outcome. Though we had failed in our duty to save Europe from destruction, we all knew that our other duty, to protect who we could, only ends in death. Thus, we all made our way to the only place where our sacrifice, our last stand would matter, Berlin.”

The room went deathly quiet as the name of the last major city to fall to the Neuroi echoed throughout the vehicle depot. “Yet it wasn’t the end of the warlocks,” Charlotte replied, “for you survived to tell the tale. How? Why?”

“It certainly wasn’t by choice.” Aaron argued. “Berlin alone caused roughly eighty percent of my total injuries. You could only imagine what I looked like by the time that I was the last man standing. I was drenched in blood from crown to crotch, my limbs were flush with bruises, and my wings had damn near broken apart from detonations and impacts, near useless for flight. Gave a good account though. We had eliminated three enemy battle groups, using whatever we had, be it guns, grenades, tire irons, wooden clubs, rocks, our bare hands even. I had every intention of joining my comrades in death, that me living was an insult to their honor and their sacrifice. I took to the skies to find another target, any target. Yet, the winds that had guided my path for long cheated me, instead whisking me
away from the flaming, dying city, leaving me alone, alive, and ashamed. I was carried a good ways into enemy held territory, my blood and tears of stolen valor, falling to the earth like crimson rain until I crashed into and through the basement doors of an abandoned chateau and I passed out.”

Shirley just shook her head slowly, dumbfounded to silence. “Yet here you stand.” she muttered, thinking about how incredible such a feat ranked on the scale of miraculous. “You are by far the luckiest son of a bitch I’ve ever met in my life.” Aaron nodded in understanding as Yeager continued, “Speaking of choice, if the records concerning your true origins are nonexistent, how did you get your name? Was it chosen for you?”

“Oh, I chose it,” Aaron clarified, “just in a way that was a bit ad hoc. Despite the thoroughness of The Thirteenth Legion, some articles of worth escaped their destructive energies. There was this really ratty looking Bible and an herb doctors dictionary that some of the Allied minders found and they cut out proper names from both, putting them into hats and told us to draw when it came to putting our names on the roles for posterity’s sake. I was lucky in regards to actually getting a name that rolled easily off the tongue: Aaron Divale. Thank God I wasn’t the poor bastard that drew Methuselah Dragon-tongue. We called him Selah for short.”

“You said you had a command earlier. Did you refer to the whole operation or just a part of it?” Shirley asked.

“That is an interesting story.” Aaron explained. “When we were sent off to fight in Russia, we made a pit stop a few miles north of Venice to discuss just what the hell to do. Obviously, organization was needed or else the moment that we got to where we needed to go and took a long hard around, we’d be in a well of hurt. As one, we discussed who should lead the unit and votes were cast.”

“You elected your leader?” Yeager asked with skepticism. “I find that to be a very dangerous precedent.”

“True,” Aaron admitted, “but we all knew how to lead from being taught by the demons inside of us. Whoever won could and would be a worthy headman.”

“And the best won?” Shirley conjectured.

“Far from it.” Aaron replied with no humor.

“You didn’t think you were the most suited?” Yeager retorted, puzzled and confused.

“Hell no. Out of all the records that survive in the Allied archives, there was a grading chart delineating the magical aptitude and combat scores of all the warlocks that Operation Reciprocity created.” Aaron justified. “I wasn’t even in the top half. In fact, next to my name there was a note stating, PDC, short for possible disposal candidate. Operation Yuletide probably saved my life.” He looked at Shirley and sighed. “I voted for someone else, yet they voted for me to lead them, all nine hundred and ninety nine of them. To say that I was surprised was an understatement. I was floored by the announcement, but I decided to go along with it because, if it wasn’t me than who? I asked them all many times afterwards why they all chose me, but they always replied with the same answer, ‘I can’t say’. With the supreme command issue ironed out, we then broke ourselves up into squadrons based on specialization. Ended up having ten squadrons, or coteries as we called them, and had those units elect their leaders as well, who then reported to me and made up my council of sorts.”

“What was your specialization?” Charlotte queried.

“I was a duel threat, close combat specialist with a heavy aptitude for psychological warfare. In
addition to heading the whole kit and caboodle, I ended up getting command of the Ninth Coterie, the Baba Yagas.” Aaron answered. He noticed a questioning look from Shirley and continued, “Baba Yaga, in Russian, roughly translates to boogeyman, and believe me, we more than lived up to the name, though it kind of made us kings of nothing as the Neuroi weren’t susceptible to such tactics. However, we did manage to become ambassadors in our own right as our knowledge of psychology made us perfect candidates for infiltration, find and talking with those who had supplies that we needed to continue the fight.”

“Infiltration?” Yeager pondered out loud. “I doubt that. No offense to you Aaron, but given everything about you, blending in would for you would be like a fitting a round peg in a square hole.” Aaron, instead of answering, placed his right hand over his mouth.

“Hey, Shirley!” Lucchini’s voice rang out concern.

Shirley whipped around fast and asked, “What is it?”

Lucchini looked at Yeager with an expression that made it clear that she didn’t know what Charlotte was talking about and acknowledged, “What? I didn’t say anything.”

Yeager was about to say something along the lines of ‘but you did, I just heard you’, when she heard Lucchini’s voice again, chuckling with glee, behind her. She broke out into a cold sweat and turned in her seat. Aaron Divale was sitting there laughing, hand now removed from his face, grinning from ear to ear with a voice that wasn’t his own. “You underestimate me Shirley.” Aaron observed in Francesca’s voice. “You underestimate me greatly. There’s more to the game than looks, you can count on it.” The whole room went white with fear. Holy shit, he can do voices and throw them around!

Yeager took a heavy draught from her calvados and glared at Aaron. “Don’t ever do that again.” she stated with force, recovering from her fright.

“No promises.” Aaron said, his voice becoming his own again. “Sorry, I scared you. The boys, though disciplined, were quite fond of innocent pranks from time to time and I was their favorite victim. Always forgave them though, took it with grace and dignity.”

“What were they all like, your men?” Shirley asked.

“Just like you and me,” Aaron illuminated, “but they weren’t at the same time. It was like we were the same people, speaking the same language, partaking in the same traditions, yet there was something off about their demeanor, as if something was missing from their being.”

“Sense of self?” Yeager suggested.

“I don’t know,” Aaron admitted gloomily, “and it’s a little too late to get answers.”

Charlotte looked at Aaron and saw that he was deep in thought again. At first she thought it was a flashback, but soon recognized that look, for it was the same that she saw on numerous occasions, etched on the faces of her friends and sisters in arms. He’s thinking about them. “You miss them all, don’t you?” she deduced.

Aaron quaffed over half his calvados before answering with sadness in his heart, “Every damn day.” He shook his head hard, driving away the memories, and asked, “Any more questions?”

“Just this.” Shirley said, getting up from her chair. She walked behind Aaron’s luggage crate quickly and soon a metallic tick was heard, like someone snapping a thin bar of tin. The sound of tread on concrete reached the ears of all present until she reemerged a few seconds later, pushing alongside
her a motorcycle, painted jet black with metal plating that was swept back like a diving bird of prey, allowing minimal spots for drag. It was a massive beast of a machine with a shiny engine, a reinforced suspension and body, and a long black leather seat, built for Aaron’s frame. The tires were thick and featured deep tread, clearly indicating that the vehicle could off road as well as drive down a boulevard.

“I wondered why it felt a bit empty in there.” Aaron quipped, smiling at the sight of the vehicle. He got up as Shirley put down the kickstand, setting the bike up near the table, yet slightly away so that all could see its splendor. Divale ran his right hand along the length of motorcycle, caressing it like a favored pet.

“Where did you get something like this?” Yeager asked anxiously, as if denying her an answer would cause her to burst.

“I built it myself,” Aaron responded, taking away his hand from the metal and taking a sip from his glass, “learned how to do so by the head of the Tinkers, the Third Coterie, Moses Dogwood. Taught me everything he knew about machines before he died, at least rudimentarily speaking. Of course, getting him to teach me was a feat unto itself. He liked to wander about aimlessly, kept getting lost and found again in the oddest of places.”

Charlotte gaped at the motorcycle and gestured with her right hand. “Rudimentarily speaking?!?” she gasped. “This design is far beyond any that I’ve seen, at least a generation ahead of it’s time, maybe more! Plus, this intrigues me.” Shirley pointed to the engine and regarded Aaron. “This is a highly miniaturized V-12 HL230 P45 engine from Maybach, capable of 700 maximum horsepower with close to 3,000 rpm! They put these things in Tiger tanks Aaron, tanks for Christ’s sake! In that 58 ton machine, maximum speed was roughly 45 mph, but in a single tonner here, I’ve calculated the top speed, without supercharging to be slightly over 200 mph!”

“So?” Aaron asked, not understanding the significance.

“Oh my God!” Shirley exasperatedly sighed. “Before I came here, I used to race vehicles just like this, trying to go faster than any witch in history, and even with my powers and technical expertise, I could only get up to 187 mph!” She waked up to him and grabbed him by the shoulders, with a pleading look in her eyes. “Let me ride it!”

“No can do.” Aaron remarked politely, letting himself loose from her grip. “This baby is my pride and joy, it’s like my child. The only one who rolls this girl out is me. Plus, you can’t ride it anyway because I’m the key that starts it.” He then swung his leg over the metal machine and sat down on the leather. The moment his body made contact, the motorcycle roared to life, a heavy thrum that reverberated throughout the room, before settling to a lion purr.

Undeterred, Yeager stepped in front of the bike and placed her hands on the front, leaning forward, eyes level with Aaron’s. “Please let me ride it! I’ll do anything you want me to do!”

Aaron simply sipped his calvados and stared at her blankly for a few seconds, thinking what he could get in exchange. Shirley began to get uneasy. “If you want to rev the engines of this wet dream on two wheels, you have to teach me what you know about the Striker Unit; how it works, why it works, and how to repair it. In return, I’ll install an ignition switch and have a key made. Deal?” Aaron demanded.

Shirley whipped around and asked, “Minna?”

Minna furrowed her brow. “I will have to submit a request to the Allied Command and have him
sign a non disclosure agreement as the inner workings of the Striker Unit are considered top secret. When this request is processed, I want your word that you will teach him properly. Any funny business and you will answer for it.” she consented.

Yeager gave a sigh of relief and extended her right hand deal. “It’s a deal.” she said.

Aaron took her hand in his right and shook it gently, before getting off the bike. The idling engine died immediately as its connection to its master ceased. He sat back down in his seat, Shirley doing the same. “So, I take it it’s my turn now?” he asked. Yeager nodded and Divale began, “So how did you become such a technical whiz with a fascination for speed?”

“My dad.” Shirley answered with pride. “He was an absolute genius with machines and he taught me everything I know. Kind of became a tomboy in my own right after a while. Of course, I’m not saying that all of me is a reflection of my father, my mother also taught me kindness and generosity, as she would take me and my two brothers and two sisters every Sunday to help volunteer at the local church.”

“I could tell that from when you introduced yourself to me yesterday.” Aaron pointed out. “Even though you didn’t know me from Adam, you put your best foot forward. Commendable. So what about the speed demon in you?”

“My life was very dull,” Yeager explained, “what with growing up on a farm in the foothills of West Virginia. I didn’t mind the hard work that such a life entailed, but I wanted something more, something that meant something. It wasn’t until I walked down the street of town one day and saw a little memento booth with these pictures of witches that fought in The Great War. Didn’t think much of it at first, but as time went on, I kept on thinking about it so much that I became convinced that this was my calling.”

“Not that of a soldier, but as a pioneer like them.” Aaron observed.

Shirley nodded enthusiastically and went on, “So I left the farm life behind and sunk myself into the Bonneville Salt Flats, a plain that stretches forty square miles. It was a mecca of sorts for speed and altitude jockeys who sought to outdo each other in the record books. Within a few short months, I broke and owned outright numerous records, including the land speed record.” She gaze longingly at the bike and added, “I hope to break it again.”

“How fast do you want to go?” Aaron pondered out loud.

“I want to break the sound barrier.” Charlotte clarified with a light in her blue eyes. “I want to be the fastest witch in the world.”

_The sound barrier! This woman is nuts! That’s close to 770 miles an hour! It can’t be done, not with this technology!_ “You do know that you face an uphill battle right? Even with your skills and know-how, the existing methods of attaining what you want just aren’t there.” Aaron remarked.

“I know.” Shirley replied with a bit of disappointment, “which was why I decided to join the war in early ’43 just so I could get my hands on and in experimental hardware that I could tinker with and improve.”

“How did that go?” Aaron queried.

“Very badly.” Shirley admitted. “I got shot down on my first flight when my unit, the 363rd, was sent over to help in Europe. I was reckless, took a turn at too many g’s and ripped my stabilizers off. I eventually got expelled due to making unauthorized modifications to my Striker Unit, but was
saved at the last minute when Mio just so happened to be at our base and whisked me away, rather than face a court-martial.”

“Besides your quest,” Aaron asked, “what else do you value?”

“Freedom, and everything that goes with it. Most of the 501st agrees with me, save for one.” Shirley answered. At the last part, she turned in her seat and glared at Gertrude, who merely crossed her arms and pouted to the side. *I can see why. One loves to be carefree and the other regimented.*

“I agree, but with certain reservations.” Aaron stated, taking another drink. “I firmly believe that one has the right to do and say what they want without any infringement from any overarching authority.”

“That’s not freedom Aaron,” Yeager retorted, “that’s anarchy.”

“Is it?” Aaron countered. “They may be different, like genius and madness, but they’re both sides to the same coin.” He pointed east and added, “Over there, is the closest thing to absolute freedom that you will find on this earth. No man has to bow to anyone, no one beholden to creed, country, or Christ. There, you are judged by what you can do and your ability to keep your word, not by who your father was or how much money you have. You could be something over there and I certainly was something. In France, I could drive a tank, fly an airplane, pilot a boat, going wherever I pleased without anyone telling me, ‘Uh, you cant do that’. True, law and order is a work in progress, and due process is normally executed by a bullet than a trial by jury, but I miss being over there, to tell you the honest truth.” He looked away, thinking about the recent past and murmured, “They were simpler time, when I knew what I had to do. Now, it’s not that cut and dried anymore.”

“What you describe can be found on this earth,” Shirley commented, “and it doesn’t have to be in a war zone.” She gestured to Lucretia. “And sometimes it’s a lot closer than you think.”

*Never thought about it that way. Was I wrong in what I said? Was I making snap judgments again when I shouldn’t have? Hajikata wasn’t kidding; this is hard.* Aaron smiled and leaned forward, putting his hands on his face and rubbing his cheeks. “You make a lot of sense.” he said, withdrawing his hands and clasping them together, staring down at the wooden tabletop. “You really make me wonder if I have been blind and reckless in my way of thought. I figured that wouldn’t happen again after what occurred in April of ‘40, that it had been knocked out of me for good.”

“What happened?” Shirley asked, interested to hear his answer.

“The Pripet Marshes.” Aaron replied. “One of the most stupidest reckless decisions I had ever made in my life. The weather was unusually warm for April and the snows melted fast, flooding the surrounding wetland far beyond the one hundred and four thousand square miles it encompassed. Russian troops got caught in the boggy terrain and the Neuroi pounced on them. They had little in the way of anti air weaponry and they were getting rolled over like a straw hut in a hurricane. We saw the development and I made the call to go in, seeing that they needed help immediately. Unfortunately, the land underneath the water was colder than the water above, triggering a massive buildup of fog that blanketed the landscape. Paid it no mind as we could discern friend from foe in that haze with magic. I also failed to take into account the level of melting that had occurred, which resulted in many of us, myself included, to land in chest high deep water with chasms that ran as low as fifteen feet, the results of artillery shell impacts. Add to that Russians and Neuroi shooting anything that remotely moved in that mess and you had the textbook definition of a situation that was most certainly F.U.B.A.R.

During that scrum, a motor round went off near my position, the force of the impact sending a flow of water into me that drove me head first into the side of a slagged reconnaissance vehicle. Got my
first concussion right then and there. I threw up and sloughed my way forward, staggering towards
the enemy, firing all the while. Continued to drive forward, feeling my head pounding like someone
was beating my skull in with a sledgehammer. After a bit, the fog began to lift and I soon realized
that I had made a crucial error. When I got my bell rung, I lost my sense of direction. Instead of being
at or around my friend’s lines, I found out, much to my chagrin and terror, that I had marched
through the marsh, to the tune of seven miles behind enemy lines.”

“And you survived?” Shirley exclaimed in shock, draining the last of her drink. “How did you do
it?”

“I ducked under the water, pulling up a body, positioning it so that it looked like a corpse dislodged
from the bottom, masking my location. Using a knife, I gutted this poor individual and poked a pair
of holes in his side with the intention of using this once living breathing Russian as camouflage so I
could, pardon the expression, dead man float to safety.” Aaron relayed. “Thus began my trek, a
journey that took me twelve hours. I had to arrest my progress at times I puked quite a bit, and the
Neuroi were blasting the marsh from above, lancing anything that remotely looked as a hiding place
for survivors, throwing up geysers of red brown water, mud, debris, and bodies all over creation.
There were also times I lost my footing and sank beneath the water, eyes coming face to face with
many more from those that would never know the sun again, pale waterlogged corpses, their orbs
glaring at me, mouths open. Though dead, they all seemed to be conveying a single message, ‘Join
us’.”

Aaron gulped down the last of his calvados and plunked the glass down. “Never again did I go into a
battle without thinking twice about it. That experience shook me to the point where I can’t let my
head go under water anymore. The prospect makes me freeze up because I see them, all those dead
Russians, looking at me just as you are looking at me now. That recklessness died that day to the
tune of a concussion, a traumatic escape, and three dead comrades.” He looked up at Shirley and
asked, “Anything else?”

Yeager shook her head no. Aaron then extended his hand. “Good talking to you Shirley.”

Charlotte took his hand and shook it. “You too Aaron.” she said and picked up her chair.
Yoshika seeks out answers to what makes Aaron tick, and offers help and support in return for dealing with the spirits that come not from within himself.

Chapter XI: Do All I Can

She may not be the tallest or the strongest, but Sergeant Yoshika Miyafuji has the biggest heart in the entire 501st. With her healing abilities and stubborn loyalty, Miyafuji is fully committed to protecting people and doing anything she can to be of aid. Though the last to join, before I arrived that is, Yoshika has acclimated well, despite her misgivings about being a soldier and being haunted by her tragic past, much like me. There is something of a naiveté about her, like she moves and acts on hunches before her mind does. It’s a dangerous trait to have, but it may be a blessing in disguise. Only time will tell.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

“Now it’s Yoshika’s go.” Minna called out as soon as Shirley sat back down in her chair. Armed with a pencil in her pocket, a notepad tucked firmly in her mouth, and lugging her chair, Miyafuji trudged over to Aaron. He almost wanted to get up and help her out, but remembered Wilcke’s words from yesterday’s first meeting with her in the mess hall. She’s got this. After some bit of struggle, Yoshika plunked down the chair and sat down, placing the pencil down with a wooden tick and the notepad down with a rustling slap. She leaned back and took a few deep breaths.

“You ok?” Aaron asked.

Yoshika stirred with a start and apologized, rubbing her face, “I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m still getting used to the training regimen that Mio puts me through.”

“Don’t be.” Aaron replied. “You’ll get used to it in time.” He looked at the notepad and cocked an eyebrow. “From my understanding, this is a coven, not a high school class.”

“Never hurts to be prepared.” Miyafuji countered, opening the pad of paper and licking the nib of the pencil. “If I’m going to be a doctor, I need to learn how to take efficient notes and make key observations.” She paused and remembered something, a memory that made her put on an expression akin to remorse. “I’m sorry about you and Lucretia’s situation, for I was the one that overheard your conversation in medical and told Minna.”

Divale leaned forward and placed his right hand on her shoulder. “It’s water under the bridge Yoshika.” he assured before withdraw his arm. “You’re fine. So what’s your angle?”

“Well,” Yoshika admitted, “I was wondering if I could ask you about what makes you different from us and others. If you ever get seriously injured, I need to know what I getting myself into so I can
Fair enough. “Starting with the top,” Aaron began, “I have a very good memory, maybe a few points short of eidetic. Even if I didn’t have my diary, I could tell you everything about what happened with a high degree of accuracy. My eyes, in addition to being exceptionally good, allow me to see in the dark as well as I can in the day. All my other senses, touch, taste, smell, and hearing, have been trained to peak levels and enhanced with magic. Reflex wise, I can move and react faster than anyone my size can manage, and when it comes to my strength,” He paused and looked over at Gertrude before adding with a sly smirk, “I think she can tell you better than I about how strong I am.”

Yoshika wrote feverishly with her pencil. Note to self; ask Gertrude about Aaron’s strength. “That’s the outside aesthetics, but what about your magic? Does that cause any ill effects? What can you do with it?” she asked.

“Anything that I can put my mind to.” Aaron explained. “I actively encouraged spell sharing amongst ourselves. Figured that it would be the best way to get people ready for any situation that could find themselves in. I can also improve my existing library with all manner of effects, be it a larger area, longer duration, higher power level, you get the picture. My magic does however work along different lines from yours. For you, the cost is a heightened metabolic rate which can be controlled by increased caloric consumption. I, on the other hand, have to use my own blood to activate my aetheric potential.”

Yoshika blinked in amazement and horror. “But that’s dangerous!” she exclaimed. “You could theoretically die from using too much magic if you get in over your head!”

“On the contrary,” Aaron politely fired back, “I happen to have a safeguard that prevent that scenario from happening. My bone marrow is nutrient rich and produces red blood cells up to five times faster than a normal person, ensuring that my supply is constantly kept up to maximum levels. The only times that it can get down to dangerously low levels is when I have little to no ability to get a night’s sleep, and even then, I require at most three hours.”

“If that is true, than fine, but the strain on your heart and other organs must be intense. Not only processing that excess blood but circulating it would damage them to the point of assured failure. Add the lack of decent sleep, the odds get even worse for you.” Yoshika pointed out.

“My heart has been modified to have eight chambers instead of four and my organs have been altered to accommodate the increased intake of blood and the possibility of sleep deprivation.” Aaron clarified.

Miyafuji’s eyes bugged out and she dropped her pencil with a clatter on the table. “Eight chambers?! That’s unheard of!” she stated in shock.

“If you think that’s crazy,” Aaron put forth with a smile, “my heart has a built in fail safe. If I receive damage to that area to the point where I lose a chamber, it will still keep going. As long as I have two, I will survive long enough to heal.”

“Heal?! You can heal damage like that!?” Yoshika spat out with the air of disbelief. “How?!”

“There is a spell that I have, called augendae, that enhances my body’s natural healing factor several times. Depending on the severity of the wound, I can fix it within minutes or hours, but it takes time and focus. In some cases, the amount of damage causes me to pass out from the sheer amount of magic usage, so I have to be very careful when and where I decide to use it.” Aaron illuminated. “Saved my life on more than several occasions.”
So he’s not invincible. He will need treatment if things get out of hand for him. “Like the time that you got that one on your chest?” Yoshika asked, pointing with her left hand as her right grabbed the pencil again.

Aaron nodded. “I got that beauty from Kharkov in ‘40,” he recollected, “on the third day of the battle. A supply truck chock full of artillery shells got hit by a Neuroi beam and shrapnel flew everywhere. I got my wings and shields up in time to deflect the most of it, but a clump of metal buried itself right over my heart. There was no medic around at the time so I had to do the operation right then and there myself.”

“Were you scared?” Yoshika queried.

“I was petrified.” Aaron acknowledged. “I honestly thought that I was going to die because I was bleeding out so bad, so fast. Thankfully, some of my guys were around and they dragged me into a crater so they could protect me while I worked to save my own life. Stemmed the blood loss with magic and cut myself open using my blade razor. Using my fingers, I gingerly probed the holes. Thankfully, most of them were stopped by the bones of my rib cage, so I extracted those easily. One of them however was deeper than the rest, and I had to break one of my ribs just so I could reach it with tweezers. Despite the pain I was in, and my lack of visibility, I yanked it out and reset my rib, using magic to affix it in place. Now, the only thing left to do was get it closed up. There was a body slumped over the lip of the hole I was in and I rummaged through the pockets. I was in luck as I found a needle case with some fishing line tied around it as the clasp was busted. Cracked open the case, fished the needle out, and poked holes into and through my skin. Then I took the fishing line and sewed myself shut. With that complete, I wiped my hands and chest clean with my now ruined shirt that I had on and kept fighting the rest of the battle until we withdrew some three hours later.”

Yoshika’s mouth was agape to the point where if it were able, it would’ve struck the floor. Self surgery in the middle of a war zone and still continues the fight? He is a wonder! Recovering from the story, she pondered out loud, “Did you get any infection from that?”

Aaron shook his head no. “My immune system takes care of simple things like that and my body is proof against most if not all poisons. I’ve never been sick or had any infection to speak of in my life.”

Remembering something he said earlier, Yoshika flipped over the page she was writing on and asked, “You mentioned shields did you not? And I take it that they aren’t like ours?”

“Correct.” Aaron replied. “My shields are three fold with the first being an invisible barrier surrounding my being, very close to the skin, that can deflect or absorb a bullet as well as a beam. It isn’t like yours where one shield is physically raised, protecting you from harm at a fixed projection angle, but rather a 360 degree series of interlocking plates like those suits of scale armor you see in the display cases in the castle. If I feel threatened or see any possible dangers, each one is activated all at once. However, they’re not permanent and they can fail if they take too much damage. If that does happen, the shields will redistribute themselves instantly, taking protection away from areas that aren’t immediately in harms way. Next, my wings, which like my shields, can deflect incoming fire, but can’t absorb it at all. They are used primarily for breaching operations where high amounts of resistance is expected. As you saw during the exercises yesterday, they can be used offensively, cutting through the hardest of materials like a hot knife through butter. Finally, my skin, musculature, and bone structure are more dense than normal, allowing me to safely stop projectiles of small caliber or low powered long ranged Neuroi fire. Have to squint my eyes a little to protect them from ricochet or a lucky shot.”

“This information you’re giving me is astounding.” Yoshika reported, scribbling away like a woman possessed. “It will go a long way and maybe even help with research down the road.”
Aaron cleared his throat harshly and stated with subdued, yet all too clear force, “Don’t use that word in my presence ever again Yoshika. I’m not too fond of it.”

Realizing her mistake, she hastily apologized, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’ll excuse it this once,” Aaron replied. “but make no mistake. We will have some words if you say that again.” He shifted in his seat and sighed the displeasure away. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Well, umm,” Yoshika thought out loud, trying to get back on Divale’s good side, “why do you drink so much?”

Aaron looked down and away, putting on a wistful face. “For all the advances in the field of medicine, they still can’t do anything for the mind. Physical pain can be controlled, deadened chemically or disconnected through surgery. Scars like those on my body heal in time, but not so the ones on my psyche. Once that vital point gets hurt or tainted, no panacea, nepenthe, or balm of Gilead ever made will restore it. Those wounds will fester for the rest of my life, causing me unbearable pain until the day I’m no more and go to dust. Alcohol is, for me, a way to escape that pain, to dull the ache that shatters my heart, rips at my soul, and makes my days grey forevermore.” He regarded Yoshika and added, “I have made peace with bits and pieces of my past, things I’ve done and said and those that I didn’t thanks to Lucretia. I know it’s destructive and I know what it’s turning me into, but as far as I’m concerned, you cope your way and I’ll cope mine.”

“Aaron,” Yoshika said, pointing at Domino, “I am not you, nor saw and did what you had to say and do all those years ago. I also may not fully understand why you feel the way you do, but she was there is now here for you.” She then placed her hand on her chest. “I’m here for you.” Then she gestured to the seated group behind her. “And I don’t know how you feel in terms of them, but they are here for you too. All you have to do is ask for help and we’ll all give it. Give us your troubles and we’ll give you the strength that you need to surmount them. And if, for some reason or another, they can’t, lay your world on me. I don’t have the broadest shoulders, but I will bear the weight and more to help you.”

Slowly Aaron nodded and sniffed away some tears that tried to force themselves out. “I appreciate that.” he uttered, keeping his composure, but just.

Miyafuji continued, “I know that you are a good man Aaron and you believe in and want to protect people, an ideal you’ve fought for your entire waking life, but you can’t do that in an inebriated state. You’ll kill yourself, and no one wants that to be your end.” She took hold of Aaron’s left hand in a gesture of support and Divale reciprocated by placing his left over hers, making a sandwich of digits. “My goodness you’re warm.” she muttered. “You’re like a roaring fire pit.”

“You’re not the first woman who’s said that to me.” Aaron said absentmindedly, taking his hands away. “What else?”

“Well, I didn’t take anything from your crate because I respect your privacy, but I did want to ask about this symbol.” Yoshika stated, pointing to the raised sigil on Aaron diary. “I saw it on several items of yours. Is it significant?”

“That was the crest of my old unit, our standard, three black triangles arranged in an pyramid, two on the bottom holding up the one on the top by their points.” Aaron elucidated. “Each stands for a tenet, a code of that each of us swore to uphold until death. The bottom triangles signify sacrifice and duty, and at the top lies honor. Without the other, these fundamental beliefs will fall like a house of cards in a high wind.”
“That makes perfect sense.” Yoshika observed, furrowing her brow and holding her chin with her right hand. “Without honor, there is nothing gained through sacrifice and duty, without sacrifice, you cannot fulfill your duty honorably, and without duty, honor and sacrifice are meaningless without a cause.”

Aaron nodded in approval. “Perfect.” he simply said. “Absolutely perfect definition of what I and everyone else back then believed and followed without question.”

Yoshika bowed a tad and replied, “Thank you. Anything you want to know about me?”

“You don’t strike me as a born soldier Yoshika.” Aaron began, furrowing his brow. “I don’t think you’ve had any training at all. Civilian?”

“Yes.” Miyafuji answered without shame. “I grew up in a mountain village, many miles from the nearest city of Osaka. My mother and grandmother run a medical clinic, something I aspired to do ever since I was a child.”

That explains the caring nature. “Then something came around and changed your mind. What was it?” Aaron pressed.

“It began on a day like any other with me walking home from the last day of the fall term at school with my cousin Michiko. We were picked up by her father, a farmer who was delivering a load of watermelons to the markets in Osaka. I volunteered to help them out, and she and I hitched a ride. Along the way, an animal of some sort, I don’t know what it was since my back was turned, leapt into the road. Michiko’s father swerved to avoid it. She and I were strapped down, but Michiko’s belt broke and she was sent down a rocky hillside. I got out and ran to help her. My cousin was hurt bad, a deep chest wound. I used my magic to try to heal her, but my emotion was draining my energy too fast, making me lose focus. It was then that Mio came up behind me and calmed me down enough to do some good. Ended up passing out and woke up in my families clinic. My mother and grandmother ministrated to Michiko who, thankfully, would fully recover. Mio then introduced herself to me, revealing that she and Hajikata took me and Michiko to the clinic for treatment. She also told me that she was looking for new recruits for the 501st and that she was leaving on a ship within a few hours, bound for Great Britain.” Yoshika recollected.

“And you joined up.” Aaron assumed.

“Absolutely not.” Yoshika declared, shaking her head. “I made it perfectly clear that I wanted no part in the war, that I was resolved to run the clinic.” She looked down and added, “I’ll also admit that I didn’t think too fondly of Mio then, for her disturbing my family with an offer of recruitment. She did say a few words to me that really got my blood boiling and left with Hajikata.”

“Why didn’t you want to join?” Aaron queried.

“We had already lost one Miyafuji to the war and my mother didn’t want to lose her only child as well.” Yoshika clarified. “My father Ichiro Miyafuji left for Europe when hostilities broke out in 1939, when I was fourteen. He’s been dead a little over a month now, a victim of a laboratory explosion.”

Aaron made a T with his hands and exclaimed, “You are the daughter of Ichiro “The Father of the Striker Unit” Miyafuji?” He put his right hand on his head and stared in wonder. “His work gave humanity a fighting chance and helped spawn numerous inventions to supplement that prospect.” He thought about what Yoshika said and slowly began to understand. The loss of her father probably made her despise war and what it brings. I can’t blame her for that at all, even if he was a great man who inspired countless witches to join up. “And yet, here you are.” he said, cocking an
“Shortly after Mio left, we received a letter from my father, in his handwriting. It contained two pictures, one of him overlooking a vast cliff of white, and the other was a group shot of all the people who he worked with, with him standing alongside Mio.” Yoshika went on. “It changed my mind, but not to the point where I joined up. I wanted answers, answers that I would go to any lengths to uncover. I practically ran from my house to Osaka, where Mio was meditating on the pier in front of a massive carrier, the Akagi, moored alongside three destroyer escorts. She didn’t seem surprised that I came down, but when I showed her the picture and asked for answers, she became concerned, almost afraid even.”

“Why?” Aaron pondered out loud. “I’m sorry, but I find it hard to believe, from what I have seen, that Mio can exhibit any emotion akin to fear.”

“You see Aaron,” Yoshika explained leaning in, lowering her voice. “When I got on board the Akagi, Mio told me the circumstances surrounding my father’s death. She was attached to his group, acting as a test pilot for many years. About a month before the accident, he told her that he felt like he was being watched and that sometimes when he came into his office during the day, his papers were ever so slightly rearranged. When the explosion was investigated, the MP’s uncovered that it was caused by an experimental aetheric power cell that malfunctioned.” She looked at Divale with an intense gaze. “Despite that it was declared an accident, both Mio and I fully believe that my father was murdered. He was kind, gentle, caring, and above all, a careful man Aaron. He would never put himself or others in a situation where their lives would be in danger.” Her lip trembled in anger. “If I ever find out that it was what I suspect it is, and whosoever did this to me and my family, I will see them brought to justice.”

*Murder of a great man in war when such individuals are needed most?! Why would anyone do such a thing?! Who could hate a man that much to end his life?* “So to find out the truth, you joined Mio on her journey to Great Britain.” Aaron stated.

Yoshika nodded. “We set sail later that day and made our way around Africa and up north, giving the French coast a wide berth. Th etrip took quite a while. Unfortunately, we were intercepted by a Neuroi strike craft, a big one. The destroyer escorts suffered badly within the first opening moments. I was on the side gantries slightly below the flight deck, heading into the main hanger, tailing Mio while she ran to get her Strikers, when I saw the Fumitsu get hit flush on the side. It went off like a firecracker, both halves flying into the air and sinking like stones into the sea. Then the Hayashi took a shot and listed to the right, her rudder ruined followed by the Toshiba, that burned from end to end. When we finally got inside the hanger, Mio told me to stay put and tend to the wounded at a makeshift triage station, leaving Hajikata to assist me. It didn’t take long for us to get people, trickling in through the help of the crew. I worked hard and quickly, making sure that the worst were treated first. Hajikata was a great help during that time. Without him, I probably would’ve been overwhelmed. Suddenly, an explosion rocked the furthest ends of the hanger, exactly where Mio had ran to get her Strikers. I feared the worst, but she came back, a bloodied bandage around the back of her head, carrying a pair, her reserve pair. She told me to follow her, grabbing my arm and taking me to a stairwell leading up to the flight deck. Before setting foot outside, Mio told me the situation. Her primary Striker Unit was destroyed, ruined beyond repair. What she had with her was her auxiliary unit, but it wasn’t adjusted to fit her leg length. With the hanger in such chaos, there was no way to fix the problem, so she asked me to go up and fight the Neuroi.”

Aaron again gave Mio a look and then regarded Yoshika. “Sending a civilian witch to fight an enemy that she had never encountered with no training whatsoever in the hope that she could fight it off?” he asked with disbelief.
“I was scared, but Mio believed that I could do this and told me that if I wanted to protect people like I told her in the clinic back in Japan, the time was now.” Yoshika recounted. “So I went up, armed with a gun and a spare communicator that Mio gave me. Through her, I learned where the core was and how to raise a shield. It saved my life as I darted and swerved back and forth all around this monstrous thing. My first attack was repulsed, knocked back by the sheer volume of fire. I tried to go under and loop over top with my next go around, but I took a hit that threw off my angle of approach, causing me to almost graze the topside of the Neuroi. It protected me as I was too close for it to counter effectively, giving me a clear path to the core location. I unloaded on that spot and revealed the weakness. I rose up and turned with the intention of finishing it off, but my gun clicked empty. I had run out of ammunition, but I didn’t give up. Rising far above the Neuroi, I dove straight down, using the gun as a spear, driving it into the core. From that point on, I don’t remember what happened. According to Mio, the Neuori was destroyed, but the shockwave of it’s death caused me to lose consciousness. As fate would have it, I fell down towards the flight deck of the Akagi. Mio had to basically jump out of the command tower and activate the secondary retaining nets as the automatic system suffered too much damage and didn’t deploy them.”

Aaron listened to the tale with his hands clasped and resting on the table. “To go up as an untrained pilot takes balls. To go up as an untrained pilot in an active combat role and unaided takes balls of steel. To go up as an untrained pilot in an combat role and unaided and execute a maneuver that results in victory takes balls of diamonds.” Aaron said. “If I had a hat, it’d be off right now. Good job Yoshika.”

“Thank you.” Yoshika replied bowing a tad again. “The rest of the trip was uneventful save for me helping the wounded from the destroyers and the Akagi. When we arrived at Dover, she took me to my fathers gravestone, high a top the White Cliffs. I stood there looking at the marker, lost in my memories. One of them was of me as a young girl asking him, “Why are you leaving me father? Don’t go! I love you”! He turns to me and replies, “I love you too, but I need to help in this war, to give all of us a reason to hope for a better tomorrow. You have a gift Yoshika, a power that you must use for the sake of protecting many. In time, you will understand my words. Be strong my daughter”.”

Aaron nodded as the import of what Yoshika said became clear to him. “And that was when you realized your purpose, what your father meant so long ago.” He leaned back in his chair and shifted his position. “There is an old saying Yoshika that I think describes this situation perfectly. It goes, ‘A wise shepard tends his flock with great care and humility, but a smart shepard knows that to protect it, he must at times fight the wolves’. You may hate war, but your quest to fulfill your father’s words makes intervention unavoidable.”

“I know.” Yoshika replied. “I am here to do all I can, nothing more or less. Just like all of us. Just like you.”

With admiration for the witch seated before him, Aaron extended his hand. “Good talk Yoshika.” As Yoshika shook his hand, he added, “Keep up the good work, and I might just be saluting you one day.”

“Likewise.” Yoshika answered with a smile before gathering her things and making her way back to whence she came. She stopped in the middle of her journey and ran back holding her notpad and pencil. “I’m sorry to do do this but, could I have your autograph?” she asked, offering him both articles.

Aaron chuckled. “Of course, but why?” he responded.

“Good men deserve to be remembered.” Yoshika simply said.
Aaron then took up the pencil and notepad and wrote on the top sheet, 'To the woman with a heart of gold and balls of diamonds. Aaron Divale “the Saint of Calais” March 5th 1944'.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Erica and Aaron talk about the ins and outs of love and that time doesn't heal all wounds.

Chapter XII: The Black Devil

I don’t understand why stereotypes exist for they are consistently proven to be anything but indicators of a particular person’s character. Lieutenant Erica Hartmann is most definitely not your prototypical German: she is very laid back, almost carefree when on the ground, yet in the air, the woman is rock solid.. Like me, she thinks realistically, never ever seeming to take the higher ups seriously, like she knows the hypocrisy and the egotistic nature of it all in an attempt to protect herself and others from their designs. I have to be careful around this one, because she is a mischievous little imp. Note to self: keep the door locked at night and possibly wear some clothes.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

As Yoshika dragged the chair to the circle, the metal legs scratching the ground like nails on a chalkboard, Minna intoned above the din, “Erica’s up next.”

“At last!” Hartmann exclaimed as she grabbed her chair. “Now we can get to the really serious questions!” Without waiting for Yoshika to get back, she practically ran to the warlock’s table, with Aaron looking at her with an apprehensive look. She set her chair down and collapsed into the seat, slouching like someone that has lost the will to be active. She rubbed her hands together and stated with glee in her voice, “Now the fun really begins.”

“If this is your idea of fun,” Aaron said, “then I’d hate to see what dull would be like.” He gazed at her black overcoat and remarked, “If it had been the real thing, you’d be wearing a lot less clothes now.”

“And your stick shift and ball bearings would be the consistency of jelly.” Erica shot back. “How are they feeling right now?”

“Amazing,” Aaron quipped sarcastically, “I just love pissing blood at four thirty in the morning.” He noticed that Erica put on a concerned face and clarified, “That was a joke. I’m fine.”

“Never joke about injuries Aaron.” Erica warned, now being serious and pointing a finger at him. “The stuff you keep to yourself could get someone killed.”

“Amen to that.” Aaron agreed. “Drink?” he asked, gesturing to the calvados.

“Yes please,” Erica replied, grabbing the glass and holding it out to him, “to the brim.”
Aaron filled it up to the level that she requested and reminded her, “I did say for the record that it will creep up on you. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Hartmann gave him a stare as he filled up his own glass. “I’m a big girl.” she proclaimed. “I can throw down and party with the best of them.”

Yeah and I’ll bet you could beat my record of twenty six beers, fifteen whiskey shots, and five glasses of wine. “I meant no disrespect.” Aaron replied, putting the stopper back on the bottle and conducting his ritual. “You just look awfully young to be imbibing.”

“Young?! I’m eighteen years old!” Erica pointed out.

“Bullshit.” Aaron countered. “I want to see your papers, right here, right now.” With a groan, Erica reached into her front right coat pocket and pulled out her military identification, a black leather flip wallet, tossing it at Divale, who caught it with two fingers. He flipped it open and pulled out the documentation with care. Looking it over and feeling the texture of the paper and ink in his hands, Aaron’s brow furrowed as he placed it above his head, peering at the front and back, using the light to shed insight on the authenticity. After a few seconds of staring, he muttered, “This is the genuine article. Well, fuck me.”

“Now? Here? In front of everybody?” Hartmann jested, placing a hand to her face, mimicking scandalous shock.

Aaron couldn’t restrain himself from exploding into peals of laughter, pushing the papers back to Erica, holding his head in his left hand, cackling like a hyena. He breathed in, trying to calm himself and made a T with his hands. “Is she always like this and is everyone here eighteen?” he asked the group behind her.

Minna rolled her eyes. “On the ground, Erica has a very lackadaisical attitude unless something piques her interest. In the air, she’s like Wall Street, all business, and, yes, we are all eighteen or over.” she answered without mirth.

Aaron gestured with his right index finger for her to lean in close, which Erica did. “And thank God for it.” he whispered. “If I had to sit through another German interrogator that sounded like he had concrete poured into them, I would scream bloody murder in frustration.” He then raised his glass in a way that was reminiscent of proposing a wedding toast. “To being contrary and having the ability to relax.” he declared.

Erica gently clinked the glass and took a deep swallow. The alcohol was wonderful as it lingered on her palette and she remarked, “That’s good stuff. If only Germany had the ability to make it.”

“It’s not that hard.” Aaron commented, taking a deep sip of his own. “Just need to make sure you use the right combination of apples and have a great deal of patience.” He regarded her and asked with curiosity, “So what business do have for me?”

“Do you have any idea why Minna has the rule that forbids interaction between us and the rest of the world, particularly the male side of it?” Erica queried.

“Are you trying to get me in hot water?” Aaron asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“No at all.” Erica assured, “but since you did imply that you were very good at reading people, I figured you might have a few theories.”

Aaron regarded the German witch with a hint of suspicion with one eye while the other saw Minna becoming visibly uncomfortable. I’m willing to bet money that it’s to reduce the possibility of
emotional entanglements, to protect and insulate them from the possibility of losing someone they care about. It’s fucking stupid and she probably knows it too. It’s like water; the more you tighten your grip around it, seeking to restrain its destructive potential, the more it slips through, damaging what you seek to preserve. “I have several theories,” he began, “but out of respect, I will kept them to myself.”

“But-” Hartmann began to press, but Aaron interjected with finality, “It’s her squadron Erica, her command, her call. If she makes a rule, it is for a reason. Regardless of how you, I, or anyone else feels about it, we abide.” He saw Minna breath a sigh of relief and nod in thanks which Aaron returned with placing a closed fist over his chest.

He sounds just like Gertrude, but I can’t deny his reasoning. If he only knew the truth. “The reason why I asked is to get a grasp of what it’s like to see things from a certain point of view.” Erica admitted. “With no man being here, we are largely ignorant of how the other side views the world and certain concepts.”

“You could’ve always asked Hajikata.” Aaron considered. “He speaks a lot of sense you know.”

“True,” Erica admitted, “but he and Mio are practically glued to the hip and he really doesn’t come around that much, and if he does, he doesn’t stay for long. You however, are a special case. Being part of the squadron, you are given a rare opportunity for mingling.”

“Within certain parameters, yes.” Aaron responded.

“So,” Erica began, “what is it like being in a castle full of women, in your perspective?”

“Intimidating.” Aaron answered without doubt. “being the lone buoy of testosterone in a roiling maelstrom of estrogen is quite perilous to navigate. Up until half a year ago, I had always been in the company of men for the most part. We could talk about anything without any fear of recrimination or blowback. Now, since I’m here, I have to quickly learn how and where to fight my battles wisely, or else I’m going to have a lot of pissed off people knocking at my door, one which everyone knows is located on the upper floors of the castle.”

“Very wise of you.” Erica commented. “Are you sure that it isn’t because of something else?”

“I don’t think I get your meaning.” Aaron admitted. Erica placed her leg, bare as a baby’s bottom on the table top, her flesh shining in the light, the limb practically directing attention to her white panty line. “So you have a steady shaving hand, what of it?” he posed.

Erica put on a face of disbelief and pondered out loud, “Do you seriously feel nothing about the fact that we are, in effect, walking around half naked all the time? And before you answer, don’t even dare give me that crap explanation ‘if you’ve seen one you’ve seen them all’ because that’s a crock of shit. There’s always mystery to a woman.”

“I will not do so because you are correct.” Aaron acknowledged. “Yet if you’re looking for the reason why,” at that point, he the pointed to Lucretia and added, “look no further. Domino is my air. My days of reaching out, straying from the nest, or mingling with the in crowd are over.”

Erica put a hand to her cheek and tilted her head. “Yet, you have to have some sort of feeling deep down. Emotion isn’t a switch on a radio that you can just turn off if you don’t like what you’re hearing.” She then had an epiphany and grew a sly smile. “Who here do you think is the most attractive?”
“Oh that’s easy,” Aaron began with confidence. He paused for dramatic effect and added, “me of course. Come on,” he got up from his seat and spun in place like a ballerina, two full revolutions before coming to a stop, flexing like a professional bodybuilder, “just look at this 6’4” frame, the toned physique, the strong chin, those piercing eyes, the exceptional lineage of a warrior. Look at the front, the side, the back, the other side. Face it ladies, you can’t get better than this even if you paid for it. Guaranteed to get the job done or your money back.”

Erica place her head in both her hands, elbows on the table and looked up at Aaron’s posturing like a daydreaming schoolgirl. “Kind of have to admit, you are a fetching young man.”

Aaron immediately stopped his charade and looked at Hartmann like she had just shot his dog. “Careful there Erica,” he warned, “the worst enemy that a woman can have is another woman, and besides, at best I’m a seven, maybe an eight if I stopped being mouthy and dressed up.”

Erica shook her head. “It isn’t the way you look and sound Aaron, it’s the way you present yourself. That is what puts you over the top. You exude this animal magnetism that just draws attention, and when you add in the fact that you’re honest, charismatic, and a fun person to talk to, you're flying high on cloud nine. The addition of being a polyglot, from what I hear, is just icing on the cake. Come to think of it, how many languages do you speak?”

“Seven.” Aaron answered, relieved that she diverged from her train of thought. “I can read, write, and speak fluently, English, French, Italian, Latin, German, Greek, and Russian.”

“What was the easiest and hardest languages for you to learn?” Erica pressed, taking a sip.

Aaron sat back down and took a deep draught. “Italian was, by far, the easiest to grasp as most of the roots were Latin based and rolled off the tongue. Took me only eight months. As for the hardest language, that is two fold. Now, no offense to your Fatherland, but if you aren’t born there, life is too short to learn German. Out of all the languages in the world, German perplexes me. In any other tongue, a group of words is spoken in turn and all have meaning and a place within a sentence. In German however, the whole phrase gets combined into one obnoxiously long word that produces more phlegm than coherent sound. Russian was an absolute bitch to pin down because they didn’t have a Latin based alphabet, they used Greek. Took me five years of my life, and a few guns pointed at my head, just to get fluent in both.”

“No offense taken Aaron, but I digress.” Erica stated, giving him a devious look. “Now it’s time to get into the meat and potatoes shall we say. From what I’ve heard from my contacts on the continent and elsewhere, you were a naughty boy before you managed to settle down with Lucretia. Obviously, some of what I heard sounds too good to be true, so I wanted to see if you could shed some light on these rumors.”

Aaron took another drink and steeled himself. “Bring it on you black devil. I’ve nothing to hide.”

“Is it true that while in Prague that you caught the eye of a nun who wished to help you,” here Erica used air quotes, “confess your sins by making a charitable donation?”

“I’ll never look at rosary beads the same way again after that night.” “That is completely true.” Aaron admitted, his response eliciting a few gasps of shock and more than a few wolf whistles.

“Is it also true that while in France, somewhere in the region of Bordeaux, that the estranged wife of a marquis invited you to her summer estate,” here Erica used air quotes, “to take a tour with her and her daughter at the same time?”

And I’ll never look at crystal decanter tops the same way ever again. “Again, also true.” Divale
affirmed, with even more cat calls from the peanut gallery.

“Finally,” Erica went on with the biggest smile on her face, “it is true that you got into bed with a German hausfrau by saying to her after she inquired why she’d want to be with you for the night, and I quote, ‘Because like Smith and Wesson, I’m the king of cock’?”

Aaron threw up his hands to the top of his scalp, and rotated in the chair, letting himself spin. *That is the last time I get drunk and tell some stories to a bunch of English SAS operatives.* His revolution stopped right in front of Erica who sat there sipping her drink, hers eyes a twinkling, thoroughly enjoying the hooliganism she was causing. “Affirmative.” he simply answered. The room went bonkers as everyone just shook their heads in disbelief or shouted their two cents.

“And are you truly?” Erica asked, pointing down with her right index finger. Aaron looked over at Lucretia and shrugged, gesturing to Erica with his head. Recognizing the hint, Domino got up from her chair and walked over to the pair. She stopped next to Hartmann, bowed down, and cupped her hands to her left ear. A extremely faint whisper passed from one woman to another and Erica’s eyes bugged out as what Lucretia imported began to get processed. Hartmann scarcely breathed and sat completely motionless as Domino then returned to her seat. As she walked away, Erica leaned in and hissed, “And she’s still in one piece?”

“It is said that the source of the greatest strength you can have comes from exercising gentleness. Though I don’t look it, I can be very gentle when I want to be.” Aaron replied, giving Lucretia a wink.

Erica gave a low whistle and shook her head dumbfounded. “She’s a lucky woman because, and I will state this for the record, if you were any other man in any other situation and I saw you alone, I’d grab you, tear off your clothes, tie you to the bed, and nail your ass to the sheets.” she declared.

Minna got up from her seat with an exasperated look to her face. “Alright Erica, this has gone too far. Either you start asking some pertinent questions, or I’m cutting this conversation short.”

“Ok, ok.” Erica hollered back. *Everyone’s a fucking critic.*

“I’ll never understand it.” Aaron uttered absentmindedly, staring into his glass before taking another drink. Hartmann looked at him strangely, yet allowed him to continue uninterrupted, the warlock lost in his thoughts. “The whole nature of it made no sense to me. I now recognize that there was a need from both sides to feel needed, but at the time I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. None of them were stupid, they all knew just by looking at me that I was a soldier fighting on the front lines, that I could up and leave at any moment, hell, maybe even die within twenty four hours, yet still they came for me.” He looked up at Erica and continued. “Every woman that I have been with reacted the exact same way. I told them as they came up, pressing themselves against me, putting the moves on me, ‘Why me? Don’t you know who and what I am? I’m a soldier. There isn’t going to be a next time with me or even a few kind words come the morning because, by the time you wake up, I’ll be gone as if I was never there in the first place. Don’t do this. You’re setting yourself up for a bad fall. I’m fighting this war to slay the enemy not vaginas’. And they always replied with, ‘I know, but I like you’.”

“When did you recognize that there was a need deep down?” Erica asked, very curious.

“Towards the end of November last year, I looked back on my past, reading my diary to help fill in the rare blank. In the parts where I was with someone, I delved into my training and thought about it, long and hard. Took me a decent while to find out, but when I did, it was a rough truth to swallow. Found out I was lonely and that a piece of my psyche wanted to assuage that. It wanted me to find some semblance of peace, it wanted me to feel like a child at rest when all the night’s fears are driven
away by some loved voice.” Aaron explained.

Erica’s brow furrowed. “To understand loneliness, one must first become that. Was there any other woman that made you feel what you feel for Lucretia now?” Aaron went shock white as his vision started to blur. The room started to get darker, like a night sky, and the depot interior, rife with the smells of grease and metal, were replaced with ocean salt and pine. *Oh no. Not this. Anything but this.* “Would it have anything to do with this?” Erica asked, reaching into her front left coat pocket. She fished out a cock stopped vial containing a faintly singed blue ribbon. The moment Erica laid the vessel on the tabletop, she realized that she made a terrible mistake as Aaron cried without a sound, tears falling down his cheeks, splattering on his pants, the floor, the wood, as he reached forward with a trembling right hand and picked it up. He held it close to his chest, wincing away the past, the painful memories.

“Of all the things that I’ve come to grips with in my life,” he sobbed through clenched jaws and closed eyes, “this was the hardest.”

“You don’t have to answer the question at all Aaron.” Erica hastily apologized. “I take it back. I’m sor-” She stopped as Aaron raised his left hand, bidding her to cease talking.

He opened his eyes, still clutching the vial to his chest and began his tale “It was in the early summer of ‘41. The enemy had broken through to Varna and were pouring into the Balkans. It wouldn’t be long before our defensive line along the Carpathians would be stretched to the point of breaking. Took a fair sized detachment and headed in and around Athens, hiding away until we could counter any enemy advance. During the late afternoon, I was traveling through some dense woods, hunting, trying to find something to eat, when I heard someone crying for help. Naturally, I ran over to where the sound was coming from and found much to my surprise that there was a woman lying on the ground near a rough patch of bushes. She was wearing a white dress that came down to her lower thighs, partially torn from the thick thorny brush and dotted with blood from their pitiless bites. Her legs were missing below the knees and her wheelchair lay off some ten feet away, toppled over on its side. Upon my approach, the woman raised her head, the olive skin tarnished with soil and tears, long blond hair matted and caked with dirt, fear in her hazel eyes, looking at me and calling out, ‘Who’s there’? I stared at her in puzzlement for she could plainly see me as I had made no attempt to hide myself. Then it hit me: she was not only crippled, but blind. ‘My name is Aaron Divale. I’m a soldier. Who are you and why are you here?’ I said. She smiled and offered praise to the sky with clasped hands. ‘Thank you god for sending me one of your angels’. She then regarded me with her sightless orbs and stated sadly, ‘My name is Larissa Kyrigos and my minder of many years left me here in the woods to die, to escape to safety at my expense. Told me that he wasn’t going to spend his final hours on earth pushing some dead weight’.

My blood boiled when I heard her story, picking up the wheelchair from where it lay. I thought to myself, how dare he, how dare he leave this woman, his charge, his responsibility, alone to perish so he could save his own skin. After moving the wheelchair next to her, I picked her up and sat her down in the seat. I told her that the enemy was coming to Athens soon and that she wouldn’t be safe, that she had to get out. She nodded and pointed east, along the faint outlines of some animal trails, saying that her home was atop a small cleared hill. I wanted to tell her that, while it was a decent idea, that she really needed to get away from danger, not closer to it, but I did as she told me and pushed her along the trail. We exchanged minor bits and pieces of conversation like where I was stationed, how long I had been fighting, things like that. I didn’t press as to why she was the way she was, thinking it would be uncouth if I did. About fifteen minutes pass and we both start going up a small rise to her house. When we got there, the structure took my breath away.

It was a small one story earthen mound with a round red door like a porthole leading into it, with small windows situated at either side. Next to the door was an ax embedded in a firewood pile,
several face cords big. A small stone chimney was puffing smoke at the far end, the wispy grey cloud circling upwards and onwards to the heavens before disappearing without a trace. The whole thing looked like a squat green mushroom that sprouted from the ground. We went to the door and she took out a key, a small iron sliver and opened it. Inside, the home continued to amaze. Sconces blazed with witch fire, casting an orange light everywhere. The floors were polished stone and the walls were paneled with hand carved wood. There was deep ocean blue carpeting at the threshold and along the lengths of the hallways that lead deeper into the structure. Everything looked to be made with her dimensions and afflictions in mind. Nothing was above her hand reach and there were rails situated here and there to not only navigate, but to keep the wheelchair in place. Where I was, I could see that I was in a foyer that lead directly into the sitting room not far off. She bade me to sit and rest while she changed and washed up. I let loose my hold on the wheelchair and Larissa, using her arms, rotated the wheels and moved down the hallway with ease, expertly navigating the confines. Made my way to the sitting room and had to hunch down a tad as I walked into it proper. Two chairs, a small table, and a wide couch sat near a fireplace, the fire almost running its course. Above the mantle were pictures and photographs of Larissa, dressed like a ballerina, performing in front of an audience, holding roses from admirers, smiling and proud. Looking through them and piecing together the stories they told, apparently, she was a dancer of some renown, so good that she was invited to be a part of the Bolshoi Theater in Russia. Next to them was a newspaper article, pinioned with thumbtacks, talking about a train derailment. Her name was among the victims. Guess that’s how she ended up the way she did.

I heard her enter the sitting room and turned to face her. Larissa had cleaned up well, no trace of her abandonment remained, clad in a green gown, her hair slightly damp, tied with a single blue ribbon, holding a bowl of apples in her left arm. She wheeled herself to a nearby table and placed the bowl on it. With minimal effort, she lifted herself up into one of the chairs. I sat next to her and we ate, talking some more, about the war mostly, until I noticed that the fire was dying rapidly and offered to go get some firewood. Larissa nodded and I left the house. Being a help wasn’t the only reason why I left. My mind was awash with questions, so many questions, but the one that kept coming up again and again was, how is she going to get out of here? There was no one to care for her now and the terrain was not suitable for travel in her condition. As I gathered up the wood and walked into the house, I decided then and there to do something about it, to give her a fighting chance. I placed the pile down and threw some logs into the fire, stoking the flames with the billows. It roared and crackled back to life and I took two logs from the pile, carefully selecting them for the purpose I was to use them for, and knelt down in front of Larissa, who looked at me with a kind thankful face. I asked her, ‘Do you believe in angels’? She answered, ‘How could I not when one found me’? With tears in my eyes I stated, ‘I do too and I firmly believe that you are one yourself who had the unfortunate happen, where your wings were taken from you. Now, they will be returned’. I then placed the logs at the nubs of her legs and cast a spell called ‘transfiguro,’ that shaped the wood my hands to that of human legs that could move and rotate like the real things. I took several steps back when I was done and asked her, ‘Can you walk to me?’

Larissa stood from her seat and gasped in shock as the legs that she had lost so long ago, now remade with kindness, bore her weight once again. Tears of joy fell from her face as she looked at me with those hazel eyes of hers. She took tentative steps towards me, the wooden limbs making a thunk with every footfall. ‘Thank you’, she said and took me into her arms. I held her close and cried silently, content that if this was the last thing I ever did of worth in this world, I would die content. Then she offered to dance with me, ignoring my polite turndowns when I told her that I didn’t know how. That was where I learned to waltz, though at a much slower pace. We danced well into the early evening, her and I, for years it seemed, maybe even forever, locked in time that didn’t want to pass. It ended as all things must and she looked at me, deep into my eyes, and my heart, oh my heart, just melted like a ice cube in molten lava. For a long moment, I honestly thought about leaving everything, my duty, my men, the war, all of it, casting my weapons to the ground to rust. Though in
mind, my place was out there, in my heart, now filled with love for this woman, made me realize that there was more to this world, that there could be something for me. We made love passionately, loved a lifetime’s worth.”

Aaron then looked at Erica with a pained expression. “I swore to myself as I stole away silently out of the house, knowing that the enemy would soon attack Athens, that I would come back for her and get her to safety. Me and my men dug in and defended the city as best as we could for four hours before withdrawing. The enemy couldn’t be stopped. As we dispersed, some going back to the Carpathians, others to set up ambushes and harass the Neuroi, I made my way back to Larissa’s house. Then that was when I heard it, an explosion in the air. I look up and there’s this cargo plane or bomber, I don’t know which since there was no insignia, falling out of the sky, it’s engines on fire, the victim of an attack. It plows into the forest like a bulldozer, disintegrating and pin wheeling all over the place. Most of the debris landed to the sides, but the biggest piece landed on top of a small cleared hill that lay at the end of some animal trails.” Hartmann placed both her hands on her mouth, realizing what he meant. “I ran faster than I ever thought possible. Nothing stopped me on my sprint. I ran over and through logs, rocks, sapling, branches and thorn bushes that raked my skin raw, hoping against all hope that what I saw was a mirage, an illusion, a trick of my emotions. Yet, it was all in vain.”

Aaron took the vial away from his chest and looked at it, rotating the glass capsule in his right hand. “Even after dousing the flames and searching for hours, I never did find her body. The only evidence that she ever existed was this blue ribbon that bore silent lonely witness to our mutual destruction.” He regarded her and stated, “You are probably wondering why I kept this ribbon, why would I retain a memory of love lost.” Using his fingers, he turned the vial and held it close to Erica, who could make out, in faint silver thread, a name, ‘Larissa’. “Because, for better or worse, I keep my promises.” Aaron said emphatically, tears welling up again.

Erica, overcome with emotion got up and hugged Aaron, squeezing him tight. “I’m sorry.” she said, distressed beyond words. “I’m so sorry. If I knew that my question would’ve caused you this much grief in reliving that pain, I would never have asked it. Forgive me. Please forgive me.”

“You’re ok Erica.” Aaron admitted. “You didn’t know and I have lived it down.” He let her go and sniffed, wiping the tears away with his sleeve. “I guess it’s my turn now?” he asked, downing the rest of his calvados with a gigantic gulp.

“Anything you want know.” Hartmann simply answered.

“Like Yoshika, I don’t think you were a born soldier, am I right?” Aaron asked.

“You’re right. I was born in Weissach and wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father who was an accomplished physician. Despite my mother telling me stories about witches, I was determined to go through with my plans to be a doctor. Traveled along the Trans-Siberian railway to the Far East, trying to see if I could perfect my chosen profession.” Erica explained.

“Yet, I take it that something happened that changed your mind?” Aaron queried.

“My mother took ill with cancer shortly after the war broke out and my father could do nothing for her. I rushed back to be with her in her final moments. I arrived mere minutes before she died in my arms. My dream of being a doctor died with her. I figured, what was the point in learning to protect others if you couldn’t protect your own family? So, I joined up.”

“Was adjustment difficult?” Aaron pressed.

“My scores were nothing to write home about. I was small and frail for a witch and my piloting
wasn’t that good. The first real combat mission after training in Bayern was a disaster. I thought there was a Neuroi behind me and I overcooked my engines trying to get away. Crash landed hard, but thankfully, I was alright. After being chastised for my recklessness, I was put into a class with instructors that taught me how to dog fight efficiently. Hated it, but I learned a great deal, how to be patient, to think clearly, and how to maximize your position.” Erica replied.

“That you did.” Aaron agreed. “From what I hear, you are considered the ace of aces. Excellent job in rebounding the way you did.” He paused and asked, “When did you get transferred to the 501st?”

“It was in early ‘41, sometime after Gertrude was transferred to the unit. Most of us were scattered to the four winds at the time, many of us were dead, leaving me and her as the only real members on call. Honestly thought we were going to get separated, like all the rest by those damned armchair generals that made decisions without regard for chemistry or logic, just stroking their egos with expendable lives.” Erica expounded, bristling with anger at the end.

“There are wheels within wheels in all organizations,” Aaron mused, “and not all of them turn in the direction that has your best interests in mind. I too am not fond of them for they are outdated dinosaurs filled with visions of The Great War, too absorbed in being on the defensive and grinding it out. Fact of the matter is, you can out grind the Neuroi. Believe me, I’ve tried. The game is one large mathematical equation with one rule, he who has the most numbers wins, and they have more. We must adapt to these circumstances and chose our battles wisely.”

Erica slammed her hands on the table and extended them towards Aaron in a sign of gratitude. “Finally, someone other than Minna and Mio who understands!” she exclaimed. “If only they thought like you back then, the whole thing might’ve ended up differently.”

*I’m good at what I do, but I never said I was a miracle man.* “Did Mio find you both?”

“Actually, it was Minna that found us.” Erica clarified. “She heard about us and our exploits on the Eastern front and whisked us up. We became the first founding members of the 501st that day. We fought all over Europe, like yourself and moved on over to Great Britain when Berlin fell.”

“Were your habits the same when you came over?” Aaron inquired. “I’ve heard through the grape vine that your conduct on the ground is highly, what’s the word, rebellious?”

Erica rolled her eyes. “Just because I’ve never cleaned my room doesn’t mean that I don’t know where everything is.” she groaned. “Besides, the air is where I need to be at my best, on the ground, nothing at all matters. It may be part and parcel of my carefree attitude and my occasional bit of tomfoolery, but I’m not going to change anytime soon. You need to cut loose, relax, enjoy life, or else you’re not going to be an enjoyable person to be around when this is all over.”

“Amen.” Aaron intoned, impressed that he had found a somewhat kindred spirit. “I take it that stance of yours gets you in hot water?”

“Plenty.” Erica answered, nodding. “Gertrude grills me like a filet mignon everyday, every time she sees me do something that she doesn’t like, which is damn near everything. I know she means well, and I know she’s doing it to protect me, but I just don’t want to hear it. I get so sick and tired of the constant nagging that I just tune it out.” She turned around and looked at Gertrude, who gave her a curt nod, but it was far from disapproving, rather, begrudgingly supportive.

“You mentioned a bit of tomfoolery.” Aaron recollected. “What kind of pranks do you pull?”

Erica’s eyes lit up as she remembered her past exploits. “Oh just this and that. I mean putting itching powder in someone’s knickers isn’t so bad, neither is glueing someones shoes to the floor, or placing
firecrackers in a pan and setting them off under their bed.”

“I find it miraculous that you haven’t gotten in as much trouble as someone like me would if I did that.” Aaron quipped.

Erica furrowed her brow in thought. “Well, part of it has to do with the fact that I am, as you say, the ace of aces. Punishing me wouldn’t look too good.” she deduced. “Have you ever played pranks Aaron?” The only answer Aaron gave was a sly smile and a chuckle. She drank the rest of her calvados and warned, “Don’t think you can outprank me Aaron. Mess with The Black Devil, and you’ll get burned.”

Aaron leaned in, grinning like a fool, extending his hand. “Let’s propose a peace: keep your designs away from me, and I’ll do the same for you.”

“Deal.” Erica declared and shook his hand. Minna observed all of this and felt a bit of despair, one that felt greater than the vibrating wierding stone in her pocket. When the pair shook hands in mutual agreement, each had their fingers crossed on their opposite hands, hidden from each others sight under the table. Oh dear God. What is going to happen in the coming days?

“Good talk Erica.” Aaron said, withdrawing his hand, and leaning back in his chair. As Hartmann picked up her seat and traveled back to the group Aaron got lost in his thoughts. What is peace? Is it truly deserving of the meaning? I say no, peace is merely the absence of war, an interlude that begs to be broken. I know that she lied when she made that pact with me. It was written all over her face. She’s not naïve either as she knows I’m joking. It’s only a matter of time before the games afoot. Bring it on.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Aaron elucidates to Eila the existential essentials, the measure of a man, and how a good man can go bad for the right reasons.

Chapter XIII: The Evasive

Apart from one other person, I could never sit down and have a deep conversation with anyone concerning the mysteries of the human condition, that is, until I met Lieutenant Eila Juutilainen. Though I suspect it has more to do with her gift of foresight than any real knowledge, she is incredibly insightful, loyal, and a tremendous asset to the 501\textsuperscript{st}, particularly in regards to Sanya. The two are virtually inseparable, with Eila acting as the protective older sister. With her magic, she is almost impossible to target effectively, which makes me nervous, for you see, what happens when the key to your potential doesn’t open the lock anymore?

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

Putting her anxiety concerning the possible prank storm between Erica and Aaron on the backburner for now, Minna gestured to Eila and said, “Your turn.” Eila took her chair and moved it over to Aaron whose smile faded away as his mood turned back to the here and now.

“You should smile more.” Eila suggested, sitting down and crossing her legs. “It suits you rather than that glum melancholic look you have most of the time.”

Aaron gave a small grin and replied politely, “I know, but I just get lost in my thoughts sometimes.”

“Will that be a problem in the air, where a clear head is needed?” Eila asked.

Divale shook his head violently no. “Absolutely not.” he stated emphatically. “Too many people have gotten killed by my leadership through the mathematics of war, but I never let my moods cloud my judgment when people were in danger.”

Eila pressed her hands together and placed them near her face, just like Minna. “You still blame yourself for their deaths, despite knowing they were not your fault?”

Aaron breathed in and sighed, shaking his head. “At times I do.” he admitted. “Oftentimes, I would lay awake at night, remembering just how fast and brutal they died. Parts of them falling on the land, parts in water, and most just burning up into nothing in midair. Though I was deeply appreciative of their trust, elevating me to be first amongst equals, losing them was hard to take. Almost made me feel like resigning at one point because I didn’t want to bear anymore deaths, to have their blood on my hands.”
“Was it really that bad?” Eila queried, pointing to the calvados and glass. Taking the hint, Aaron poured them both a full helping and conducted his ritual. After patiently waiting, Eila pressed, “What shook your confidence in yourself?”

“Polesti in the mid summer of ’41.” Aaron answered after taking a drink. “By that time, Greece had fallen and the Carpathian line was reformed, an overbloated bulge that was hemorrhaging men and materiel. I knew what was going on; the enemy were trying to surround and batter us to oblivion, exploiting gaps, so I told my boys to use magic decoys to give off the impression that we had more people than we actually did, to dissuade them from attack. Good news is, the ruse worked, bad news was that it caused them to go make a thrust into where we weren’t, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia were attacked as well, but we weren’t in a position to help them. We came across intelligence that suggested that the Romanians were attempting to make a stand at and around Polesti, protecting the valuable oil and fuel refineries that dotted the landscape there. Took around one hundred men and flew over. When we arrived, things looked like they should, with the fortifications all set up and kitted out, except the Romanians weren’t there at all.”

“They weren’t there?” Eila inquired, clearly puzzled. “Was the intelligence false?”

“At the time, I didn’t know what to think of it. Immediately ordered some scouts to investigate. However, before they could do any appreciable digging, the enemy showed up. I recalled them all, as I needed every gun in the fight. So, the battle began, in both the sky and ground. Fighting was vicious and the Neuroi spearheaded the assault with Cataphracts, pinning us down while air units kept any support busy. Thankfully, the Romanian’s made their bastion thick and strong and we held on like demons, beating off assault after assault. Would’ve held the whole thing till Judgment Day, until the unexpected happened. The whole earth heaved up and exploded, taking out everything on the ground for miles in either direction. In the air, I looked down at where my men were on the ground and saw nothing but a ball of ash, fire, and flame, as if Hell itself erupted like Vesuvius did in Pompei.” Aaron answered sadly. He looked at Eila and added, “The bastards rather than fight bravely rigged the whole fucking oilfield to explode with underground incendiary bombs in an attempt to take out as many as they could before their nation fell.”

Eila took a sip from her drink and tentatively posed, “Did anyone make it out alive?”

“Not very many.” Aaron recollected. “After we scoured the smoke wreathed ruins that resembled Dante’s Phlegethon the final butchers bill was thirty six dead and forty one wounded. Over three quarters of my force was in the hospital or a body bag. Most the medical staff I had with me were amongst the dead, so I took it upon myself to operate, to save the lives of those I could. Spent the next twenty two hours in the emergency triage. Did a lot of amputations and skin removal. Most guys came out of there less than men and more like tin soldiers, if you catch my drift. When I got back to base with what remained, I called an officers only meeting. As the last of them came into my tent, I closed the flap and put spell of silence over us, making doubly sure that whatever passed between us never saw the light of day. I told them that I messed up, that I got good people killed for nothing, and that I believed that a change in leadership was needed. They looked at me like I was from Mars as I tried to reason with them, imploring them that I was not fit for command and to vote amongst themselves as to who would take the reins. They soon broke ranks and commenced the vote, with me abstaining. Then as one, they all declared, ‘We select our leader’. and pointed right at me. I was floored, stunned, and quite angry and I demanded why they chose me again. Yet again, they said the same thing to me that they did the first time, ‘I can’t say’. Never did find out, despite my repeated entreaties.”

“Looking at it from my point of view,” Eila observed, “it would appear that they attempted to tell you that, as the French say, c’est le guerre. You all may have been created to fight, but no one, not
mortal, not witch, not even warlock is ever ready for such a struggle. I know it, you know it, your officers knew it, even those that didn’t come back after Polesti knew. Ask yourself Aaron, is anyone ever truly ready for it?"

Aaron paused and thought, placing his right hand to his chin. “You make a great point Eila.” he acknowledged, nodding his head slowly, his eyes down and away in contemplation, “We all were human deep down, all with the same weaknesses. Fear is the oldest emotion humanity has, a great limiter to its full potential. The doubts it creates hinder all, warlocks included.” Divale directed his gaze at Eila and said, “I do not fear my own death, for I know what awaits me, we all did, but I don’t think any of us were ready to see so many die, give so many empty chairs a wide berth.”

Eila placed the glass away from her and leaned in, hands away from the face and now clasped on the table. “I find you interesting Aaron, to the point where I want to find out everything about what makes you, you, your beliefs, your stances, your morals.”

“A debate for the ages.” Aaron intoned, adopting Eila’s posture. “It’s been a long time since anyone broached such subjects to me. Ask away.”

“Your symbol perplexes me.” Eila began, gesturing to his diary. “While the triangle is the strongest shape in the universe, the structure you have created for yourself is fragile, one slight move to either side, and all crumbles. What keeps it together?”

Nodding, Aaron answered questioningly, “Discipline perhaps? Or maybe loyalty?”

“Or maybe faith?” Eila suggested.

“You mean like in God?” Aaron pondered.

“One does not have to be one of the faithful to have faith. You could have faith in those ideals or in yourself and others in doing what you and they do.” Eila remarked, taking a sip.

“Never thought of that.” Aaron quipped. “It would make a lot of sense. I always believed that what I did was right, that it was for the greater good. True, we were but a few, but I feel that we helped save thousands, tens, hundreds, maybe millions. That possibly may have kept me going all those years and now, that we did our duty to the best of our ability.”

“And that you know it isn’t finished, that you continue the fight.” Eila added. “As you said, ‘Only in death does duty end’.”

“Amen.” Aaron agreed.

“So what do believe Aaron? Do you have faith in a higher power, and if not, why?” Eila inquired.

“I do not believe in God, but I fear God, as I fear anything that is more powerful than me. There aren’t many things in this world that fill me with dread. As for the reason why I don’t have faith in the divine, it is probably because of my relationship with it.” Aaron explained. “The situation that best describes our attempted union is where I’m a switchboard operator whose placing jack after jack into the board, without knowing that it’s off, shouting hello in every language know to man, yet receiving no answer.”

“Have you ever tried to turn that board on?” Eila asked.

“No,” Aaron expounded. He put on a shamed face and added, “because I’m afraid, scared that I, after having done so much good, bled gallons, cried rivers, and given a lifetime of war away to a noble cause, that I will be found wanting in the end, punished to walk the world as a mourning spirit
for all eternity, denied, cast aside, and forgotten.”

“Non succederà il mio amore. Troverò un modo per aiutarti, per liberare quel demone dentro di te (That will not happen my love. I will find a way to help you, to release that demon within you).”

Lucretia spoke up, drawing Aaron’s attention to herself. “Non perdere la speranza (Don’t lose hope).”

Aaron smiled at her, though his mind did not.

“I wish that I could believe that Lucretia, but I’ve been disappointed far too many times. Eila soon righted the ship to where it needed to be with a quick question, inquiring, “Knowing now that you have no faith in the divine, where then does it lie?”

“In myself.” Aaron clarified with no hint of doubt in his voice. “I’ve been in situations that would cause sane men to break, cause brave men to run away screaming like cowards, and the most docile soul to grow ice over his heart, yet I have held true to what I know is right, for I do know right and wrong and am blessed with the common sense to know which is which, by remembering who I am.”

“And who are you? Describe yourself.” Eila pressed, intrigued beyond measure.

“I’m a uniquely damaged individual, a devil birthed by foul magics and unholy darkness, cast into a world of light in need of angels.” Aaron surmised. “Like a clown in a circus, I’m forever cursed to wear a mask, forever presenting myself as a moon with my false face, hiding my dark side, my true self, protecting it from prying eyes. Within me, dwells the measure of beast and man, the best and worst of both in equal measure. My mind has been scarred, my body battered, and my heart rent in twain, but here I stand, unbent, unbowed, and unbroken. I’m Aaron Divale, no more and no less.”

Eila clapped in approval at what Aaron said and smiled. “And that you are, but that doesn’t mean that’s all you’ll ever be.” She pointed her glass at him and added, “Remember that.” After taking a sip, she furrowed her brow in thought. “What are some basic tenents that you ascribe to? Your code, your Golden Means?”

“First rule that I have with anyone is to tell the truth, even if your voice shakes to pieces. None ever forgive a liar. The second, is to never go back on your word. Keep your promises, no matter the cost. Next, always remember those who helped you, your friends, for without them, you would be nothing. Finally,” Aaron illuminated, the last part having him put on a serious face, “always defend your friends from all foes with extreme prejudice. Do what you will to me, say whatever you wish to my face, and I will do nothing if I feel that it isn’t worth it. The second you bring my friends into the situation or threaten them in any way, I will put you six feet under so fast that death will be late in collecting your soul.”

“Are we your friends?” Eila asked with a cocked eyebrow.

Aaron stopped and thought, long and hard, taking a deep sip of calvados. He looked at Eila and moved his eyes throughout the room, regarding each person behind her in turn. “None of you have done me a wrong,” he stated, “none of you have shown me clear intent to harm me or what I hold dear, and all of you seem content to defend me and mine, even going so far as to lend aid or advice. In time, as I get to know you all and see your true measures, you will be brought into my circle of trust and friendship.”

Eila nodded to herself. And that is more than fair Aaron. Trust is earned, never given. “What kind of lessons have you learned over the course of your life?” Eila queried.

“Too many to count.” Aaron admitted. “The first lesson I learned was that I wasn’t invincible, that I’m fallible, that I can make mistakes. Next, was that the worst monsters that one can encounter are ones with a human face. Then, I found one’s inner demons are just as deadly as those from without.
Moving on, there was the realization that while to live is to know suffering, pain, and loss, it is also beautiful and gives one great joy. Finally, I learned far far too late to cherish one’s time on earth, to experience living, for every day I draw breath is a gift that shouldn’t be wasted, that I must live a full life.” He paused and jolted as if shocked by electricity. “And also never to divulge your past encounters with a group of SAS while three sheets to the wind with the fourth being pulled out the closet.”

The pilots behind Eila laughed a tad. “How much did you have?” Erica commented.

“Twenty six beers, fifteen whiskey shots, and five glasses of wine.” Aaron stated for the record. He stifled a grin when he saw Hartmann’s jaw drop. “Easily paid out the nose to the tune of two hundred pounds. Still think you can hang with the best of them?” Erica put her hands up in mock surrender and looked away, shaking her head in disbelief and respect.

“So we now know what it is that you believe and do. Tell us the things that you don’t believe or do.” she requested.

“If any of friends still draw breath,” Aaron answered, “I will never leave them behind. To do so would be cowardly and spit on our honors. I also will never lie to save myself from just punishment and I will never break a promise, for of all the things this war has taken from me, I still have my word and my honesty, and I break them for no riches, glory, or fame. Finally, I will always defend the innocent from the predations of the wicked. The world is in need of good men who do things that reflect badly on them for the greater good. Takes great courage to do so, knowing the consequences.”

“So you believe that bad men are needed and that you may be in fact a bad man?” Eila inquired.

“Yes,” Aaron replied, “because bad men like me keep the worst ones at bay.” Eila took a deep draught from her glass and thought about the next question she would ask, but Divale caught what she was doing and posited, “You are going to ask if there was a time that I was a bad man, that I did something wrong or morally ambiguous?” When Eila nodded in the affirmative, Aaron made a T with his hands and looked at Minna. “Before I go any further with my answer, I want to hear again your assurance that what I say here will not leave this room, that you are positively, absolutely, completely sure.”

Minna grew very uneasy upon hearing Aaron’s statement. What did he do that makes him afraid to divulge it? “You have my word.” she answered with confidence.

Aaron breathed in deep and readied himself. This is it, bringing what was done in the dark to the light. “I was responsible for the Houska Castle Massacre.” he stated.

Eila’s eyes bulged in shock and she toppled over, chair and body landing on the concrete. Several of members of the 501st, particularly the German contingent, went white as if drained of blood. The whole room went silent, some realizing the import of what Aaron said, while others stared around trying to figure out what the fuss was about. Minna got up from her seat and pulled out the wierding stone, holding it in the palm of her right hand, holding it away from her so that all could see. “State that again for the record.” she commanded, eyes locked on Aaron as if he was an enemy. Divale did so and the stone refused to budge, showing all that the truth was spoken. From the floor, Eila saw the words having no effect on the magical item and slowly got up, righting her chair and sitting down. Aaron, for his part looked down at the floor, unable to meet the gazes of his allies.

“Tell me everything,” Eila began, “and I’ll promise to hear you out.”

Aaron regarded all in the room and saw their faces. There’s fear etched in all of them. Dear God did
make a mistake in telling them this? “It was in the late summer of ’42 when Austria was being invaded and ground to a pulp.” he explained. “We camped out in the woods surrounding Blatce, over forty miles behind the main lines near Prague to try to get to a central location where we could intervene, yet stay hidden. Supplies were running low, ammunition especially, so I took two guys and we went to Blatce to see if anything could be found. It was a small village, virtually bereft of any modernity. Looked as though it remained permanently locked in the early mid 19th century. To be expected from a relatively remote location, pickings were slim at best. Everything went by the book, covered our tracks, staying in disguise and character, yet somehow someway, I felt something off about the place, like I was being watched. My suspicions were later confirmed when I picked up a shadow that wasn’t mine as I navigated around the streets. Took a small quick turn and hid myself in a recessed threshold of a side door and waited. I heard the steps getting closer and closer, heavy ones, the kind made by boots, clopping on the cobblestone streets like a horse’s hooves. As soon as the sound of footfalls got louder than my heartbeat, I reached out, grabbing this little spy, and rammed them against the door.

Though the face was hidden by a thick cloth around the mouth and a black cap that came down to the eyes, I could tell it was a woman from he cries of surprise and pain. I ripped off the hat and mouth covering and saw a woman with brown hair, skin the color of beige, and cat’s eyes, one blue, the other hazel, looking at me in fear. She was wearing the uniform of a law officer, a long black trench coat with brass buttons on the front, her baton and side arm in holsters on her right side. ‘Why are you following me’? I demanded, holding her firmly. She answered, ‘I’m Helga von Krieger and you’re all in danger here. I need to get you and your friends out of sight, they could be watching and listening right now. Everything will be explained’. I heard the urgency in her words and followed her to a stable a few streets away, keeping to the side alleyways as much as possible. Inside, my boys were in there, drinking water from their canteens, sitting on overturned water buckets. In front of them was another law officer, this one much older with numerous honors on his left breast, the head constable. He told me that The Thirteenth Legion had taken up residence in Houska Castle a few months ago, lending their services to the Austrian army. Rather than ask for payment, they instead persuaded the government to essentially give them free reign to take whatever they wanted from the surrounding areas, Blatce included. Needless to say, there was next to nothing left for the local populace. Also, he informed us that the mercenaries kept informants within every town within their jurisdiction, relaying information on visitors that could have something they want. Given how we were kitted out, it made us prime targets. To that end, he suggested that we leave that night, to steal away under the cover of darkness. It was a good plan, so I agreed, sending my boys to sleep in an inn not too far from the stables, while I slept with the female officer inside the stables.

When night came, we met up and proceeded to move as quickly as we could out of the village. No one was about and the windows were curtained and shuttered. Dead quiet. We were roughly halfway through the place when we came across the local church, the belfry overlooking a four corners. As we crossed the way, I saw a twinkle in the bell tower, and it wasn’t a reflection from the moon on the stained glass, it was a sniper’s scope. Before I could tell them to get down, a shot rang out and one of my guys went down, his head popped like a melon. The other one rolled next to an empty barrel, while I ducked behind a low wall. I lost it when I saw my comrade, a loyal soldier and brother, lying face down, blood pooling around his aerated skull. Cloaking myself, I unfurled my wings and flew up, into, and through the stained glass where the shot came from with the sound of thunder. The shooter was there, clad in a long black cloak, bolt action rifle in his hands, and very shocked that the glass seemingly broke with nothing being thrown at it. I snatched him up by his front, lifting him completely off the floor, his feet dangling in the air, and revealed myself, wings ablaze and eyes burning with anger. He proceeds to wet himself, his piss dribbling down his covered legs, dotting the wooden floors, saying over and over, ‘Mein Gott. Mein Gott’, thinking that it would save him. From his voice, I realized that it was the head constable.
Knowing that we had been betrayed, I resolved to avenge my fallen. I tortured that bastard until he confessed the world to me, even his wife’s maiden name. Told me about Houska Castle, it’s defenses, how many there were, all the entrances and exits, both within sight and hidden. Thanked him for his cooperation by shoving his gun butt first up his ass, and left him mounted on the scantlings like a suckling pig being spit roasted over a fire. Reunited with my sole remaining man and told him to get every Baba Yaga we had left to Houska Castle and surround the place, with the orders that no one gets in or out. Met up with them all when the perimeter was secured, the wall sentries and those patrolling the grounds taken out quietly. It was raining that night, a cooling sensation on my skin, but it did nothing to quench the fire of liquid rage in my heart, steaming hot and beating a furious tattoo. Told my men to stand guard and eliminate any who attempted to flee or help from the outside and I went in alone.”

Aaron drank the calvados in his glass until almost nothing remained, a couple drops of brown liquid swirling at the bottom. “I took my time with the business at hand, bring all my magic to the fore, all the years of psychological warfare training being used to the fullest. I wanted them to scream, to cry in terror, to pray for salvation that would never come. Spent two hours haunting the halls of Houska Castle like a angel of retribution, serving justice with fire in my hands and ice in my veins, remodeling the interior to that of an abattoir. None made it out alive. Came out of the place soaked in blood from crown to crotch. Didn’t say a single word of what I did to my men as I walked past them, holding my head up to the rent heavens, into the rain, playing the part of Pilate and washing away my sin.” He looked at Eila and bade her to take hold of his hands with a gesture. Hesitantly, she obeyed, looking upon him in fear, and he went on, “I know why you look at me the way you do Eila and I don’t blame you in the least, none of you. Looking back on it, I realize that I should’ve stopped at the one, the man responsible for the murder of my blood kin, but my mind was clouded and my emotions got the better of me. I regret none of what I did to The Thirteenth Legion for what they did, for they also did the same to the people they brutalized. Found a cache of records, written by the head commandant. They painted a picture of a ruthless lot, predatory, seeking nothing but their own self aggrandizement. They burned, they raped, they pillaged, and they killed, all for their one God, the almighty dollar. Their deaths were entirely justified in my mind. They were animals, feasting on those they were paid to protect, and I slaughtered them like animals. No one grieved for them, and no one ever will. The world is a better place without them. However, I understand if this makes me persona non grata in your eyes. I accept any sentence you pass on me.”

Eila reasoned away inside her mind. He admits his wrongdoing, a sign of a conscience. Justification for it is backed up by facts and hard numbers, not gut instincts or any deluded sense of righteousness. You may have done an unspeakable thing Aaron, but I forgive you for your sin. I just hope that this will not be a case of reaping what you sow down the road, or there will be a devil to pay. “You are not guilty in my eyes.” she said to him, withdrawing her hands slowly. “They committed a wrong, violating one of your core beliefs. You stated that you are a man of your word and you upheld it. If someone did that to Sanya, I would lose myself too.”

“Anything else you want to know?” Aaron asked.

“Just one last thing.” Eila replied and reached into one of her belt pouches. After a bit of rummaging, she pulled out a small wooden box and placed it on the table. Opening it, the pair could see a deck of tarot cards in mint condition. “Where did you get this?” she asked.

“When I was scrounging for supplies in France one day in mid October, near La Harve. It was in a ditch next to a body of a person that I couldn’t even begin to identify. Didn’t think much of it at first, because I was absorbed in getting ammunition, food, or water, but something drew me to it, forcing my hands to pick it up. Never used it at all, and they have never been opened since then.”

“Why?” Eila inquired.
“I firmly believe that there is no such thing as fate or destiny, that the future is not set in stone. Anything and everything that has happened, is happening now, and will happen, is due to a specific set of reasons. Coincidence doesn’t exist. To me, you can’t ever predict the future for it is like water, where the faintest gust of wind will cause the surface to change, every ripple a twist in the tale being told.” Aaron answered. He looked at Eila and cocked his eyebrow. “You have the gift of foresight?”

“Only to the near future.” Eila admitted taking the cards out of the box with care. “Anything past a certain point is a toss up.” She shuffled the cards and placed them in front of Aaron. “Care to see?” Aaron looked at the back of the top tarot card, a blued parchment with the sign of the all seeing eye, floating above a cloud, casting a ray through it as if it meant nothing. I don’t believe in fate so this will mean nothing if I see. He nodded slowly. “Ask a question, any at all.” Eila instructed.

“I wish to know how my journey here started, where it will lead in the near future, and how my station here will end.” Aaron solemnly stated.

“Draw the first card.” Eila directed. Aaron did so and flipped it up. On the card was an illustration of an old man carrying a staff and holding a lantern with a six pointed star. “The Hermit.” Eila pointed out. “Your trip here was one of enlightenment, a quest for answers and knowledge. You came with discretion, shrouding yourself from the world. The lantern, a beacon in the darkness, guides you and the staff aids in navigating narrow roads.” She gestured for him to draw again and Aaron did so, revealing a card that depicted a man straddling a mountain armed with a staff, doing battle with seven other staves attempting to dislodge him. “The Seven of Rods.” Eila remarked. “Your time here will be one of struggle, of maintaining whatever it is you gain from all manner of obstacles and threats. With courage, you will face them down and persevere. Like the mountain he sits on, you are a rock that cannot be pushed aside.” Again, she bade him draw and Aaron took up the last card and place on the table, revealing a card that gave both pause. A bolt of lightning struck a dark tower, casting a gold crown and two bodies, one of a woman and man, from the top, it’s battlements ablaze with fire. “The Tower.” Eila stated. “The end of your stay here will be marked by a grave crisis, one that will create much change in your life. Whether for better or worse is unclear, for not all changes are inherently destructive.” Eila then picked up the cards and placed them all back into the box, closing it with reverence. “So is there anything you want to ask me?” she asked.

“What made you join the war?” Aaron queried.

“It was mostly due to my elder sister, Aurora.” Eila replied. “She joined up with the intention of protecting our homeland and I followed suit, seeing if I could help and protect her in the process. However, she was selected for the army while I went to the air force. It was a tough thing to take, but we dealt with it well. We both fought our first combats at the Mannerheim Line in the winter of ’40. It was a terrible fight. The enemy outnumbered us seven to one, but we held the line for months while refugees made it out, including the Soviet leadership who fled from Moscow.” Juutilainen recollected something and added, “The enemy should have broke us, for the force we engaged was only the tip of the iceberg. Two other groups were poised to arrive later, sweeping up along our flanks while our main force was pressed, but they never arrived. Never did find out why, but I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth” As he did with Lynette, Aaron’s eyes flashed with recognition, and made a T with his hands. “Your elder sister is Aurora “The Rock of Kollaa” Juutilainen?” he anxiously pondered. Eila was shocked rigid and she straightened out her spine. “You know my sister?”

Aaron smiled. “Yes I do,” he clarified, “and when you see her again, tell her your welcome, from me.”

At first, Eila was puzzled as to why Aaron would say such a thing, but then the import of what he
said hit her, causing her to gasp loudly. “You took the other groups out!” she exclaimed, realizing what he meant.

Nodding, Aaron told his story. “Our first combat as a unit took place on New Year’s Day of ’40. We knew that the Mannerheim Line was being attacked so we originally planned to make our way there, but along the way, we saw two minor groups moving behind the enemy lines, using the din of battle to hide their movements. I took the entire unit and placed them inside some woods that the Neuroi would have to cross through to get to the Finns, hoping to ambush them. We sat there in the cold dark for over an hour, behind trunks, in the branches, dug into the snow banks, crouching behind rocks, or lying on our stomachs in hastily dug trenches, waiting for them to get there, and when they did come, it was in long columns, four miles long and half a mile wide, replete with heavy ground units, but surprisingly lacking in air cover. It was if they didn’t expect to be intercepted. We let them into the woods, keeping deadly quiet and still, using our magic to make us invisible. Minutes rolled by slowly. As soon as the last of them entered the tree line, we unleashed hell. It was a massacre. A blind man with a fully loaded rifle could pop off all five shots in any direction and successfully get five kills. The whole thing was over in less than five minutes. Not a single enemy unit remained and we took no casualties.”

Eila listened spellbound. “How many were there?” she asked.

“Roughly nine thousand total.” Aaron illuminated, still grinning from ear to ear and downed the last drops of his calvados. “Moving on, when did you get involved with the 501

“Well, as the enemy retreated from the attempted invasion, new pilots from all over began to get rotated in to compensate for losses. Most came from Russia. Sanya and I met in the spring of ‘40 and quickly developed a good chemistry with each other. Though she was a night fighter, first and foremost, I adapted to her style and complemented her well in our adventures together over there. Towards the end, in the winter of ‘41, when Norway was crumbling, Mio came over to Trondheim with an offer that our unit couldn’t refuse. She was part of an expeditionary force that arrived from Japan near the end of ‘40 and offered to give us what remained of what she commanded at that point in exchange for both of us.” Eila explained.

_Hell, I’d take that bargain in a heartbeat._ “What of your sister?” Aaron asked.

“She was transferred to another JFW, the 502

“I’m sure she and others feel the same about you too, for I’ve also heard that you use your powers excessively, relying on them rather than your shield. You’re burning your candle at both ends girl. Change your ways, or you’ll find yourself in a bad spot at the wrong time, or even get someone killed because you have forgotten how to defend. “She will be fine.” Aaron assured. “If Aurora could hold Kollaa, she can hold anywhere.”

“Your very kind in saying that.” Eila said. “Thank you.”

“Speaking of kind.” Aaron remarked, using air quotes at the end of his statement, “I hear that you have a rather infamous reputation for being hands on with the newcomers.”

Eila immediately blushed. “Well, you have to have some way to amuse yourself, to play some good natured pranks now and then.” she reasoned.
“By copping a feel?” Aaron asked. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what the big fuss is about when it comes to bust size. It’s not like it’s an indicator of superiority or some shit like that.”

Eila gasped and wagged a finger at Aaron. “It’s a matter of pride!” she stated emphatically.

“Maybe to you all, but to me they really mean nothing.” Aaron pressed. “I could care less whether a woman has a pair that belong in the Smithsonian because of their beauty or size. To me, all I care about is what’s here.” He pointed to the center of his chest, tapping his sternum. “Everything on the outside is aesthetics. In time, all those will fade to nothing, shells of their former selves. The heart will always be beautiful.” He looked at Lucretia and said fondly, “Even if the one I loved was so hideous that she can’t see the light of day, it wouldn’t matter a damn if her heart was pure.”

Some members uttered a few hushed words and Domino nodded and smile in approval. Eila, for her part, did nothing but lean back and cross her arms. “You truly are unlike any person that I have ever met in my life and I’m glad.” she said.

“Likewise.” Aaron admitted, extending his hand. “Good talk Eila, let’s do this again sometime.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Lucchini learns that it's all fun and games until you mess with the green fairy.

Chapter XIV: The Black Cat

Pilot Officer Francesca Lucchini is a ball of energy that could probably power the whole world if it could be harnessed, that is if you ever managed to catch her while she’s awake. Sleeping seems to be a favorite pastime for her and she’s very causal like Erica, almost carefree even. A prodigy, she has a rare ability to naturally grasp even the most complex of maneuvers and dog fighting styles, absorbing the knowledge like a sponge. This makes her addition to the 501st that much important. However, she can play pranks from what I’ve heard and can be very childish. May have to plan my hijinks carefully, lest I get drawn into a four on one match.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

Eila had just barely got back when Minna coaxed, “He’s all yours Lucchini.”

Aaron overheard the statement and quipped, “Dentro la ragione Lucchini. Sono gia parlato per dopo tutto. (Within reason Lucchini. I’m already spoken for after all)”

Lucchini laughed as she took up her chair and moseyed over. She sat her chair down and was about to make a move to sit in it when she stopped and looked at Aaron with a smile. “E bello sentire qualcuno che parla la mia lingua madre. E passato cosi tanto. (It’s nice to hear someone speak my native language. It’s been so long)” she said, walking over to him and embracing him like a dear relative in thanks.

“In qualsiasi momento, ma credo che dobbiamo essere trasparenti con loro sfortunatamente. Ne parliamo piu tardi, se vuoi (Anytime, but I feel that we need to be transparent with them unfortunately. We will talk more like this later if you’d like)” Aaron replied, gesturing to the rest of the squadron.

Lucchini sighed with resignation, knowing that he was right and sat down in her chair. “I’ve noticed that not only are you an officer, but a gentleman.” she remarked. “When Perrine got wounded, I hear you didn’t look at her when Yoshika operated, when Erica practically gave you a show, or when Ismenoth turned over in her bath.”

“It’s a matter of courtesy and respect.” Aaron explained. “To look upon a woman in her vulnerable moments is vulgar.”

“Also, you seem to have a little issue with rank.” Lucchini observed. “During the training yesterday,
it caused you to almost bash Perrine’s head in.”

“To be perfectly clear, I never would have hit her.” Aaron stated, arms crossed. “And yes, I do have a slight issue with rank because of what it does to people. I’ve seen privates in various army units, young men that were full of jokes and merriment, get promoted, and all of a sudden do a complete one eighty turn to this serious no nonsense bastard that wields their authority with reckless abandon over their perceived inferiors, completely forgetting that they themselves were just like them only days before.”

“Yet, you yourself were promoted.” Lucchini pointed out. “Did you change?”

“No.” Aaron replied emphatically, “I may have been first among equals, but I was still an equal. No one was superior or inferior, despite the fact that certain people just so happened to be in charge. To us, rank meant jack shit. We saluted and followed the man, not the title he held, for the man is worthy to be respected, not his honorific.”

“Interesting thoughts, though you might have to change your tune to fit your current circumstances.” Francesca commented with a hint of warning. “Some people here really take it seriously.”

Aaron leaned forward with a sly smirk. “And what are they going to do about it? Spank me?” He looked over at the rest of the group and added, “I’m the hardest hard-ass you’ll ever find folks. Strike my derriere and you’ll probably break your hand.”

Minna spoke up with a voice that wasn’t amused. “I don’t have to hit you to hurt you.” she cautioned.

Thinking about it and remembering his upbraiding at their first breakfast together, he nodded at her. “Touche.” he admitted with respect. “I’ll do my best, but I offer no guarantees.”

“On that note,” Lucchini went on. “you’ve seen many things out in the world haven’t you?” When Aaron nodded yes, she asked, “Where was the most beautiful place you’ve ever been?”

Aaron leaned back in his chair and raised his head to the ceiling, peering up into the overhead lights. “That would have to be the steppes of Russia.” he answered after a few seconds pause.

Lucchini put on a sour face. “That barren, desolate, freezing cold place?” she queried with disgust.

“It doesn’t snow all the time over there Francesca.” Aaron explained. “During the spring when all that melts away, the whole countryside explodes with green and life. The skies blue as Shirley’s eyes and the clouds as white as Sanya’s skin. It’s far from barren and desolate. There is so much beauty that you could spend a lifetime wandering around and yet only see a minute fraction of it. Of all the places that I could live, if the war ended today, right now, I would settle there and get lost in it.” He regarded Lucretia and added, “Though of course, I have to consider her wishes as well. Her life is in Great Britain, her livelihood, and whether she wishes us to stay or go, I’ll stay or go with her.”

“It’s nice to hear you say that.” Lucchini acknowledged. “Far too often, I’ve seen people make decisions that benefit themselves rather than the group at large.”

“You sound a lot like me and Erica.” Aaron remarked. “Guess I have more in common with you all than I thought.”

“I’ll have you know that it’s also common around here to be assigned a common chore around the base.” Lucchini illuminated.

“Anything you want me to do, I’ll do,” Aaron declared, “except handle dirty underwear in relation to
“Then how in the world did you manage to get so lucky with the ladies if you couldn’t get their panties and bra off?” Lucchini inquired, clearly puzzled.

“Not my fault they removed them for me,” Aaron pointed out. “Besides, if push came to shove and I had to remove them, I would grab the faintest edge and whisk it away faster than a jackrabbit running from a coyote.”

“You must really hate underwear huh?” Francesca pondered.

“Oh hell yes.” Aaron answered. “I made it a point to never wear a single pair of the damn things and I never have.”

Gaspsof shock and awe reverberated throughout the room. “Someone likes it breezy.” Erica chimed, smiling. “Can’t blame you though, because if you are as bottom heavy as Lucretia says you are, you need all the room you can get.”

All Aaron did in response was wink, grin, and shake his head. *Man oh man this stay here is going to be fraught with peril. Lord preserve me and prevent me from doing anything stupid.* “In regards to Lucretia, how did you two meet?” Lucchini asked.

“I met her in France to start,” Aaron recollected, “and ferried her over along with a group of children, setting them down near Southampton. When I decided to cross the Channel, she was assigned as my personal medical officer.”

Francesca shifted a bit in her chair. “That’s not what I meant.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. *Alright. Who put her up to it? Et tu Lucchini (And you Lucchini)?*

“Sorry Aaron,” Lucchini replied, clearly not sorry in the least, “but they are very persuasive.” She gestured to Eila, Shirley, and Erica, and Divale narrowed his eyes as he regarded them. *So the sign of the four is revealed, a quartet of trouble.* Looking at Lucretia, Aaron could tell that there would be no defense or help from that quarter, as she shrugged and gestured to him.

“All right you little perverts,” he declared, throwing up his hands in defeat, “here’s how everything went down. We both found out that we were getting transferred out the day before I came here. I was given leave to depart and spend the night anywhere I chose, as long as I was supervised. Lucretia took me over to her house and we had dinner together. I got a shower before bed and before I finished up, she decides to join me.” He paused to allow the room to let loose a round of ‘ooohs’ and ‘aaahs’ before continuing, “She took me in her arms, crying into my chest, saying that I deserved better than what I’d got from the Allies, and that I didn’t warrant being left alone, letting my heart harden to stone. Her words moved me, and the way she looked at me made me understand why she said them. Lucretia loves me, and I love her, and that night we had together was one of the most tender moments I’ve had with anyone in a long time.”

Lucchini listened politely, eschewing the rather tasteless smirks and gestures that she knew some of her friends were making behind her back. “That’s so romantic.” she uttered. “I’m glad you have someone.”

Her response took Aaron aback and for a moment was unable to come up with words to say in response. “Thank you.” he finally replied.

“What I don’t find romantic is the sheer amount you seem to drink.” Francesca noted, pointing to the
now half bottle of calvados sitting on the table. “That stuff will get you into trouble, just like Yoshika said.”

“It doesn’t anymore,” Aaron defended, “now that I know what and how much of it I can handle.”

“So when did you realize that you needed to set some sort of limit on yourself?” Lucchini inquired, curious.

“Well,” Aaron began, “before I begin, I want you to know that this is going to sound like the biggest cock and bull story that you’ve ever heard, but it’s all true. This all started about two weeks after Larissa died. Her death hit me hard and I was very depressed, moody. I wasn’t myself at all and my men realized that, so what they did was, at the drawing for R&R before anyone had gone, my officers held a unit vote to suspend the rules and pass on. What that meant was that they as a body instead of drawing, voted as to who got R&R. The vote passed and they chose me, saying, ‘Go wherever you please and do whatever your heart desires, just come back to us better and in one piece’.”

“Where did you go?” Francesca asked.

“At first, I didn’t know where to go as technically, nowhere was safe to cut loose in the amounts I needed to get out of the doldrums, so I just took a map, laid it flat on the ground, and flipped knife into the air.” Aaron replied. “Wherever it landed, I would go. The blade point struck a town in Northern Germany called Wilhelmshaven, which just so happened to be Germany’s largest deep water port and naval base. The town would be crawling with soldiers and sailors, but that didn’t bother me in the slightest because I could easily blend in, looking like a dock worker if I wanted to. Thus, I dressed up, or down depending on how you saw it, shoved about two thousand marks in my back pocket, and sped off to the port city. When I got there, most of the fleet in the harbor was gone, dispatched to places unknown, leaving the town itself relatively under populated, which again, wasn’t all that bad, because now, I could really get lost. As you could well imagine, port towns have certain businesses that caterer to the primary clientele, i.e sailors. Bars were everywhere as well as places of ill repute, but I didn’t go into the later, I was still hung up from what happened. I find a bar northwards in the Sengwarden called Die Ertrunkene Ratte (The Drowned Rat), and proceed to bubble up, drown myself like its namesake with copious amounts of beer.

I got there at around noon and stayed there for a good five hours, drinking. Though it was good beer, fantastic stuff, it just didn’t seem to dull the ache, that something was needed to put me over the edge. As soon as that thought crossed my mind, a well to do man sat down next to me at the bar, probably a dock warden by the way he smelled like the sea, and orders his drink. He turns to me and notices the glass castle that I had constructed with all the empty beer receptacles and gasps, ‘How are you not dead’? I look up from the bottle of my stein and replied, ‘Because I already am’. He shakes his head and leans over saying that he was actually a distiller of spirits who was going from town to town peddling his liquor in the hopes that someone would stock their shelves with it. Apparently, he had a family that he wanted to get out of Germany, but didn’t have enough money to do so wholesale. Curious, I ask him if his wares were any good and he pulls out of his pocket a tiny blue bottle with a white and pink label on the front depicting a pursed pair of lips that read Der Kuss des Todes (The Kiss of Death). He then says that it was a cherry absinthe that was so potent that it could knock anyone on their ass. Feeling lucky, and a bit bored, I bet the man the remaining one thousand marks in my wallet that I could down the whole thing and still stand still. Naturally, he takes me up on it, thinking that I was so far in that I would get crushed. Popped the cork off and chugged the contents in two swallows. It was a very tart cherry and the moment I drank it, I knew that I had made a mistake, for I didn’t know at the time that absinthe was extremely potent to the tune of almost industrial grade alcohol.
After I downed it, I got up from my seat, and gently circled around, arms outstretched, and thanked him for the drink and that it was very good. Dejected at having lost, he nods, thanking me for my kind words. He also proceeds to ask if I was interested in doing a double or nothing. Intrigued, and getting hellacious aftereffects from consuming that bottle, I decided yes. The man tells me that there was a back door guarded by a man who would only let you in if you had one of those bottles. I would then go down a flight of stairs into an arena where I and a large group of men would engage in an impromptu street fight, and if won that, I would get an additional two thousand marks in addition to the one thousand that I was due. Feeling lucky, and starting to see double, I enthusiastically agreed, taking the bottle and tramping off to the underground fight club.”

“How many people were in there?” Lucchini queried, absorbed in the story.

“There were easily thirty men inside the ring with another fifty or so in the stands looking in and down on the spectacle.” Aaron recollected. “I take off my shirt, showing off my scars to a bit of applause from some members of the audience, and get into the ring. Looking at my opposition, they were drunk and high on adrenaline. Focusing on them was a bit hard to do because that damn green fairy was messing me up so bad that I was starting to see triple. A man from the stands picks up a bullhorn and yells, ‘Let the games begin’! All hell breaks loose and everyone starts kicking, punching, elbowing, kneeing, head butting, gouging, biting, hair pulling, doing anything they could to be the last man standing. The whole fight lasted a good ten minutes, and by the end, I was the only person on my side of the ring still standing. I turn and see this mammoth of man throw down another smaller individual with the force of a wrecking ball on the mat, bouncing him up and over the ropes. Now, I’m a big man, but this guy was bigger that I was. I had to look up at him! He was built like a brick shithouse, the muscles on his chest and arms thicker than the vault of the Bank of England, the hands the size of ten pound hams, and a craggy face that only a mother could love, like he fell from the ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down.”

“Then what happened?” Lucchini anxiously asked.

“I charged him obviously, or a least I thought I did because my muscles were starting to give into the booze and my head was spinning like a top.” Aaron continued. “Didn’t even get halfway to him before some doors off to the side of the arena open up with a boom and shrill whistles start blowing. It was the cops, and apparently, they had been looking for this place for a good while. Some people in the stands run while others pull pistols and start firing. I lost my footing at the sound of the sudden intervention on someone’s arm and I fell face first into someone’s crotch and passed out. Woke up sometime later handcuffed, on the ground, inside a cell filled with other people from the fight, head still spinning, and wearing lukewarm pants that had a huge wet spot. Didn’t take me long to realize that I had been arrested, placed inside the precinct’s drunk tank, and that I had pissed myself. Five cops come into the place and one of them points at me. His fellows pick me up, two at my arms and two at my legs, and carry me out and down a hallway, all the while complaining that I reeked of alcohol, piss, and scrotal sweat. They take me to a near empty room with an overhead light illuminating a chair with straps, bolted to the floor. At the far end of the room was a lone window, locked down tight, but not barred. I was then strapped down to the chair and the four officers that carried me in leave, leaving me alone with one other. He turns and asks me if I wanted to say anything before my interrogation. All the while I was being secured to the seat, I was hatching a plan to escape, non violently of course, and the more I thought about what I was going to do, the more I felt comfortable in doing it. I tell the officer that yes I did, but I needed to be sober to correctly elucidate, so I tell him, and I quote, ‘Kick me as hard as you can in my stomach so I can get rid of this crap and if I get anything on you, there’s one thousand marks in my back pocket that will more than pay for the cleaning bill’. ”

“And he went for it?” Francesca wondered out loud in disbelief.
“I dangled well over a few months of pay in front of his face tax free, of course he did. Winds up and boom, right in the gut with his right foot. Using that application of force, my natural strength, and a decent portion of magic, I push myself away, bolts snapping like twigs, and I sail through the air, across the room, and out the window with a resounding crash. Unfortunately, he did his job very well and I puked, all that absinthe and beer coming out in a brownish green slurry. I keep going and hurling past the window and across the street until I hit the side of a brick building next to the station, smashing the chair into splinters. I rip the handcuffs and fall down and down until I land back first into a horse drawn refuse cart, poke trailing after me, showering my body in alcohol infused bile and stomach acid. The whole thing startles the horse and it snaps the bonds holding it to a post. The mare then gallops full tilt down the streets leading to the outskirts of Wilhelmshaven proper. Took me a bit to get my bearings as the roads outside of the port were fairly rough dirt roads and the cart hadn’t been cleaned out for a while so it was a slimy as a greased ball bearing. After what seemed like ages, I popped my head up over the lip of the front of the cart and I see that I was in the country now and that the harness connecting the animal to the cart was wearing thin as it grazed the wheels. A curve was coming up and I’m thinking, ‘Oh shit’. I brace myself and duck back in as we round the bend. The curve is navigated and I hear the harness snap. The cart rocks and hits a bump, sending both entities airborne. Tumbling together like a pair of mating birds, we go until earth fall. The shock of the impact ejects me from the cart like a ball from a cannon and I land spread-eagled on the back of a cow. It moos in displeasure and shakes me off before moving away, leaving me cradling my balls in pain. Sufficiently safe for the time being, I decided that enough was enough. I cloak myself and go back to the front. Became the butt of jokes for a long time afterwards as I arrived reeking of garbage, vomit, piss, and alcohol, my clothes stained and dirty, and still with one thousand marks in my back pocket.” Aaron concluded.

Lucchini held her face in her hands and laughed hysterically. That is just too damn funny. One could write a novel on that story alone and sell millions. She turned at looked at Minna, who looked less amused but still smiled, shaking her head no. “That’s a hell of a story.” she chuckled. “Was it worth it?”

“Hell yes it was.” Aaron agreed. “Definitely helped get that depression out of my system and I came back just as new. Would do it again in a heartbeat. However, now I stay away from the green fairy at all times. She and I don’t mix anymore. Those sorts of fun and games are anything but.”

“Did you or your men play any games during the downtime?” Lucchini inquired.

“Definitely.” Aaron acknowledged. “Whenever we weren’t fighting we played all manner of games. Some would play card games like poker, bridge, or euchre. Others would throw knives or play ten pin if we could find some flat ground, and if that wasn’t available, we played bocce. I was decent at all of them, but my true calling was billiards. Love that game. A mathematician’s paradise. Whenever we found an intact table, we played that sucker until the felt gave out. Though I was far from a genius with numbers and angles, I could successfully make damn near any shot imaginable. My record stands at one hundred and sixty three wins, no losses, and two draws.”

“How do you draw a pool game?” Lucchini inquired, puzzled.

“Well, the first draw was the result of a hunting accident. One of my boys saw a goose flying overhead and shot it for lunch. He hit it and it fell on the table during a shot. The second draw was when we found a table inside a ruined bar that was still decent. When we got a few shots in, the ceiling caved in and a cast iron tub from the floor above broke the table in half.” Aaron answered. He furrowed his brow and thought something. “I found it to be rather bittersweet, that I found a billiard table inside the chateau I crashed landed at. It was a magnificent nine foot table in perfect condition, like it had never been used. The cues were made of the hardest, polished woods, the balls ivory, and the table so level that an earthquake wouldn’t disturb it. Beautiful thing. I must’ve played
over a hundred games on that table. It was a shame that there was no one to play with. I'll always remember it fondly because of the symbols near the pockets, a black white shield with three inverted shells, two above and one below. In between them was an inverted black bar with three yellow hollow squares.”

“What did you say?!” Perrine screamed from the back, causing everyone to turn and look at her. Perrine’s face was red with anger and she charged at Aaron. Minna got up from her seat the moment that Clostermann crossed the row of seats and grabbed her, locking her arms around her like a straitjacket. Restrained and lacking the will to go up against the commander, Perrine seethed, glaring a hole at Aaron. “Where did you land, where exactly?!” she demanded.

“Agincourt.” Aaron simply answered. It was at that point that Divale understood why she acted that way and his breath was snatched from his lungs at the revelation. “That was your chateau that I landed at wasn’t it?!” he exclaimed in shock.

“Yes it was,” Perrine uttered through gritted teeth, “and if I find so much as a errant thumbprint on a the side of a vase, you will pay dearly.”

Aaron put up his hands and stated, “With the sole exception of the cellar doors, doors that I have since repaired with my own hands, nothing was damaged in that house. While I did go and explore within the confines, I only did so to make sure that I was alone and to set up alarms just in case I had some nocturnal visitors. I took nothing from your estate and only used the billiard table and it’s various instruments. You have my word.”

“Is he telling the truth?” Perrine asked Minna without breaking her stare.

“Yes he is.” Minna replied coolly. “Get back to your seat and settle down.” Wilcke released her grip and Perrine shot Aaron one last parting glance before turning away back to her chair.

“Moving on,” Lucchini quipped, sensing that the danger was over, “I only have one last question for you.” She got out of her seat, and like Shirley before her, went behind the crate. Within seconds she reappeared, dragging a massive black duffel bag behind her with some effort. It took her a full minute to traverse the distance before letting it lie between Aaron and her. Francesca stooped down and opened it, revealing one hundred dollar United States bills in packets of ten thousand, dozens of them. “I helped my mother do the books at our family run vineyard in Rome. How did you get all this money?”

“It was all back pay.” Aaron clarified. “Calculated to the exact dollar amount that the Allied Command believed was owed to me for services rendered, even though I didn’t take the Oath of Enlistment until recently.”

“How was it calculated?” Lucchini asked, zipping the bag back up.

“Well, upon recruitment, there is a signing bonus. During training, I would be paid for every week at a standard rate, which I spent fourteen years doing. Then, I was activated to full combat status and deployed to an active zone of conflict. When it came to pay rate through rank, I nominally held the rank of wing commander and squadron leader at the same time. In addition, I also was the chief medical officer, the quartermaster general, and company chaplain. Take into account being in an active zone of conflict for over four years, and adjust for inflation, you come up with roughly three hundred and ninety six thousand four hundred and thirty seven dollars.” Aaron calculated.

Lucchini ran her right index finger on the table, using it as a makeshift paper, thinking out loud while doing so, visualizing the math. After a bit of mad scribbling, her strokes running across the grain, she stopped and nodded. “Yes that appears to be right.” she stated. She regarded him and added, “No
wonder you can afford a Gieves and Hawkes suit.” Francesca sat back down and leaned forward. “I’m sure that this isn’t the only money bag in your possession is it?”

“No it’s not.” Aaron replied. “I have various caches hidden all over Europe.”

“The products of finding things that mortified souls had no use of now doubt.” Lucchini observed.

Aaron breathed in deep and sighed. *Grim business, but we didn’t have a choice.* “If you’re implying that we took from the dead, I freely admit that we did,” he admitted, “but, I had strict rules concerning that. If the body was below ground in any way, it was off limits. No jewelry, no pictures, or other personal effects were to be taken, with watches the sole exception as we needed them to synchronize our attacks. Clothes were allowed as was ammunition, weapons, water, food, and medicine.”

“Then why take cash?” Lucchini pressed.

“There were times that we couldn’t salvage enough to make ends meet, so I went from place to place buying excess stock.” Aaron answered.

“Obviously using aliases to avoid a paper trail.” Francesca deduced. “Did you ever do business with less than scrupulous organizations?”

“Yes.” Aaron admitted shame faced. “We did do deals with pirates, war profiteers, and various criminal organizations with ties to the military. It wasn’t like we had much choice in the matter, I had to provide for the unit and they had what we needed to continue the fight. Yeah, I understand that such a thing is wrong, but given the context, I believe wholeheartedly that it was justified.”

“Whoa there.” Francesca commented, holding up a hand. “I didn’t attack your motives there Aaron. I agree with what you say and what you did. Like you said, you had to provide. I was only curious.” She put her hand down and added, “What do you plan on doing with the money?”

“Reinvest it into reconstruction projects when we start liberating the continent proper, starting with France. I made many friends over there and I want to give back more than I have so they can get their country back on it’s feet.” Aaron answered, glancing at Perrine, who despite stewing in her seat, gave a curt nod, or something akin to it.

Divale nodded back and, looking back at Lucchini inquired, “My turn?” Francesca smiled and leaned back in her chair, expecting anything. “Born and raised in Rome on a vineyard. Must have been an interesting life.” he stated.

“It certainly was,” Lucchini agreed, “for everyone had something to do which suited me just fine since I was the one with all the energy. I helped my mother mostly, tending to the day to day and my father served in the navy aboard the battleship Andrea Doria. I have a picture of them both.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a photograph, old, faded with age, and heavily creased and handed it over to Aaron. He took it carefully in his hands and saw a young Francesca Lucchini in a yellow sun dress, black hair down to her waist, betwixt a middle aged man and woman smiling at an unseen photographer lens, standing in front of a rather large winery of sun dried brick, flanked on either side by fields of wine grapes, maturing in the Roman sun. *A paradise, as if the pieces of Eden fell to earth and landed in one spot.*

“I have a picture to show you too.” Aaron replied, handing the photo back. He rummaged around inside of his formerly red shirt and whipped out a larger picture, folded many times and just as faded. Some of the edges were torn and, here and there, was a dried spot of blood or a burn mark. Lucchini took the picture in her hands and saw every member who served with Aaron, the date Christmas of
1939. Peering around the gathering, some standing, some kneeling, and many more sitting down, she saw Aaron, or what was Aaron, standing up in the back row with a faint smile, hair down to his shoulders like some wild man, pale as a ghost, dressed in a dark red shirt. *My God he looked so young back then, they all did.* Then she noticed very faint writing above all the heads of the men around the young Divale, little postscripts denoting name and the place and date of death. The roll of battles were astounding: Berlin, Kharkov, Warsaw, Abbeville, Vienna, just to name a few.

“So many names.” Lucchini uttered as she handed the picture back to Aaron.

*Oh yes Francesca. Many names belonging to old friends, old friends long gone, but never forgotten.* After placing it back into his inner shirt pocket, he asked, “Why did you leave that life behind?”

“When war broke out, I originally wanted to stay out of it.” Lucchini explained. “It was in Russia so I figured that it was too far away to do any harm to my country, but I was wrong. When that country fell and they started raiding the Eastern port cities, I joined up, to protect my people.”

“I’ll bet your energy helped some.” Aaron assumed.

“Both yes and no.” Lucchini admitted. “The top brass certainly appreciated my vigor, but it was my attitude that really set them against me. They constantly wrote in my files that I was too carefree, not serious enough to be a decent pilot, even after I wowed them in training. There was talk of expelling me when Mio came to where I was stationed in Rome and told them that she needed pilots to flesh out a squadron.”

“And the bastards were only to happy to oblige.” Aaron deduced, nodding.

“That was in the summer of ‘42, right around when Perrine was tapped and I have no regrets in doing it. I figured that if they didn’t want me, I’ll go where I am wanted.” Lucchini clarified. She then put on a sad face and looked away. “I miss my home, my family. The Neuroi even took the island of Delos where my family took me on numerous trips when I was younger. I hated not being there to do something about it, but my place is here. As they say, you made your bed, now lie in it.”

“Vedrai nuovamente l’Italia Francesca. (You will see Italy again Francesca)” Aaron proclaimed in a solemn voice. “Segna le mie parole (Mark my words).” He paused and then remarked, “For a person who claims to have limitless amounts of vitality, you certainly do sleep a lot.”

Lucchini put on a sour face. “It’s important to get your rest when you can Aaron, because I do not want to be like I was during The Blitz, being awake for almost days at a time, getting dark circles under my eyes so bad, that I would look like a robber from those old silent films.” she pointed out. “I was a living wreck by the time I got a proper sleep. Passed out for twelve hours.”

“You have to do what you have to do.” Aaron simply answered. “I’m no stranger to sleep deprivation.”

“One night stands don’t count.” Lucchini playfully shot back.

Aaron pantomimed getting shot in the heart, feigning pain. “Mi ferisci madonna. (You wound me)” he said with a grin. “So it is you four; Erica, Shirley, Eila, and you, the four horseman of pranks is it not?”

“For sure.” Lucchini said with a mischievous smile. “Feeling a little scared there Aaron?”

“More like anxious to get this ball rolling.” Aaron countered, rubbing his hands in expectation. “I love a little excitement in my life.”
“Better watch yourself,” Lucchini cautioned, “for we all know where you live.”

“Likewise.” Aaron quipped with a tiny laugh. “You see, I’m not locked in here with you all, you all are locked in here with me. So you watch yourselves.”

Lucchini turned around and looked at her partners in crime who all gave her looks of encouragement. She regarded Aaron and declared, “Looks like the games afoot Watson.”

“Let’s just hope you don’t run into Moriarty, Sherlock.” Aaron riposted, extending his hand. “Good talk Francesca and remember what I said.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Sanya gets to know the man within the monster and the value of generosity.

Chapter XV: The White Lily

Lieutenant Sanya Litvyak is one of the very few witches that can combat the Neuroi effectively at night due to her magic, which makes her the person to head up the night patrols. She takes her responsibility very seriously, fighting bravely yet patiently, and normally comes back fatigued and sleeps during the day. Her friendship with Eila goes back to when they first met and they haven’t so much as left each others sides since. Though she’s proven herself, she’s just like Lynette in that she has self confidence issues. Unlike Bishop however, hers stem from witnessing her country fall and her comrades die all around her. Many painful memories with this one, the kind that I can relate to so very well.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

Francesca shook Aaron’s hand and trotted back to the group with her chair. “Now we have Sanya.” Minna announced. The tiny Russian witch stood up and made to pick up her chair, but was politely shooed away by Eila who stood up and bade her to go on ahead while she herself picked it up. As Litvyak came closer, Aaron could see the tiredness in her eyes, a little red here and there, the faintest outlines of dark circles hidden by foundation. Looks to be a night patroller judging by that look of exhaustion. May be the only one that does it. Eila got to the table first, setting the seat down and departing with a kind smile. Sanya returned it with one of her own and a nod in thanks as she sat. She looked at Aaron with her blue green eyes and tilted her head as if listening to something before nodding in some sort of understanding and putting on a warm smile.

“You seem to have gotten over your fright from yesterday morning.” Aaron observed. “What changed since then?”

“Listening to you.” Sanya explained. “Hearing you talk. Lynette is right, you’re not as scary when one gets to know you. Guess you really can’t judge a book by it’s cover.”

“Drink?” Aaron offered, gesturing to the calvados bottle.

“No thanks,” Sanya politely declined, producing a hand sized bottle of vodka from her back pocket, “but would you like some?”

Aaron answered by picking up his glass and placing it towards her. Sanya unscrewed the cap and poured a small bit into his glass and her own. Placing the cap back on, she waited as Aaron conducted his ritual of remembrance and declared, “To new found understanding.”
“And to kindred spirits.” Aaron proclaimed, before the two glasses chimed together. He took a very small sip and let the vodka wash over his palate. *Oh this is wondrous. No burn at all and no impurities.* After he swallowed, he commented, “Just as amazing as the first day I tried it.”

“When was that?” Sanya asked after taking a bigger sip than Aaron did.

“It was about a week after our first combat.” Aaron recollected. “We came across a small Russian armored column that had been caught and wiped out. Naturally, we foraged for supplies and we kept on finding this stuff all over the place in large glass jugs or even jerry cans. At first, we didn’t know what the hell it was. It wasn’t food or fuel, but it had to have been important given the amounts that we were finding. I took it upon myself to see if indeed it was food and took a drink. When I didn’t experience any negative effects, I declared it to be safe to consume. Needless to say, some members partook a bit too much and got roaring drunk, myself included. Found out later that Russian tank crews normally used vodka to take the place of gasoline when that ran out.”

“Yes indeed.” Sanya agreed. “It’s a marvelous thing vodka. Keeps you warm and keeps you going, figuratively and literally.”

“So what do you want to know about me?” Aaron asked, leaning in, hands clasped.

“I want to know more about the man at rest.” Sanya expounded. “What he does when he isn’t out in the field, when he’s in his native habitat.”

“So being me so to speak?” Aaron asked. Sanya nodded and he continued, “Well, you all now know of my penchant for female company and combining good moods with good spirits, but I also have fondness for reading.”

“What kind of literature?” Sanya inquired.

“Political treatises, the old Greco-Roman classics, and a few philosophical texts as well. When it comes to fiction, I love Robert Louis Stevenson. Poetry not so much, but Edgar Allen Poe holds a special place in my heart. In theatrics, I enjoyed Shakespeare thoroughly.” Aaron answered. “I have a very large library of books stored at my cache, burrowed into the rock promontory of Pointe du Hoc, behind a very hidden secret entrance that only I can open and only I know. Every time that I had a spare moment, I would leave the chateau and spend hours and hours reading.”

“Philosophy you say? What kind?” Sanya pressed.

“A bit of Locke, Hobbes, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero, Goethe, Kant, Nietzsche, but the one I loved the most was Machiavelli.” Aaron clarified.


“Most do,” Aaron admitted, “but they do so because they see his work as a testament to his beliefs. I personally don’t think he truly espoused these ideas, but rather made a logical commentary on how states rose and fell, and what kinds of leaders and rulers gained and lost power through exhibiting various traits. To me, it was meant to demonstrate his knowledge in political matters to the Medici’s who exiled him from Florence, to try to get back into their good graces and have his banishment lifted. The Prince itself, his best known work, strikes a chord with me when it states, and I apologize if I’m paraphrasing a bit, that while a prince, a leader of men, should ideally have good qualities, it is sometimes necessary to go against the grain, to abandon them if doing so will do more good than harm. Looking back on my life, I can safely say that I’ve probably lived his vision to the fullest.”

“Yet you maintain your sense of self.” Sanya pointed out. “You don’t keep the mask on at all times,
knowing that doing so for too long will cause you to forget who you are.” She took another sip and signed in resignation. *I wish I had an ounce of that mental fortitude you possess. “Any other pastimes you enjoy?”*

Aaron though about it and answered, “I also enjoy people watching from time to time. During my stay in France, I spent a lot of time with various French Resistance cells, observing people, gauging behavior. Learned much about being human from them, how to act and react to various stimuli that I normally wouldn’t even bat an eye at. That alone probably caused me to recognize that I am still worth a damn to someone or something. Helped keep me going during those tough times.”

“Where they bad?” Sanya queried.

Aaron nodded. “It was bad on some days. I’ve seen grown men who were once good neighbors kill each other over cans of dog food, young girls no more than thirteen offer themselves in the hopes of getting something to eat or a bed to sleep in, and unwanted babies be…” His voice trailed as he winced, the pain of the memories flooding in, and he took another sip of his vodka. “It’s was medieval out there. Life was cheap, brutal, and short. All that cruelty, barbarity, and despair was oftentimes too difficult to take and I’ll admit that I’ve had thoughts of putting a pistol in my mouth and pulling the trigger.”

The room went quiet as Aaron’s statement echoed throughout the room. Sanya leaned in and put and hand on Aaron’s shoulder in support. “You’re still here.” she simply said.

“I know,” Aaron acknowledged, “but it wasn’t out of fear that stopped me. Most of it was the fact that I saw suicide as a cowards way out, the path of least resistance to end one’s problems. Another was that I was curious as to the future, what it held, whether we would win or not.” He looked up into Sanya’s eyes and added, “When I lost my comrades in Berlin, I lost my anchor and I was adrift emotionally. I never thought that I would find it again within the company of people, flesh and blood human beings just like yourself. Every kind word, every thank you, every meal I ate with them, every handshake, every kiss on the cheek was a tether that pulled me back. Christ I miss them so much.”

“Pomnite, my zdes’ dlya vas (Remember, we are here for you).” Sanya stated, giving his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Aaron placed his right hand over hers and patted it. “Spasibo (Thank you).”

Litvyak withdrew her hand and pondered out loud, “You speak many languages, meaning that you can grasp things very quickly. Any other innate talents?”

“I can dance believe or not.” Aaron said with a smile.

“Oh I believe it.” Sanya replied. “I saw you during the ground exercise when you popped out into the street out of that building into a fusillade. It was a thing to behold, they way you moved and spun wasn’t forced at all. It came naturally. Where did you learn that?”

“In France.” Aaron answered. “I was often invited to weddings where I was frequently called by the ladies to dance with them. In the beginning, I didn’t know how at all, but with patience, many trials, and many more errors, I learned the bal musette, albeit with my own style and flair.” He paused and looked at Sanya before asking, “Would you like to dance?”

Sanya was taken aback and placed her glass down. “Well, um…” she started hesitantly.

“Come on.” Aaron coaxed, getting up from his chair and extending his hand. “Nothing ventured,
Sanya thought about it. I never danced with anyone before save for my father. He seems to mean well and he’s right. Guess I’ll try it. Like a rookie snake handler reaching out at a king cobra, Litvyak took Aaron’s hand and got up from the table, letting him lead her to the center of the room, away from all obstacles. “Now, the beat will be a tad quick.” Aaron informed. “A fast tempo 1-2. Hold onto me close and watch my feet. Ready?” Sanya held Aaron close, her head almost level with his diaphragm, a comical byproduct of the size disparity between them and nodded. “Ok. Begin.” he instructed and he counted off the beat and moved around in a circle, holding her gently with one hand behind her back and the other cradling her other hand like a bird, her palm within his. The group watched them twirl around to the quick step as Aaron gave out instructions in a calm level voice. “Then shift, then shift, now turn, and slant. Very good. You’re getting it. Now a pirouette in place with a deep lunge dip.” At that point, he held her hand high and let her spin, timing his to hers in rhythm, before lunging forward like he was about to do a forward split, letting her arch her back gently into the dip and pulling her back up with care. He let her go and bowed. “Excellent footwork Sanya.” he congratulated, clapping his hands. The rest of the squadron followed suit and Sanya blushed, reacting with an impromptu curtsy.

The two returned to their seats as the applause died down. “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” he conjectured with a grin, taking a drink.

“No it wasn’t.” Sanya admitted, copying Aaron’s movement with her glass. “That was actually enjoyable. No wonder the ladies wanted to dance with you.”

*Among other things. “What else?”*

Sanya furrowed her brow and her eyes lit up when she recalled something of worth. “You can dance, but can you sing?” she wondered.

“Oh God no.” Aaron immediately responded. As soon as he uttered that statement, Minna held the wierding stone in front of her and shook it. *Ah fucking damn it.* “Well, maybe a little,” he grumbled reluctantly, “but I’m not that good.”

“I would like to hear you try.” Sanya pleaded. “You can do voices and emit a powerful scream, so there has to be something. Please, for me?”

Aaron looked at Sanya’s eyes and saw the imploring look. His resolve crumbled into dust like a foot passing through a parched field of dead grass in a drought. *I can’t refuse that look and she fucking knows it too.* He held up his hands in surrender and stated, “I’ll do it, but you must sing with me.”

“That’s no problem.” Sanya said. “I’ve a decent singing voice and Minna during her off time has tutored me.”

Aaron gave Minna a glance, one that she knew was a question in disguise and answered, “Before the war, I was classically trained at the Mozarteum in Salzburg.” *Holy shit. That’s the big time. She must be amazing at singing then.*

“Aria? What will we sing?” Sanya asked, curiosity at its peak.

“We will sing something that I heard on the radio when me and my men were freed. An operatic aria that filled me with joy when I heard it for the first time.” Aaron vaguely illuminated. He gestured to the center of the room again and both he and Sanya got up from their seats. When the pair had settled in front of the group, Aaron turned and genuflected to Sanya and uttered, “Il mio nome non sai. (My name you do not know)” Minna noticeably shifted in her seat, the legs grinding on the floor as she
placed her right hand to the side of her face. *Puccini’s Nessun Dorma, and as a duet! Now this is certainly interesting.* “I’ll lead with the first stanza, then you will lead the second, and we both combine at the final after the lamentation of the women.” Aaron informed as he regarded Sanya. He closed his eyes, gathering his thoughts before opening them and his mouth, singing the opening words. From the start, Aaron held the entire room captive from the first two words. All displayed varying degrees of shock and awe as his voice rose and fell to the aria. At the conclusion of his part, he stepped back and away, allowing Sanya to take center stage. Aaron stood spellbound as Litvyak sang and he found it hard to restrain his tears as she did the song justice. Minna watched on, shaking her head as the two came together and complemented each other with the grace and style of seasoned performers. Her heart skipped a beat and her breath was taken away as the final note, a sustained B4 into an even longer sustained A4, was struck dead on by both, causing her to lift her goose bumped arms up in sheer amazement.

As the final note ended, new ones took its place, to that of resounding applause, cheers, and whistles. Lucchini stood in her seat and called out, “Magnifico! Stupendo! (Magnificent! Stupendous!)” Lucretia wept with joy and clapped enthusiastically. Sanya and Aaron were all smiles as they exchanged curtseys and bowed to the group.

The commotion died when Minna rose from her seat. For a good bit she tried to speak, yet no words came out, her mouth gaping out vowels and consonants that refused to come. Finally, after what seemed like years of trying, she forced out, “What can I say, except that that was an excellent rendition of Puccini.” She looked at Aaron and pointed at him. “Your voice is a high baritone, going from A2 to C5. That’s three octaves and I counted nine semitones. Normally, Nessun Dorma is sung in tenor, but you sang it within your tone very well. It created something that I find quite interesting and which gave me goose bumps. In the play, Calaf sings this aria in a triumphant way, but you brought a sense of sadness to it, as if he realized that his goal would have dire consequences for those who’d fail the cruel princess. You humanized that aria and character and, I think, really displayed the conflicting emotions that any person in that situation would have. Splendid job. With a little schooling yourself, you could be one of the more prolific baritones in the world.” She looked at Sanya and smiled. “As for you, you complemented and kept the tone that Aaron set, projecting the same moroseness. Just marvelous, marvelous. I’ve taught you well.”

The two nodded silently in thanks and returned to their seats. “An extraordinary individual.” Sanya muttered, taking a drink. “You can dance and sing in equal measure.”

“What can I say,” Aaron quipped as he himself took a long drink of vodka, “except that I paint a pretty picture of humanity.”

“Speaking of which.” Sanya began as she turned around and motioned to Eila to come over. For her part, Eila picked up a white sheet covered object lying under her chair and walked over with it, taking great care with whatever lay underneath the cloth. She handed it over to Sanya who removed the shroud, revealing a painting of a blue sky with white puffy clouds so lifelike, that it looked like she was holding a piece of it in her tiny pale hands. “You can paint too?”

Aaron looked over the work, his work and got lost in his memories. *I haven’t seen this artwork in almost two years. “Yes that is mine.”* he answered. “The story regarding it is a little rough but, I’ll tell it. It was in late winter of ’41 and I was leading some of my men out on a foraging run through the upper portions of Austria, south of Prague if I recall correctly. It snowed all day and there was precious little to find. We eventually came across a deserted village that had been evacuated a few days earlier. Most of it had been looted by vagabonds and such, but still we scoured that area from ceiling tile to floor grouting. Splitting up, I walked into a small building and saw that it had once been an art dealership. Paintings and statues lined all four walls with placards denoting the artist and the title it bore. A few of them were slashed and destroyed, burned for firewood by robbers. Found
some money in a large safe that I cracked open and as I turned to leave, I noticed that there was a secret door underneath it, leading down into a cellar of some sort. I move the safe and pull up the latched portal, revealing a small staircase of rough hewn wood. I travel down, gun out, distrustful of such things panning out in such a convenient manner. The floor was dirt, tamped down so much that it felt like a hard packed clay tennis court and I see this easel with a clean white portrait board in the corner, along with a collection of oil paints with a palette. I still don’t know why to this day, but I had the urge to put color to canvas, to create something of meaning to me. Knowing that I didn’t have much time, I decided to go for something simple: a skyscape. Pulled out every shade of blue there was and started painting. Didn’t take long to finish, probably like seven or eight minutes. I had originally intended to leave it there, but I kept it ever since, feeling that maybe it would help me out someday in reminding me of what I could one day have again.”

Seven or eight minutes and he creates a masterpiece! Does he even know what he has done?

“Aaron,” Sanya gasped, pointing at the canvas, “this is beautiful. No other artist has done this before. This is so lifelike that I feel like I could reach inside and feel the wind on my fingertips.” She turned it over in her hands and looked at it, getting lost in the realism. “What do you call this?” she asked.

“Freedom.” Aaron simply said.

Sanya then regarded Aaron and demanded, “How much for the painting?”

Aaron cocked an eyebrow. “You serious?” he queried.

“Absolutely.” Sanya returned with emphasis. “This is a work that deserves to be kept and cared for, not lost and forgotten in a box or some secret hideaway. Name your price.”

“Why do you want it?” Aaron inquired.

Sanya paused and replied with sadness, “It reminds me of the skies of Russia, my Russia, skies that I haven’t seen in many years, except from a distance that refuses to do them justice. Whatever price you set for this, I will gladly pay it and more.” Aaron sat there with the glass of vodka in his hand for a brief second before waving his hand, a flick of the wrist that plainly read, ‘go ahead and take it’. Litvyak’s jaw dropped and she stammered, dumbfounded beyond belief, “I-I can h-have this? For f-free?”

“If it means that much to you and gives you comfort and solace, go right ahead.” Aaron assured. Sanya, overcome with such a selfless act of generosity, started to cry, Eila immediately holding her as she sobbed. She broke free of her wingman’s embrace after a few seconds and placed the painting in the table so that her tears wouldn’t mar it’s beauty. Sanya looked up at Aaron and got up from her seat, practically running towards him, arms extended. “Spasibo. (Thank you)” she choked as she hugged him tight like a python strangling the life out of its next meal.

“V lyuboy moment. (Anytime)” Aaron replied, holding her firmly. He let her cry into his shoulder for almost a full minute before letting her go, Sanya gesturing to Eila to take the painting back with her. Nodding at Sanya and giving an approving look to Aaron, she gingerly picked up the canvas and walked back. “Any more questions for me?” he asked. Litvyak, after drying her eyes, shook her head no, and Aaron went on the offensive, stating, “You have a love for beautiful things and appreciate the finer things in life.”

“That was due in no small part to my father.” Sanya explained. “He was a composer of some renown and he taught me how to sing and play the piano, even going so far as to write a song just for me that he played on my birthday.”

“Where were they when the invasion happened?” Aaron asked as he proceeded to quaff the rest of
the vodka.

“Stalingrad.” Sanya answered and the moment she uttered the name of the city, Aaron choked on the alcohol, coughing up a storm in apparent surprise. “Are you alright?” she asked with concern.

After clearing his throat, Aaron looked at her and reiterated, “Stalingrad?”

“Yes, why?” Sanya queried.

Aaron panned his vision all around his room and turned his head this way and that, resembling a vigilant meerkat protecting the gang. He licked his lips and regarded Sanya warily. “It is gone you know, a hive was there.” he stated.

“I know that.” Sanya replied, puzzled. “It was destroyed by my countrymen and it wiped out the city with it’s blast radius. The same thing occurred in Leningrad.”

“The Russians did not destroy those hives,” Aaron illuminated, “we did.”

The room went silent and Sanya spun around and looked at Minna for clarification. Minna, just as shocked as the rest shook her head no. Tentatively, Sanya looked back at Aaron with wide eyes and trembling hands, as if the fright she felt when she first met him had returned with a vengeance. “How did you manage that?” she uttered in a low voice.

“After our first combat,” Aaron expounded, “we discovered that the Neuroi were susceptible to hierarchical apoptosis. When we killed bigger units, several disintegrated without having been hit by anything.”

“Apoptosis?” Sanya inquired, clearly not understanding a word that Aaron was saying. “Are you saying that there are alive?”

“No,” Aaron clarified, “you have it backwards. You see, in the early days of the war, the Neuroi liked to deploy vast numbers of Legionary’s whose job it was to overwhelm through sheer force of numbers. How they accomplished it was by having the main hive that appeared over Moscow divide twice, forming two more hives that went north and south to Leningrad and Stalingrad respectfully. Those two then copied the strategy, creating armies of lesser units, but in doing so, left them vulnerable. Every time they created a unit, they lost a piece of themselves, a layer of protection for their core. As they died off, a part of them came back to the hive, but in a lesser quantity than it started out as. When we found that little piece of information, we decided, why waste ammunition on the small fry when we instead could for the big prize and still have the same effect? I split my boys up, with me going south and the rest going north, laying in wait for an ambush. We dug ourselves into the third reserve trench lines within the city, literally. It was a hard go as the winter had frozen the earth so much that it felt like were digging into concrete with toothpicks. The cold was unlike anything I’ve felt since, a harsh freeze that split skin and froze blood. When the work details came back to warm themselves by the fire, they cried tears of pain. Quite of few of them lost fingers and toes due to frostbite.

After we placed our last spider hole, the enemy showed up, tramping through, a sea of black and red marching like the sound of thunder. We sat there, in groups of two and three as they walked over us. Not a single peep was made, for if they discovered us at any point during those crucial moments, the ambush would’ve turned into a massacre. This lasted for over half a hour, until one of our lookouts spotted the hive, the normally black carapace stripped away, leaving a bulbous baleful red core the size of a small city itself. Patiently we waited until it bore down right on top of us. That’s when we sprung loose, erupting like angelic geysers into the air, firing at it with everything we had. We had caught it flatfooted and it screamed out a cry for aid, but it was too late. Our determination and
precision was too much to overcome as we sailed up into the air and down, unleashing firepower that could wipe an army in seconds onto one small spot, cracking the core. As it died, we sped away, fearful at what destruction such a demise would bring. I turned around at the last second to verify the kill, seeing it explode into an ocean of white shards that flattened the city into nothing, the shockwave feeling like an earthquake from the Old Testament though I was miles away from the epicenter.” He looked at Sanya who was taking the news of the death of her home stoically. “I never forgave myself for that decision. If I knew what would happen, I would’ve set up shop further out, to preserve the city. Mark my words Sanya, when this war is over, I will return to Stalingrad and raise it from the ashes, brick by brick, plank by plank, with my own bare hands if need be. That city was more than just a place for people, it was a symbol. It bore the name of Stalin himself and you can bet your life that he would never let such an insult to his name stand. It will be rebuilt, I promise you that."

*That may be Aaron, but us Russians are like the Tartars of old, never settling down for long if things got to hard or if they could find better use of their time and energy elsewhere. It would a miracle for that to happen.* Sanya then took a sip of vodka and sighed. “You had no way of knowing what would happen Aaron. I don’t blame you at all.”

“Where did they evacuate to?” Aaron pressed, returning to the topic at hand. “Did they go west and south to the Balkans or north and west to Scandinavia?”

“They went south, looping around the Caspian Sea, passing through Persian lands before arriving behind the Urals.” Sanya explained.

Aaron thought about the route. *Long and circuitous. Very dangerous. They only managed such a march because they struck a deal with them. The Persians gave them access and protection in exchange for the complete erasure of their debts to Russia. Fair deal in retrospect, but they no idea just how many flooded down there, how hard their infrastructure would be taxed and stretched. Millions died along the way, probably millions more when they arrived. “Do you know if they made it?” he asked her.*

“I’ve had no word at all.” Sanya replied, her sadness coming back. “Even with my magic, I can’t pick up anything behind that iron curtain they call the Urals. I’m scheduled to get an upgraded radio, one with increased range and power very shortly. Maybe, just maybe, I’ll find something, anything that can tell me that my parents are alive.”

“Vsedga yest’shans Sanya. Khranite veru, i vy budete voznazgrazhdeny (There is always a chance Sanya. Keep faith and you will be rewarded).” Aaron assured. *There’s not much I can do except encourage her to be strong. Lynette just needed a push in the right direction, to actually see that her labors were doing something of worth. With Sanya, the burden of losing one’s country and possibly her family can only be exorcised with an affirmation of denial or life of her loved ones. God, grant her and hers mercy. “Where and when did you meet Eila?”*

“We met up in Finland as I was helping protect the remains of the Russian leadership as they evacuated. Due to a lack of pilots, she was transferred to us temporarily, tapped to be a night witch, and we formed an ad hoc pairing for a time. Worked out pretty well and she ended up staying on longer than anticipated, for which I’m eternally thankful, for we were harried every step of the way, and we became close friends. When we faced the end in Norway and Mio asked for Eila to join the 501st, I asked to go as well, to thank her for her service to my country and to preserve our bond.” Sanya answered.

“Very noble of you.” Aaron observed, nodding and extending his hand. “Good talk Sanya and keep you chin up.”
Chapter XVI: The Devil’s Advocate

Out of all the witches in the 501st, Captain Gertrude Barkhorn and I have the most in common. We both were in the armed forces before the war started, albeit under different circumstances, efficient administrators and archivists, have a mean temper, and fought east to west. Also, like me, she hides a great deal of pain, but unlike me, she holds it in instead of letting it out, like she’s constantly on alert, on guard. I did that many times before and it doesn’t end very well, so I hope that whatever is preventing her from expressing her true colors and feelings goes away, or else it could get her seriously injured or even killed.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

Minna watched Sanya shake Aaron’s hand and walk back to the group. She stopped and turned around with the intention of reclaiming the chair, but Aaron stood up and waved her off politely, picking up the seat and walking it back himself. An actual gentleman in this day and age in the guise of a warlock. He’s just full of surprises isn’t he? The moment Aaron set the chair down and Sanya collapsed into the seat gently did Wilcke regard Gertrude and utter, “Have at Trude.” Her comment created a stir as Aaron shifted his stance so hard that he slid away from the group, soles grinding across the concrete, and brought his hands and arms into a relaxed fighting stance, his left in front and the right in the rear, the fists half balled up. The entire squadron looked at him in puzzlement, the tension rising with every second that passed. As if awoken from some vivid daydream Aaron shook his head violently and walked away at the quick step towards his seat.

“Sorry about that folks.” Aaron apologized as he sat back down rubbing his face with his left hand. “In the old unit, we said that phrase when we were about to spar in practice.”

“Did you ever take part in them?” Gertrude asked as she got up with her chair and walked towards him, the effects of his kick long since healed. “You probably didn’t judging by the way you fought me yesterday. Seemed like you were a little slow, like an old man.”

Aaron cocked an eyebrow and countered, “I’m sorry that three months of fighting mortals, followed by three more of confinement made the combat a little dull, but I was not slow enough to kick you square in the groin so hard that your future child will feel the pain.”

Gertrude grinned as she sat down the chair and herself. “I don’t plan on having any so you probably did me a favor. How are you feeling?”
“Peachy.” Aaron replied. “You always talk this tough?”

“I walk my talk Aaron, same as you.” Gertrude pointed out. “Always have and will.” Barkhorn paused and sighed, as if coming to grips with a fact that she didn’t like acknowledging. “I’ll admit that you were right that I should consider myself lucky that magic wasn’t used in our bout together. If you did then what you did in that ground exercise-”

“You would’ve had no chance in hell.” Aaron finished. “One on one, I’m more than an uneven match for any one of you. And, to answer your question from earlier, no, I didn’t take part in the sparring as I felt it would a bad thing if the chief medical officer got injured. However, I did take part in inter-squadron duels, especially when pride was on the line. Was pretty good at it too. Never lost a match, technically.”

Gertrude cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Out of all the members of my unit,” Aaron recollected, “only one ever stood toe to toe with me and lasted longer than four rounds: David Rose, the leader of the First Coterie, the Dreadnoughts. If it wasn’t for me, that man would’ve been in command, and I would’ve no qualms about following him into the jaws of Hell if need be. He had it all, the physique, the tactical acumen, the voice, the charisma, the perfect soldier, the best I had ever commanded. One day, towards the end of our life as a fighting force, we decided to square off, to settle once and for all who had the best hand to hand skills in the unit, for he too was undefeated. Went ten five minute rounds, with no one gaining a clear advantage. Though I had speed and agility, he had the power and reach. It would’ve gone to the eleventh round, but the enemy had other plans in mind. He was a good friend, almost like a brother, watching my back even in the worst of times, a keeper of my conscience.”

A bright light and the air is filled with smoke and the heat of flames. Buildings blaze away like funeral pyres and the sounds of screaming people could be heard through the hot winds that blew through the gutted, dying city of Berlin. Vision is on a face, one that was youthful and strong, once full of life, now pale and grey with death, eyes glazed and deadlocked to the heavens being hung in black by the embers of destruction and the hell of war. A hand reaches out and closes the eyes reverently, and picks up a large bomb, easily two hundred pounds worth of metal and explosives as if it weighed nothing. It runs over the tip, checking for the delay fuse, making sure that it wasn’t damaged. Seemingly satisfied, vision looks away from the bomb and the feeling of a back against a rough brick wall overtakes the senses. Peering around a corner, the sight of a ruined street greets the eyes, an avenue of chaos replete with bodies, mangled by the enemy guns, burned black by fire, and crushed to pulp. Vehicles lay buried under rubble or bubble like swamp gas from being slagged. Craters as big as medium tanks pockmark the way down, bits of the earth beneath the asphalt now vitrified. Suddenly a building falls, and understanding sets in. A mind thinks about the pursuit of the Neuroi, the methodical march onwards towards finishing the job. An armored group of Strategos comes into being, panning left and right with their cannons. Arms heft the bomb and a plan is hatched, a desperate ploy to make the imminent sacrifice worthwhile. Thoughts scream violence and retribution for years of pain and blood. Memories of all those that died at their hands flood in, adding to the rage that was building like a crescendo. Muscles tense for the sprint, one that is calculated to be a quarter mile down.

The enemy turn and advance down the street towards the individual. The moment of action had come. Then, another arm grabs the bomb, arresting forward movement. A head whips around and a face is seen, a face of a proud warrior, noble, charismatic, and patrician. The dull blue eyes are full of concern, the short curly blond tresses singed and dirty reflect like gold veins in torchlight, the scars on the cheeks from years of battle evident, especially the one near the right side, a deep gouge that curved to the edge of the lip, permanently making it seem like the man was perpetually sneering. “No Aaron. It is not your time, for I’ve had a vision.” he says with a gravelly voice.
“To hell with your visions David!” Aaron screams. “You know I don’t believe in fate! It’s a load of shit, all of it! Now, as soon as I take this group out, get into the air and search for more targets! Die well my brother!”

The grip on the bomb refuses to relent. “You will make your way to a land far away from here, to an stone nest a top a white cliff where an eyrie of eleven eagles await. There, you will play another part in the events that are yet to unfold.” David explained.

“Are you daft man!?” Aaron violently retorts, gesturing with his free hand to the city, David, and the dead man near his feet. “My place isn’t in some far off land, fighting on a distant battlefield! My place is here, in this city, with you, with them! I’ve suffered for far too long and endured too much pain to live any longer! I’m used up and we both fucking know it, a king of nothing! You will not rob me of my just death David, I’ve earned this peace!”

A knee comes up from David, quick as a flash and connects. The wind rushes out of Aarons lungs and he collapses into a heap, the dust and debris on the ground billowing away from the impact of his hard landing. “I’m not robbing you,” David assures, picking up the explosive, “I’m saving you.”

Son of a bitch. You were right David. But why did you do it? What sense did it make to you to take my place?

Aaron looked up at Gertrude who was eyeing him with a confused look. Shaking his head hard to and fro, Divale apologized, “Sorry Gertrude, I got lost in my thoughts.”

Nodding in understanding Gertrude leaned in and said, “I do disagree that I wouldn’t have won. Every Goliath has its David.”

“But Goliath didn’t know David’s name.” Aaron returned. Barkhorn furrowed her brow and Divale continued, “You see, a name isn’t just a title; it’s symbolic of a person’s soul, a reflection of their power. To know a name is to not only know that power, but how to counter and defeat it. For example.” He turned in his seat and looked at the can of nails near the packing crate. “Let us say that that can of nails has a name, call him Bob. Bob here is about to undergo something that I hope to never again do to a living being.” He paused and stared intently at the inanimate object before muttering, “Capio Bob.” As if his hand became a high powered magnet, the can and all of its contents flew to the table landing in the center with a loud clang. Casually, he placed his right hand over it, palm hovering a few inches above the tallest nail head, and stated with a deep other worldly voice, “Mortem Bob.” Gertrude watched in shock and awe as the nail filled can simply disintegrated into a small pile of ashes. Aaron took the pile into his right hand, clasping the remains, and brought his fist to his face. Turning his head away from her and the group, he opened his palm and blew on the ashes, sending them on whatever journey he had intended for them. He then looked at Gertrude with a cold stare. “This was one of many takedown tactics we adopted after we saw the Striker used at Warsaw, and as you can see, it works very well.”

“Impressive,” Gertrude spoke up, recovering from the sight. “but a can doesn’t fight back.”

A brave face despite fear. I respect that Gertrude. “Speaking of back, let’s get to where we need to go.” Aaron proclaimed. “What do you want to know about me?”

“After destroying the two minor hives around Stalingrad and Leningrad, why didn’t you combine your forces and attack the last hive over Moscow? You could’ve ended the war, saved Europe.” Gertrude asked.

“Though the Moscow hive took great losses to its armor, it still had a sizeable portion left protecting the core. Moreover, the two hives, the fully exposed hives, took a massive amount of firepower to bring down. Over 70% of our total ammunition was used in those two engagements alone. Even after factoring in the use of magic, our odds of taking down that last target were less than .4%, with
casualty figures upwards and onwards of 99.5%.” Aaron explained. “We may be warlocks, but we weren’t invincible nor was our magic infinite. It pains me to say this, but given what we could do at that moment, we gave it our best shot, and I’m sorry if you find that excuse wanting, but that’s the cold hard truth Gertrude.”

Barkhorn swallowed deep and grudgingly nodded. *The stars might lie, but the numbers never do. He made the right call.* “You mentioned shields during Yoshika’s turn. If you have them, why didn’t you raise them during the exercises yesterday?

Aaron answered, “My layers of protection only get worn down if they take damage that would be lethal. If I had used my shields, the shots would’ve bounced off and have no effect for the entire duration of the exercises. It would be like trying to stab a charging rhino with a goldfish, I’d be invulnerable. If you folks truly wished to get an accurate gauge of my abilities, I had to turn them off and take the punishment. As you saw when I took off my shirt before our fight, I have shrugged off and taken a great deal of it, having been shot, stabbed, burned, partially eviscerated, impaled, crushed, gored, poisoned, choked, and recently threatened with castration by gunshot, courtesy of Perrine.”

“So you dumbed yourself down to our level and took it on the chin.” Gertrude surmised. “That takes balls.”

“Biggest ones in the room.” Aaron boasted. He thought about it and gestured to Yoshika. “Well, maybe the second biggest.”

“Nothing good comes from being humble all the time Aaron.” Gertrude warned. “It’s perfectly fine to be proud of your accomplishments as long as you can separate the ego from the man. Speaking of which.” At that point, Barkhorn pulled out a small piece of paper that was folded many times. After unfolding the parchment and placing it on the table, Aaron could see a vast map of Europe, something that could belong on a general’s grand strategy wall. She then produced a red pencil and offered it to him with her right hand. “Where exactly were you and your men fighting?”

Aaron plucked the writing instrument from Gertrude’s right hand and started to make a mark a small ways south of the Karelian Isthmus and then drew a line that diverged into two groups with one at Leningrad and Stalingrad and began. “After the hive battles, we assumed that the Russians would swoop right in and go back on the offensive, to retake the ground that was lost. Our wishful thinking backfired when, after we managed to crack their military codes, that we discovered just how mauled they were. Four million dead with the first four months, and that was just military personnel. If you add civilian deaths to it, the numbers go well over ten million. Unbelievable casualties. So, we regrouped at Stalingrad.”

Aaron then drew a line from Leningrad and moved it towards the named city on the map and continued, “Knowing that we would receive little to no help on our end of things up north given the evacuations and relatively weak resistance, we set up fighting retreats all along the southern parts of Russia like Kharkov, Smolensk, Kursk, Minsk, Kiev, Sevastopol, and Odessa, wherever the remains of the Russian military formed up. Sevastopol was really bad. The Russian Black Sea Fleet was on a military exercise in the Pacific when the war broke out, clear on the other side of the world. They steamed at full speed back to their home port in an effort to defend the city that they knew was going to be attacked, the sole major point of entry into the Mediterranean. By the time they got there, the enemy had half of the port taken. Overcome with indignation, the admiral of the fleet took command of the defense, ordering all the ground and air forces out, while he covered their retreats. Magnificent valor on his part, and they held the line with what ammunition they had for a good nine hours, but in a battle like that, only one thing matters, numbers and mobility, and they had none to match the Neuroi. They were picked off, one by one, and sent to the bottom. We set out in patrol boats and
pulled out survivors from the water during that scrum. Just couldn’t leave them there to drown, not after what they did. Saved quite a few, but not all of them. Well over seven thousand drowned or were executed by the enemy air units. Some nights, I swear I can still hear their screams, see the oil slicks on my hands, no matter how many times I wash them.

After that, we set up a defensive line along the Carpathians, defending the river valleys leading into the Balkans. The key was Varna, if that fell, the way was open. Greece and her sister states wouldn’t last long. Repelled wave after wave of attacks, like Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans holding back the entirety of the Persian war machine. Like them, we also cracked in the end, and the Neuroi swarmed into Greece and rolled over them. Thessaloniki, Athens, Crete, and Dubrovnik all fell within a month and our position grew more precarious, our lines stretched out to the point of breaking, but we held firm. With Greece under their feet, the Neuroi launched an offensive into Romania, Poland, the Baltic States. You know about Polesti, but we also fought at Warsaw, Lodz, and Danzig.”

“That was when you saw the Strikers in action wasn’t it?” Gertrude asked.

Aaron nodded in the affirmative. “It was truly a sight to behold, the way those women, some younger than I was back then, took to the skies and fought bravely, defending their country.” he stated, looking this way and that, not looking at Gertrude at all, lost in the past. “They were outgunned, outnumbered, out positioned, and outpaced, but they fought like demons, everyone of them, just like us. And like us, they died in droves. We saw some of their broken bodies as we fought. Even in death, they had the look of defiance. Witches earned our respect that day and I made it known that there would be no scavenging witch dead, their remains were to be gathered up and buried with full rites. We honored them like one of our own.”

“Did you extend the same courtesy to land witches?” Gertrude pressed.

“When we found them, yes.” Aaron expounded. “Most of the time, we kept well away from them, especially in the early days, lest we run into one like Mio who could see the unseen and find us.”

“You did a very good thing for them Aaron.” Gertrude acknowledged, extending her hand. “I admire you for it, not just because you treated them with respect and dignity, but accepted them as equals to you and yours.”

“A warrior is a warrior,” Aaron simply returned, shaking Gertrude’s hand, “no matter who you are. All are worthy of respect. The rest of the battle of Warsaw was an absolute nightmare of urban warfare. We fought in the air and ground once the witches pulled out. It was brutal, with the combat fast and fierce as we moved blocked by block, street by street, house by house, even room by room. We eventually had to escape through the sewers, where many of the civilians and soldiery had fallen back to, fighting off the Neuroi in one sided skirmishes. Pure hell, or as close as you could get. Some time after Warsaw, witches took to the skies in greater numbers, giving us some modicum of breathing room, but it didn’t last long. The Carpathian line cracked and the enemy spilled into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Worst fucking ground I ever had the displeasure of fighting on. More mountains, hills, and woods than you could shake a stick at. Great for defensive warfare, but once the enemy took those positions, it was just as hard for us to dig them out. Hellacious body counts. We had fluid combats in an around Pecs, Debrecen, Sopron, Budapest, and Bratislava followed by one of the worst battles that I had fought at that time: Lake Balaton. The enemy, being a bit careless at this point, had split their forces and went around the lake into two groups. We decided, why spilt ourselves up and go around in circles like a dog chasing its tail, when we could group up and go across the water and hit both at the same time? So, flying and fighting on the surface of the water, we stalemated their advance for several hours until they got the bright idea of boiling out the lake through air attack, creating superheated steam that shrouded the area like a fog. In the end, there was
so much blood in the water that the crater that resulted was a vibrant fire engine red. Undaunted, we continued to fight until we heard planes flying overhead. It was a Hungarian bomber group with escorts, lining up for a run. We broke ranks and ran, but the damage couldn’t be avoided fully. They dropped their bombs right on top of us, slamming into the glass bowl of a crater, sending whirlwinds of glass shards everywhere. Those that didn’t get out in time were obliterated in an instant, becoming red mist. One of my men in front of me got hit full on and simply disappeared into goo, a slick of red that I slipped on and fell into, covering my body with a sickeningly warm paste that had once been a comrade in arms.” Aaron rubbed his face and looked at Gertrude. “That wasn’t the worst part though. That battle took place on Thanksgiving of ‘41 and some of our boys came across a cannery during a supply run later on that day. After parceling out the spoils, I crack open my can and find that it was cranberry sauce. I start crying uncontrollably as I dig in with my hands, I had no spoon on me at the time, and shove it in my mouth. I puke several times when I remembered how that man died, but I still kept on eating and sobbing. Can’t ever look at cranberry sauce the same way again. A happy Thanksgiving that was.

Austria was more forgiving than Hungary as the Germans came down in full force to defend it, France and Italy following a bit later. Eight months went by, as did the battles of Salzburg, Linz, Graz, Innsbruck, Steyr, and Vienna. I’ve seen many great cities in my time, and seen many more fall, but the loss of Vienna galled me like none other. I can’t remember how many times I cried when I saw it being destroyed, centuries of culture ground to dust. A piece of me died that day, and I nearly died as well. I was in a tank factory, looking for explosives to make traps with, when the Neuroi attacked. A beam hit a munitions cache and I took a screwdriver into the side. A tank chassis suspended above me on chains came loose and fell. One of my men pushed me away at the last moment, taking the hit that would’ve surely ended my life. Recovered from my injury and got all my wounded out in an undamaged and fully gassed transport that I managed to find. Put the pedal to the metal and didn’t stop until we reached the German border. Of course, no sooner did we get there that we found out that the Neuroi were launching a major offensive into Germany. The northern parts around Berlin were suppressed so no reinforcements could get down and aid the southern areas. We could do nothing for Prague as our line of advance was cut off, so we fought at Augsburg, Wurzburg, Munich and Stuttgart. It was touch and go for a long while until the enemy hit Strasbourg and the Maginot Line head on.

I will say that the French defended their lands valiantly during the winter of ‘42, enabling Germany to rotate units in, Great Britain and America to send whatever aid they could, and getting most of their fleet out of Toulon. Unfortunately, the enemy learned from its mistake and went further south along the Italian Alps, driving into the soft underbelly of French resistance. With so much focus on the middle of the Maginot Line, there were little to no defenses. Nice, Toulon, Marseilles, Toulouse, and Bordeaux came and went. Every battle happened so fast that it was a blur. Once they flanked the Maginot Line from the south, the Neuroi poured into it, rolling it up, seeking to essentially cut France completely off. The French High Command then ordered the evacuation of the defenses and blew all the main tunnels out, caving in the majority of the subsidiary tunnels due to sheer proximity, rendering enemy movements null and void, saving themselves precious time. Regardless, the end came pretty quick after that, with Lyons, Falaise, Nantes, Orleans, Metz, Amiens, and Abbeville. Berlin followed a few weeks later, and well, here we are.”

Gertrude just shook her head as she tallied up the engagements. *Forty five major battles and numerous skirmishes over the span of three and a half years, and he survived every single one of them in more or less one piece. His experience must be in the top echelons of the entire Allied army, if not the top.* “What was you kill count before you came over here?” she asked.

Aaron uttered a low whistle. “I’ll have to consult my diary on that one.” he admitted. “I’m pretty sure the number is high because, at the end of it all when I was in France, I compiled the final combat ratios for the unit. For every one of us they shot down, we killed over sixty thousand.”
Gertrude’s mouth opened so wide you could drive a tank through it. “Sixty thousand?!” she exclaimed incredulously. “Under normal circumstances that would almost guarantee victory!”

Aaron sighed and looked at her with a pained expression. “I know.” he stated. “Anything else you want to know?”

Gertrude reached into the inner pocket of her coat and pulled out a folded piece of dirty off white cloth. She placed it on the table and gently pushed it towards Aaron. With care, he opened the material, little more than a rag and spread it out, revealing three black triangles arranged in an arrow. A series of rusted iron loops lined the left edge, clearly used as standard fasteners. It was old and smelled of smoke and blood, even from a good distance away. Some parts were burned, pockmarked with dirt and oil, torn from bullets and shrapnel, frayed with use and the weather conditions. Aaron ran his right hand over the fabric, feeling every stitch, every tear, thinking, remembering. “Was this your standard?” Barkhorn asked after a few seconds passed.

Aaron swallowed deep and nodded. “We all had a hand in making this and it was carried by many great soldiers. The pole was a oak staff with several holes drilled into it, the names of it's bearers carved into it.” At that point, he gestured to the rings. “It has been lifted and carried over countless battlefields of horrendous carnage, endured and saw all the hell war brings. Despite everything that happened, even the pole itself being torched to cinders in Berlin, this flag never hit the ground. One of my most treasured possessions, one of very few that I managed to keep with me over the years.” He folded up the standard and moved it over to the side of the table. Assuming that it was his turn, he opened his mouth to speak, but stopped as he gazed at the map of Europe and squinted his eyes. Now focused, he could see small indentations over certain places in the northern areas of Europe. Curious, he placed both hands over the map and uttered, “Revelare.” White light trickled out of his outstretched fingertips like salt from a shaker and illuminated hidden penciled lines, circling locations away from his markings, yet eerily similar to his own, to the point where if one folded the parchment down the middle, the points would almost overlap perfectly. He looked at Gertrude and asked, “Finding out where I’ve been wasn’t the only reason you provided this map to me was it?”

Barkhorn shifted in her chair, uncomfortable in having her carefully orchestrated ruse discovered. “When you said that we were more alike than we liked to admit yesterday, I got me thinking as to how much in fact we are alike. Given what you told me about your combat history, our routes mirror each other, you in the south and me in the north. The closest we ever came to seeing each other was when you were in Vienna and I was in Prague recovering from a fever, less than thirty miles away from you.” she acknowledged.

“From what I hear, you are one of the very few in this room that joined the war before it began, why?” Aaron inquired.

“To be honest, I was bored at home in Kaliningrad, thought it would be fun to do. Plus, my father played a part in that too.” Gertrude explained, her voice changing towards the end into one of sadness as she mentioned her father.

Cautiously, Aaron broached, “I take it that is where you got your slight cauliflower ear.” he deduced.

Gertrude nodded. “My father was a veteran of the Great War. Had to be discharged in ‘17 when he fell victim to a gas attack, messed up his lungs. Spent the next few years womanizing and drinking his pension away until he met my mother. Got her pregnant with me during their relationship. He told her that he would support my mother and that he would change his ways, be a family man rather than a wastrel, but as soon as the priest said, ‘I do,’ he went back to what he was before. My mother could do nothing but cry in her sleep alone, as her husband philandered and imbibed his paycheck away. Life was hard in our house. Didn’t have much money to spend on necessities, so we relied on
the kindness of our neighbors to get by. When I got older, and my mother got pregnant with my sister Christiane, my father’s drinking got worse and worse and he began hitting my mother and me. Secretly joined a boxing club to learn self defense during vacations from school to help defend her and my unborn sister. Sometimes I won, sometimes I didn’t, but I didn’t care. The bastard’s days of having free reign in that house would be over, one way or another. After a while, he just stopped and left the house in ’37, leaving me, my mother, and now my baby sister alone. That was when my powers began to manifest and I joined up to provide for them both.” she illuminated.

“What became of your father?” Aaron pressed.

“Found dead on the side of the road before the enemy invasion came to my home, victim of an apparent mugging. Good riddance.” Gertrude spat out.

“And the rest of your family?” Aaron queried.

“My mother didn’t have the money to get herself and Christiane out, so she paid for her passage, staying behind. Christiane managed to get to Antwerp before the end to that city came in ’43, but her convoy was attacked while I was away. Somehow someway, someone got her on board the last transport that left the harbor. She suffered greatly during the attack, going into a coma, one that even now she’s still in. The doctors tell me to have hope, but the longer it goes on, the less likely it is that that she will wake up.” Gertrude replied, half choking up at the end.

Aaron listened and watched Barkhorn as she wrestled the tears down. So that explains all of it, the tension, the alertness. She feels that she failed her sister by not being there, that she let her guard down at the worst possible time. Now, she’s absolutely adamant in her resolve to never let that happen again. “We are indeed very much alike Gertrude.” he stated with polite finality. “We both joined the armed forces before the war started, fought east to west, and are still in danger of losing a woman we love and hold dear to our hearts. Yet for all that binds us, there is something that separates us. You seek to hold in your emotions rather than express them. Now, I’m not a psychologist, but restraining those outbursts aren’t healthy. You should let them out from time to time.”

Gertrude shook her head violently no. “Emotion gets in the way Aaron, it makes us weak, clouds our judgment.” she countered.

Aaron leaned in quick and growled, “Emotion is what makes us human, what separates us from the enemy, from beasts. If the war ends, what kind of world would we live in if people adopted that philosophy? It and all of humanity would be just as cruel and uncaring as your father was. Do you want to end up like that? Do you want to help raise your sister in that sort of world that you took up arms to defend, that you protected her from?” He returned to his original position and softened his stare and voice. “I used to be like that and it only leads you down a dark alley. I worry about you Gertrude and I’m sure that others here do too. Learn to let go of everything that you stand to lose or it’s going to get you hurt or worse. Don’t make the same mistakes that I have.”

Gertrude just sat there, impassively staring back at Aaron. Divale hung his head and sighed. Have it your way, but mark my words: only bad things will come of this. “So Wilcke snagged you and Erica in early ’41 for the 501st?” he pondered out loud.

“That she did.” Barkhorn replied, her statement revealing to all that she was relieved that the line of questioning had taken a sharp turn. “Formed the core of the unit right then and there in Berlin. It wasn’t easy though. Even with me aiding Minna with reports, the sheer strain of the day to day administration was immense. Almost gave me an ulcer at one point. Thank God Mio arrived when she did later on that year. She alone probably managed to save the unit from collapse.”
“Good talk Gertrude.” Aaron uttered, extending his right hand. Barkhorn reached out and clasped his palm firmly. Suddenly, Aaron pulled her in and muttered, “Remember what I said. You need to change.”

“Worry about yourself Aaron and I’ll worry about me.” Gertrude retorted in a low voice before letting go. She made to turn away, but stopped as she recalled something important. “So when should we have our rematch?”

“Anytime, anyplace.” Aaron replied. “But I choose the conditions.”

“Deal.” Gertrude agreed and she got up and took her chair into her arms.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Minna and Mio join forces and find out that pushing the envelope is not a good idea when confronting a warlock who knows your name.

Chapter XVII: The Princess And The Samurai

Major Mio Sakatmoto and Commander Minna Dietlinde Wilcke are what one might call the yin and yang of the 501st. The two have known each other for a long time and have come to trust each other implicitly. To me, they function as mother and father, with Mio handling the discipline and Minna the nurturing, though both can switch it up at a moment’s notice. Mio is extremely loyal and faithful to obligations and can be quite sentimental at times. She also trains like a demon, constantly seeking to improve herself, though I feel that it may be a clever feint to draw attention away from something greater. As for Minna, she exudes elegance and deeply cares about the welfare of her squadron, even going so far as to put her personal military gains on the backburner, something I deeply respect. Though she is gentle by nature, she will not back down from unreasonableness, and directly challenges anyone and anything that she finds to be out of sorts, myself included. Underneath all that, I feel that she has a thin line where, if it gets crossed, she’ll break like glass, just like all of us, one that only becomes apparent when someone one deeply cares about may get hurt or worse.

Diary Entry March 5th 1944

Minna watched Gertrude come back to the group and sit down, watching her face as she did so. She’s not able to let go just yet. Maybe with a bit more pressure, Trude will crack that shell and really start getting better. It pains me to know that she’s suffering like this. Speaking of pressure... She looked at Mio who returned her gaze with an understanding nod. As one, they picked up their chairs and made their way to Aaron who looked upon the scene with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation. Two on one now is it? Suits me just fine, I’ve faced worse odds and came out unscathed. Bring it on. “Ah, Mio and Minna, at long last we meet and talk face to face.” Aaron quipped as they both sat down. “Welcome to my office, make yourselves at home.” He gestured to the calvados and both women nodded. Divale poured Minna’s glass first and then poured Mio’s glass into what was his own and handed both off. Then, he comically looked around at the table and then at the fifth of a bottle of liquor left in his right hand, shrugged, and proceeded to do his ritual. As he did so however, his interrogators copied the gesture, letting a drop of the apple infused spirits fall to the ground. Aaron said nothing as he understood why. Everyone has lost someone here.

“To better understanding.” Mio proposed, holding the glass in her right hand.

“To the building of trust.” Minna added

“To the sharing of mutual respect.” Aaron intoned.
The triple entente clinked glasses and while the officers took a small sip, Aaron took a deep swig out of the bottle, his swallowing triggering a large bubble formation to travel from the bottom to the top. “How in the world are you not drunk off your ass?” Minna asked, shaking her head in disbelief and disapproval.

“Alcohol is a poison and my body takes care of it quite well. However, there is a limit and, well, to be honest, I haven’t hit that limit yet. I could’ve sat here the whole time sucking this bottle down and I would probably feel little more than a buzz.” Aaron explained.

“Remember what I said earlier Aaron.” Minna warned. “You are on a strict consumption schedule from here on out after this coven is over.”

Aaron nodded. “So what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked.

“We both have been listening to what you have said throughout this coven and we have had many answers as to who and what you are.” Mio began, taking another sip of calvados. “Yet those answers have generated a lot of questions concerning your ability to mesh well within our unit. Nothing too serious mind you, but it’s enough to raise a few red flags.”

“Such as?” Aaron inquired, cocking an eyebrow.

“When you mentioned living along the lines of Machiavelli’s ideal prince,” Minna politely interjected, “that gave me pause. You see, I have also read that text and it terrified me. While you acknowledge that a wise leader or ruler must sometimes put his own good qualities aside for the greater good of one’s people and preserving his position, I feel that when it comes to being in the military, you can’t do that. One must carry out orders to the fullest, regardless of how distasteful and the personal cost. Can I trust you to do whatever it is I ask of you to the fullest?”

Aaron furrowed his brow. “Yes, you can trust me.” he replied. “Though I think you meant that question to regard orders that go against my core beliefs and codes.” Minna nodded silently and Divale went on, raising his left hand, extending his index and middle finger upwards. “I will state for the record that I will not do two things: I will not harm or kill a child and I will never let the wicked run free.”

“Commendable,” Mio stated, “yet distressing, for there may come a time where you’ll have to do that. If Minna ordered it, would you do so?”

Aaron looked at them both and leaned back, looking up at the overhead lights for a long while, mulling over his response. “I will do so, under protest mind you, as long as you second it.” The response took both aback and Mio gave him a puzzled look. Divale then explained, “You see, a great leader is only great if they have great counselors, those they can rely on to give advice when it is sorely needed. In the past, the greatest amongst them was the naysayer, one whose job was to disagree with all the decisions that the leader made, to provide a counterweight, a balance to offset snap judgments. While many think of them as sycophantic mouthpieces, they served the important purposes of not just offering words of wisdom, but of guarding the consciences of the ones they served. I mean this as no disrespect to Minna’s ability to command, but there must always be a check in place. She may watch the squadron, but who watches her?” He then pointed at Mio with the index finger of his right hand. “You do, the keeper of her integrity. If you second her command, I will follow any order.”

Minna thought about the reasoning behind Aaron’s statement and could find no fault in it. Just as he had David, I too have Mio, keepers and protectors. Never thought of it that way. “Now the question I need to ask you is, who watches you?” she asked.
“Lucretia does.” Aaron replied without doubt, gesturing to her with his bottle before taking another gulp.

“And if that connection were severed?” Minna continued, moving her hand down to her side. Before she got halfway, Aaron’s eyes flashed with anger and he placed the calvados down and raised his right hand, three fingers outstretched, keeping a watchful eye on where Minna’s hand was going. Faking concern, Minna queried with a voice that clearly betrayed her thought process, “Is something wrong Aaron?”

“Not yet.” Aaron menaced and suddenly, coruscating blue energy crisscrossed his fingers, gaining in intensity. “I know what you are insinuating Minna, and I don’t like it.”

“Are you threatening her Aaron?” Mio forcefully inquired, moving her hands closer to her katana.

“I’m merely offering a bit of, shall we say, full disclosure.” Aaron clarified. “Out of respect for you both, I’m going to make one thing clear: do not open doors with me that you don’t have the balls to walk through. Don’t even dare push me. This is your first, last, and only warning: you level that gun Minna, I’ll level you and anyone else that stands in my way.”

“And you said you were a good man.” Mio countered, her hands fully clasped around the katana hilt.

“That I am,” Aaron defended, pushing his seat away gently, to give himself more maneuvering room, “but I never said that I was above doing bad things.”

“Is she worth it?” Minna pondered out loud in a low voice.

Aaron looked at Lucretia, who, like the rest of the squadron looked upon the escalating scene with fear. She locked her eyes with his and the look she gave him was pleading with him, imploring him to stop this madness. “Worth killing for.” Aaron answered, regarding Minna.

Minna leaned in close to Aaron, getting as close to his face and eyes as she could, showing no fear, face like stone. “You’re not going to do it are you?” she asked in a mocking way, downing half her glass in two swallows.

“No I won’t, because I know that neither of you are that stupid to try.” Aaron retorted. The blue lightning ceased to exist and he lowered his hand to the table, his yellow eyes turning for the briefest of moments orange. He then took a quick drink and set the bottle down hard, the glass hitting the wood with a mighty thump. Minna placed her hand back over the table as Mio withdrew hers from her sword.

“He’s a great judge of character and extremely protective. Excellent qualities to have. Aaron will be a good addition if he can keep his temper in check.

“You strike me as someone who is quite loyal.” Mio observed, taking another drink. “I respect you for that, and I hope that when we can all trust each other, that you will extend it to us. Speaking of which, if we do get within your circle of trust, how will you defend us?”

“To the hilt, pommel, wrist, elbow, and all points beyond.” Aaron solemnly answered. “You protect and trust me, I’ll do the same for you.”

“Even the one’s you may have a problem with?” Mio pressed, gesturing her head over at Perrine. “She did try to emasculate you after all.

“That technically wasn’t her fault that she reacted in that particular way.” Aaron admitted. “The situation was born out of a simple misunderstanding.”

Mio tilted her head and countered, “I fail to see how having the barrel of a fully loaded automatic
weapon being pointed at one’s groin can be thought of as a misunderstanding.”

“Regardless,” Minna interrupted, “you will protect her as well, am I right?”

“Affirmative.” Aaron answered.

“If there comes a time to sell your life for our protection, how will you do it?” Minna asked.

“Sell it high and sell it dear.” Aaron replied, taking a drink from his glass.

“Speaking of high,” Minna remarked, “how did you command your old unit?”

“I led from the front, as I always have. A leader is useless in a fight if they can’t see what is going on, if they can’t encourage their men, emboldening them to great feats of strength and sacrifice, not just through words, but actions. What they suffered, I suffered with them. I never have put any of my boys in a situation where I would not put myself.” Aaron expounded.

“That’s still very dangerous.” Mio contended, sipping her calvados. “If a leader goes down, the army gets demoralized.”

“A human army would, but not one of warlocks.” Aaron countered. “We all were prepared to die, and while yes we would grieve, all knew how to command, and David would’ve made sure to keep the ball rolling for as long as he could. I would be remembered as one who played his part, his role.”

“Which role would that be?” Mio inquired, eyebrow cocked.

“That of a front line defender and attacker. I’ve also be known to be an effective heavy flanker.” Aaron explained. He paused and added, “For this unit, I see myself as the one who would be sent in to undertake missions that require a deft touch, missions that might make some people apprehensive in sending someone else, someone who could get killed. I’m very good at accomplishing things that many think impossible. I broke into and out of Ryuken, I waded through a sea of bodies at Pripet, I held the Carpathian Line for almost a full year, and I survived Berlin, on the ground. Regardless of the job, I get it done. If a F.U.B.A.R order came down the pipe, and Minna didn’t comfortable in sending a witch, she could send me.”

*Might not be a bad thing to consider for him. He does have a sense of urgency and he is experienced in such matters.* “Now, I must digress from the direct line of questions to address another small concern that both Mio and I share.” Minna declared. “As you have stated, you have had many dalliances with the fairer sex, some of which that I find to be unbelievably scandalous to say the least. I must ask if you had used any advantage in procuring company for the evening?”

Once more, Aarons eyes widened with realization and this time, his faced contorted with rage, his hand clutching the bottle so tight that even the people in the back could hear glass slowly breaking with the sound of collapsing ice. *That’s it.* “How dare you!” he seethed in a low voice. “How dare you even imply that I would use my powers so shamefully! I have never done that! Coercion through magic is nothing short of rape, and that is wrong!”

*I just went too far! Bring him back!* “I didn’t imply that-” Minna began but Aaron cut her off hard.

“And yet, you did.” he growled, slowly getting up out of his seat. Mio grabbed her katana and made an attempt to pull it out, but Aaron merely waved his left hand and she found that the blade wouldn’t pull from it's scabbard. Afraid, Minna tried to get up, but Aaron muttered, “Capio Minna. Capio Mio.” Struggling, both witches tried to move but, their feet were stuck, glued to the floor as if they waded through quicksand, their arms useless and heavy like lead weights. The rest of the squadron attempted to get up to come to the rescue, but all Aaron had to do was hover his hands over the
heads of Minna and Mio to stop them dead in their tracks. He regarded Minna and saw the absolute terror in her eyes and laughed. “An advantage you say?” he chuckled. Leaning in close, Divale hissed, “Let’s see how much of an advantage I can play.”

“Aaron!” Lucretia called out from across the room, standing up in her seat. “È abbastanza! Sta solo cercando di valutarti, non di pungolarti. Per favore, comprenderi che sta solo cercando di proteggere gli altri (That’s enough! She’s only trying to gauge you, not goad you. Please understand that she’s trying to protect others)” Divale gazed at her and his eyes began to soften.

He then turned and regarded Mio and Minna. “If she wasn’t here, and you were any other two people…” Divale began, but trailed off as he merely balled his fists, the knuckles cracking loudly like firecrackers. He sat back down and waved his right hand. The two witches heaved violently as the enchantment broke, nearly sending them teetering from their seats. Mio breathed in deep, her brow lined with cold sweat and Minna did the same, eyeing Aaron all the while. He simply sat there, staring at her with a cold gaze, face expressionless, his temper gone, but his ill humor still very much present.

Minna breathed an internal sigh of relief. Thank God for Lucretia being here. Lord knows what would’ve happened. “Believe me when I say that I meant no offense.” she offered. “Lucretia was right, I’m merely trying to see how far your loyalties lie and where your principles truly stand, so that I can do my duty and fulfill my role. You have my sincere apologies.”

“You mentioned that when you used mortem on that can of nails that you hoped to never use it again on another living being. That to me means that you have used it before, probably on whatever this was.” Minna observed.

Mio then got up and walked behind the crate at the quick step. After a few seconds, she appeared holding a small wooden box with an iron carry handle and series of latches, two on either side, holding what was inside secure. She set it down on the table and flipped the latches open. Sakamoto then reached in and pulled out a ghastly trophy that elicited a loud series of gasps and hushed whispers from the squadron behind them, a bleached bone skull, one that looked human, but wasn’t by any stretch of the imagination. The teeth were sharp at the front like a shark’s, and, embedded slightly askew of the cranium like whorled hair, were dozens of curved horns, black, thick, and jagged like rusty butcher knives, looping counterclockwise around the bone to the jaw line. “What manner of thing was this?” she queried.

Aaron reached out and took the skull in his hands, peering into the empty sockets like a fortuneteller gazing deep into a crystal ball. “Alas, poor Illyana.” He looked at the squadron as a whole and held the skull aloft. “I knew her well ladies, though not as well as some unfortunates. What you all see in my hands, is the skull of a succubus, a lesser demon of the underworld. Don’t let the term lesser fool you; like Ismenoth, they are deceivers and temptresses, luring foolish mortals to their dooms with guile and charm. They live through extracting the life force from their prey through sexual means until the helpless individual dies from exhaustion. Using that life force, they inject it into the wombs of young women, using their bodies as unwilling hosts to their male counterparts, the incubi, which are born fully mature, surely killing the mother upon birth.

“How did you kill such a thing?” Minna asked, intrigued.

“It was during the early months of ’41 after we had just finished establishing the Carpathian Line.” Aaron recollected. “I was stationed west of the town of Cluj-Napoca in a forest known as Hoia Baciu in the old regions of Transylvania. Like Bedgebury Woods, the forest had a long sordid
history, little of it good. Rumored site of many of Vlad the Impaler’s cruelties, the locals stayed as far away from it as humanly possible. We didn’t take much stock of their superstitions and hunkered down for the long haul. It wasn’t long before reports started reaching my desk concerning strange sights, lights that went on and off, traveling like swirling shadows within the foliage and of outlandish smells that had no place in such an environment. Soon, lookouts during the night started talking about something stirring, something they couldn’t see, a shrouded creature that seemed to bend the laws of nature. Every so often, I would hear this thing running through the trees, giving chase to something or someone. Seconds go by and a high pitched screams rends the air. Then I hear it eating and I just huddle up in my tent and pray to God that I’m not dessert.

One morning, two of my men that had been acting as lookouts disappeared. I decided to search for them, alone. Going to their last known location, I knew that something was off. The tracks led into the woods at a steady gait which made no sense as they had strict orders to not enter unless there was an enemy that needed to be dealt with, and even then they would advance at the run or raise the alarm. In addition, there was the smell of vanilla in the air, thick and rich as if it came straight from the seed pod itself. Immediately, I had a bad feeling about this endeavor, that I shouldn’t be here, but I had a duty to my men and myself and I walked into the woods, following the tracks. The journey was fairly long, taking me the better part of an hour to navigate. As I went deeper in, I swear this on my honor, I heard a woman’s voice singing a haunting tune, one that pierced my soul with it’s beauty. However, that siren’s song gave me the knowledge of what I was facing, it indeed was a succubus. That alone saved me from being completely beguiled by the refrain, steeling my mind from her charms. I continued to advance until coming to a clearing, where in the center lay a small cottage, pristine and well built, the chimney puffing smoke, the singing emanating through a slightly open door.

I go up the stone steps and pull out my pistol, cocking the hammer loudly. The song stops in mid chorus. Silence overtakes the air and all I hear is my breathing. Gently pushing open the door, the smells of enticement flooded out, bathing me with exotic flavors and thoughts of faraway lands. Honey, saffron, burnt sugar, and more registered within my senses. Along the walls of the hallway I found myself staring down were lines of wax figures, evidently the succubus’s victims, less than two dozen from what I saw. Walking in, I pan to and fro, keeping my eyes and feet moving, never staying still for more than a second. Suddenly, I hear her from beyond, deeper into the corridor. ‘Come in,’ she cooed ‘and know me better’. Slowly, a shape come forward out of the dark, that of a shapely woman, tall and buxom with eyes the color of gun metal, peach skin barely concealed by a long pink tinted flowing fine fabric, dark hair cascading down from her scalp, perfume of allspice assaulting my nostrils. At that point, I knew that she was a young succubus for I could sense that her magic was weak, unfocused. She thought she had me right where she wanted me, but in fact I was the one waiting to cut her down to size.

“What did you do?” both Mio and Minna asked anxiously.

“Naturally, I played along, seeing where she would lead me, if she would show her hand.” Aaron went on. “I let her take me by the hand and she leads me to a room that could’ve been taken from the pages of The Arabian Nights. It was a grand sight, a tall ceiling dining room with ornate tapestries lining the walls, depicting various scenes of life, mostly lewd and clearly denoting what lay in wait. No less than twenty two lounging sofas were scattered here and there with no apparent pattern, each one being attended to by a young man or woman, smiling and blushing as I walked among them. Tables were laden with sweetmeats, pastries, and tall amphorae of fragrant wine atop platters of silver and gold. Everywhere incense burned, casting a faint haze. I reclined on a sofa and graciously thanked my hostess for her great hospitality, for I was very weary from my trek and that I was both hungry and thirsty. I wished to know her name so that I might tell all, far and wide, of her generosity.”
“And she fell for it,” Minna deduced, “hook, line, and sinker.”

Aaron winked and continued his tale. “She told me that her name was Illyana and that I was welcome to help myself to whatever I wished and stay for as long as I liked. Convinced that I was firmly in control of the situation, I lean in and say, in no uncertain terms, that there was one particular fruit that I was very interested in sinking my teeth into. Smiling with rapturous joy, she embraces me, running her hands through my hair, and caressing my back, her nails easily feeling as though she were running them along my flesh.” He made a T with his hands and announced, “Before I go further, I wish to state for the record that I am not without weaknesses folks. In addition to being scared of being underwater, I also am very sensitive to touch, particularly if a certain spot is rubbed on my back. Suffice it to say that when that happens, I, how do I phrase this, rise to the occasion.”

“Target acquired.” Erica crowed from the peanut gallery, making the gesture of a loaded gun being fired.

“Keep your hands to yourself Lieutenant Hartmann.” Lucretia civilly countered from the other side, giving her a look that withered Erica's triumphant posture like drought does crops.

“Grazie. (Thank you)” Aaron stated, looking at Lucretia. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. So, she has me in her arms and proceeds to kiss me, but I playfully put my finger to her lips and say that there is a small condition for my affections. Blissfully unaware, she inquires what that could be. I then play my trump card and take off my glasses. Illyana goes rigid with shock and fear and I say to her, and I quote, ‘Tell me what I want to know and I’ll think about letting you live’. Escaping from my grasp as quick as a flash, she leaps to a corner in the ceiling, clutching the wood and plaster with the grip of a spider, hissing like a snake. Her disguise drops revealing her true form. Her skin, once a pure peach was now mottled like a browned apple, her hair gone, replaced by black curling horns, her eyes ablaze with hellfire and brimstone, and her teeth sharp and bared. ‘Kill him!’ she commands to her thralls. For the next eleven minutes, all was pure pandemonium with me facing the combined might of herself and her slaves. I tore that place apart, slinging all manner of offensive spells, burning people alive, freezing them into statues, acting like an ancient Roman gladiator, fighting for his life. When her minions were dispatched, I cornered and grabbed her, demanding where my men were. She struggled mightily, but could not break my iron grip. I had her and she knew it. In an attempt to save her life, she broke down and told me that my men were among those in the hallway, encased within the wax. I repaid her kindness with some of my own, that of mortem. As her energy was being drained and the flames devoured her being, she howled, ‘You said that you’d let me live’. I replied, ‘I said that I’d think about it, and I thought no’. She screamed a long time before she died.”

“Did she tell the truth?” Minna asked.

“That she did,” Aaron admitted, “but when I broke the wax holding them within, all that remained of them was a black ooze that seeped into the floor and dissolved into nothing. I decided to keep it as not a trophy, but a reminder to never go into a place like Hoia Baciu again without doing some research.” He furrowed his brow and regarded Shirley. “How did you know what I was facing in Bedgebury Woods today?”

Shirley shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the subject matter. “When I was a young girl, my father would tell me stories about a wailing woman that haunted the passes of Allatoona down in Georgia. He said it was the widow of a southern soldier who died during the battle there, back in the Civil War. When I was twelve years old, I made my way down there to see if they were true.”

Aaron pressed, “What did you find?”

Yeager then stood up from her chair and turned around, hiking up her coat. Even from this distance, Divale could see a quintet of dark purple scars along her lower back. “More than I bargained for.”
she answered before covering herself back up. “I tried to do some research into Bedgebury Woods before we got there, but most of the records concerning that place were lost when the local historians office at Tunbridge Wells got hit during the Blitz.”

*And thus we went in blind. Thank God I was there or none of you would’ve left those woods alive. “Is that all for me?” he asked Mio and Minna.*

“That is all from us.” Minna replied drinking her calvados. “What about you?”

Aaron looked at Mio and asked, “Like Gertrude, you look like a born soldier. Been in the army long?”

“Since ‘37.”Mio answered, “but my path differed from that of Barkhorn’s. Like you, I never knew my parents. I was an orphan, left on the doorsteps of a widowed retired navy drill sergeant in Osaka. He never made an attempt to find out who left me there on that night, though I’m sure he had his suspicions. His name was Osaki Sakamoto, and his warrior heart took pity on me and took me in, raising me as his own, teaching me discipline, and sending me to school with parts of his pension. Osaki instilled in me the virtues that made me who I’m today, I still have some of the training equipment I used to practice with. When my powers manifested, I joined the navy, following in his footsteps. Rose through the ranks quickly and my skills drew the attention of Ichiro Miyafuji who was going off to Great Britain to develop the Striker unit when war broke out in ‘39. Surprisingly, my adopted father begged me to not go, but I went anyway.”

*That’s usually the way it is Mio. They push you into the service in peacetime, but when war rolls in, they try to pull you out.*

“Very hard indeed.” Mio admitted. “The Strikers originally were too powerful, even for a witch like me. I passed out numerous times. In addition, my beginning maneuvers were judged to be so bad that I was sent to Italy for comprehensive reevaluation. Once the final prototypes were given the green light, I helped head up the Japanese Expeditionary Force, and fought. Won several battles, lost several, but we did our part, protecting the Baltic States so that civilians could get out.”

“When exactly did you meet Minna and fall into the 501st?” Aaron queried.

“It was during the summer of ‘41 when I was on a resupply run in Northern Germany. I walk into the hanger and ask Gertrude for the commanding officer. She leads me into the office where I see her, completely burdened by reports, folders, pamphlets, all stacked to the rafters. Minna looked terrible, like she hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days. We talk for a while and immediately, I felt a connection, that what she was doing was something that I wanted to be a part of. Joined up and took over a portion of her duties, searching for pilots to fill out the 501st. Recruited everyone save for the founding three and you.”

“How long has Hajikata been your attaché?” Aaron asked.

“Roughly a year and a half now. He was sent over from Japan with strict orders to aid me in all capacities. Hajikata has been a great help to me since the day he arrived and I’m thankful.” Mio replied, glancing over at the warrant officer who gave a respectful bow.

“He does strike me as someone who’s a great asset,” Aaron added, “for he speaks a great deal of sense. Quite uncommon in this day and age.”

“So do you,” Mio countered, “from a certain point of view. Hajikata has a pure heart and a noble vision, seeing the world in black and white. What is right is right and what’s wrong is wrong, there’s no grey area, no doors open for interpretation. You however, while still having those extremes, have
a large grey area, for your experiences have taught you that some things are indeed open for debate,
that some actions, wholesome or otherwise, can be undertaken depending on the circumstances.”

“Well, if the enemy isn’t going to play by the rules, why should we?” Aaron remarked. “It could be a
nail biter or a wash, but at the end of the day, what wins the fight, wins the fight.”

“True enough,” Mio observed, pointing a finger at Aaron, “but always be mindful of the
consequences. Anything else?”

Aaron shook his head no and Mio drained her glass. He picked up the calvados bottle and swirled
the liquid with a circular motion of his right wrist, and gazed at Minna, tilting his head and stroking
his chin with his left hand, brow furrowed in deep thought. After a few seconds he stated, “You are
like Perrine in the sense that you come from a family of prestige, but you’re not a blueblood by any
stretch. Seem more like Lynette’s family after a fashion, prosperous and connected, am I right?”

Holy hell he’s good at figuring people out. How much can he deduce just by looking at me? “The
Wilcke’s are the direct descendents of the Bach family and have used our connections to secure our
place in high society, but we never let it go to our heads.” Minna answered.

“And by Bach you mean Johann Sebastian Bach, the composer and organist?” Aaron pressed.

“The very same, which explains why most of my family, myself included, were involved in music.”
Minna explained. “The voice teachers I had in Poznan couldn’t instruct me beyond a certain point
and I went to the Mozarteum when I was nine. Spent five years learning from the best of the best,
singing my heart and soul out. My witch powers came into being during that time and I used them
spot when I should be raising or lowering my voice during a song, greatly enhancing my arias. Made
many a person cry during my graduation, and had many admirers, but I turned them down. I didn’t
want a life then, just music.”

She hesitated ever so slightly at the mention of the word admirers. Maybe that’s what the rule is all
about, that she lost someone that chinked her armor. Don’t push it. “The war had different plans.”
Aaron observed.

“I joined up when it broke out and was assigned to the Eastern front. My magic helped carry the day
on several occasions and I soon found myself in charge.” Minna recollected. “Of course, I didn’t
have much of a choice, all the other high ranking officers were dead or got reassigned.”

“What made you form the 501st?” Aaron inquired.

“In the early days of the war, witch units were grouped up according to classification. There was
little to no diversification, and thus had little in the way of countering Neuroi that seemed tailor made
to counter our main power set. We suffered tremendous losses because of it. After burying so many
people, I asked myself why, why does this have to be this way, why does no one do something
about it? I went before the German High Command in Berlin with my concerns and they laughed at
me, right in my face, so I threatened resignation.” Minna answered.

“Bet that sobered their asses up.” Aaron said, chuckling lightly.

“Like hell it did,” Minna agreed, “and they immediately gave me fully sanction to form a joint fighter
wing. Gertrude and Erica were close by so I grabbed them up before they got transferred. Mio joined
later that summer and the rest is history.”

“I have no further questions.” Aaron stated and as soon as he finished his sentence, Minna reached
into her pocket and pulled out the wierding stone.
“Are you sure?” Minna asked.

Aaron leaned in and whispered, “Like I said with Erica, out of respect, I keep my opinions to myself.”

Understanding, Minna placed the stone back and whispered back, “Since you don’t want to ask a difficult question, I’ll ask one more. Would you have used mortem?”

Aaron eyed both Minna and Mio and gestured for Sakamoto to join in on the meeting, which she did quickly, the scene now looking more like a group of plotters trying to mastermind a nefarious crime. “If it was life or death,” Divale began, “in a heartbeat. What happened then was me losing it, letting my emotions get the best of me. While I realize what you were doing and why you asked that question Minna, there are some things that set me off, some buttons that when pushed get my blood boiling, and that is one of them. Aside from taking lives, lives in which I was entirely justified in taking, I’ve never used my powers for evil or selfish intentions. To even imply that is to invite wrath the likes of which would made the Old Testament look tame by comparison.” He regarded them both and extended his hands, one to each and solemnly said, “I’m sorry for what I did. It will not happen again.”

Mio took Aaron’s left while Minna grasped his right. “Me too.” Minna replied, genuinely remorseful and forgiving in tone.

“Good talk folks.” Aaron stated and let go off their grasps. As Minna and Mio picked up their chairs and left to join the rest, Aaron guzzled the bottle of calvados down and followed it up with emptying Minna’s still half full glass. By the time both officers sat back down, both were drained and Aaron sat there in his seat, still as a statue.

“Before we adjourn this coven,” Minna announced, “is there anything else you wish to say Aaron?”

“I’m no angel ladies,” Aaron intoned, “never was and never will be. In many ways, I’m just as bad as I was in the old days in many respects, but I want to get better and I will be better than I am now. It’s going to take time and patience on all our parts, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make it work.”

“Including aiding Yoshika and Lynette with the laundry.” Minna added with a sly smile.

Aaron face soured on the spot and Minna just broke out laughing. At first Aaron was puzzled, but then understood. “That’s not a funny joke.” he pointed out, yet Minna still laughed, and soon he himself couldn’t help but join in. *Ah Germans, such sick senses of humor. Guess this stay of mine might not be so bad. Things can only go up from here, I hope.*
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Sanya picks up a mysterious signal while pursing an errant Neuroi night fighter near Calais, one that belongs to a French witch unit believed lost. Summoning Sergeant Divale and Major Sakamoto, Minna orders them into France to find and rescue any survivors. However, Aaron reveals to Mio that the message is not all that it seems.

Chapter XVIII: Welcome (Back) To The Jungle

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but what manner of human orb can gaze upon the hell that is now France and see such magnificence underneath the pall of devastation? I guess only mine can. True, the days are just as bleak and shrouded as the nights, the enemy patrols are numerous and bothersome, and the marauders wreck terrible atrocities on their own, this chateau, this land, this country, these people struggling to survive, are my personal pieces of Eden, slices of heaven from the cake of Hell. I actually love it here after a fashion, maybe I’ll stay here and live out my life. Oh, and Happy Thanksgiving.

Diary Entry November 25th 1943

Over twenty five thousand feet in the air, cruising at a leisurely pace within the clouds, Sanya hummed away, her fathers song playing in her head. Her hair, despite being held down and secured by bobby pins and a thin black plastic hair clip, flapped in wind like dog ears. Litvyak didn’t mind in the least for the night was soothing to her, as it always was, giving her time to be alone, to reflect, to focus. Looking over at her Fliegerhammer, a massive nine barreled rocket launcher, developed specially for her, she hefted it’s massive bulk, the pressed steel cool and reassuring, the launcher ports, though cleaned routinely, still carrying the faint smell of missile propellant. Just one rocket is all I need to take down a Neuroi night fighter. Goes off anywhere within the same zip code and it’s dust. Minding her surroundings, Sanya hovered within a dense body of cumulus clouds, and activated her magic, a detection aura that could pick up disturbances and radio chatter for miles around. As had been the case for the entire evening, the cursory scans turned up nothing. After the Blitz they got more careful and less numerous, directing their attention elsewhere. They usually don’t like coming out this late, but they have caught us with our pants down on more than one occasion. If we actually wore pants.

Quickly taking a look at her wrist watch, she noted the time, 3:45 AM. My watch will be over soon and relief will come within fifteen minutes. Suddenly, her magic picked up a signal, a faint blip on her magical antennae that erased all thoughts of a uneventful evening. Gently decreasing altitude so as not to give away her position, Sanya dove through the cloud cover, moisture gathering along her face, uniform, and Strikers. Peering down at the dark water of the Channel, a small Neuroi craft whizzed away from her, looping in a lazy C out of pockets of fog several hundred feet above the water line towards France. Immediately, Litvyak placed her hand on her communicator, dialing to...
the channel reserved for the night fighter patrols, and pressed the stud there. “This is White Lily. I have a confirmed enemy craft looping towards France at high speed in grid number B7. Will mark and pursue. Out.”

“Roger that White Lily,” another woman’s voice replied, “and happy hunting. Out”

Keeping high and maintaining constant awareness, Sanya stalked the Neuroi as it sped away, seemingly oblivious to the hunter above it. As she moved to and fro, staying within the clouds and eyeing her prey like a hungry wolf, she forced down her urge to engage. Careful Sanya. These Neuroi like playing tricks, using the old bait and switch tactic. Don’t dive in unless you have the advantage. Moving in stride, Sanya could see that she was getting closer and closer to the coastline of Calais, grid number C9, the furthest reaches of most patrols and imminent danger, knowing that the enemy could rise up and pounce at a moments notice. Regarding the Neuroi, it still continued to zip away through the night air. It’s not coming around. Time to bug out and return. Looping into an Immelman turn, Sanya rose up and leveled, turning the other way towards Great Britain and safety. She turned around warily, watching the dark land behind her getting more distant by the second and felt another small tremor. Stopping, Litvyak focused on the signal, strengthening her magic more and more, trying to discern what it was. The signal was illegible garble, hissing harshly with static and pops with keening whines. It's not a Neuroi fighter or Resistance activity. What is it? A radio signal? Going through her memories, she gradually became convinced that she was receiving a message of some sort, for she managed to catch words, faint echoes of ‘mayday’ and ‘assistance’ in an accent that was unmistakably French. Soon, she cracked it, hearing an identification number, DN38416. Her eyes widened in shock as memories of over six months ago resurfaced with a vengeance.

That’s a witch signal from the French military! There are survivors out there!? Quickly, she thumbed the dial to Minna’s number.

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Groggy and wincing in slight pain, Minna rose from her bed, swearing softly under her breath. “Gottverdammt (God damn it).” she muttered, as her hand searched for the light switch to her nightstand lamp. A light sleeper out of necessity rather than nature, Wilcke had heard the communicator on her officer’s coat buzz with activity from across the room. No one ever contacts me this late except Sanya, and only when something big is going on. Finding the pull string, Minna turned the lamp on with a tug, a series of metallic ticks that bathed her bedroom with a dull white glow. Her room was fitting for an officer of her rank, with a large oak desk with a chair, a full revolving mirror in the corner, a walk in wardrobe, bookshelves replete with military reports instead of texts, and her bed, an old yet wide knockoff Victorian affair with thick white and pink sheets and goose feather pillows with blue embroidery. The coat hanger was next to the door and Minna threw off the sheets. She straightened out the white T-shirt she wore that was hiking up her stomach, readjusted her panties, and slipped into her white cotton slippers with practiced ease. Within five steps, she reached the coat and applied the receiver to her ear and finger to the stud. “This is HQ, Minna receiving. What’s going on Sanya? What’s happening? Over.”

“Commander,” Sanya’s voice rang over the airwaves with crystal clarity, “I just found a French signal used by witches, DN38416. I haven’t managed to triangulate the signal’s origin, but I’m working on it now, trying to clear and clean it up. I’m convinced that this is a fresh transmission, not a ghost echo or repeating broadcast. Permission to RTB and report. Over.”

A French witch signal?! I thought they all got evacuated before the fall. Where they left behind, and if so, why? This is disturbing and needs investigation. “How far away are you from HQ? Over.” Minn asked.

“If I go at maximum throttle, I’ll get there within ten minutes. My relief will take my place five
minutes from that. Over.” Sanya answered.

Can we afford a gap in the perimeter in the line? Given the circumstances, I can justify it. I’ll take the heat if shit hits the fan, no problem. “Permission granted Sanya. Get that transmission locked down and unscrambled. Meet me in my hanger office ASAP. Out.” Minna ordered and cut the link, going to Mio’s signal with startling alacrity. “Are you awake Mio?” Wilcke inquired into the communicator, knowing that the major had probably been awake for a good hour or more getting an early morning training session in.

The sound of a pair of heavy barbells could be heard hitting the floor with a hefty clang. “Loud and clear Minna,” Mio’s voice answered with concern, “What’s wrong?”

“Sanya’s picked up a French military signal used by witches while out on patrol. She’s convinced that this isn’t a transmission ghost, that it’s the real deal, and I’m inclined to agree.” Minna explained.

“So am I.” Mio agreed. “Litvyak’s instincts are good. What do you need from me?”

“I want you to find and bring to my hanger office Sergeant Divale on the double. I’ll contact the French High Command and see if they can send a representative to help verify the signal. Bring Lieutenant Clostermann as insurance in case I can’t.” Minna ordered. She paused and added, “We may need boots on the ground, and if so, I’m sending you in with them.”

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Perrine closed the door to the china cabinet in the near dark and picked up the teacup and saucer that she just took out with her right hand. The two dishes lightly clattered as she walked towards the stove, a black kettle slowly beginning to shriek, the metal reflecting what little moonlight passed through the tiny window looking out into the courtyard. Taking a terry cloth from an overhanging bar, Clostermann wrapped it around her left hand and slid it off the burner, wincing slightly, the pain in her chest flaring up again. Despite Yoshika’s ministrations, the rehabilitation was taking longer than expected, and Perrine constantly yelled at Miyafuji to make the pain go away so she could get back into the air where she belonged. And yet here I am, a damned invalid, restricted to light duties. I feel so useless. Damn that Miyafuji girl! I shouldn’t need rehab given what she can do. Why doesn’t she just heal me fully and get it over with? She shouldn’t be here if she can’t make the proper decisions. Letting her thoughts go for a second, she tipped the kettle to its side and poured out a good full cup of marigold tea. This helps the healing process along. Mother used to swear by it. Her mood darkened as she remembered her mother, the argument they had when she told her that she was going to enlist, the slamming doors, the funeral, the last gift that she thought was there that wasn’t. Shaking her head violently, getting out of the past, Perrine placed the cup on the saucer and walked to the double doors leading into the messhall proper. Eschewing her arms, she turned around and backed into them, using her legs and back to gain entry.

The room was empty, which was to be expected given the hour, small rays of moonlight shining through gaps in the curtains, casting long thin silver rectangles on the table. Clutching her light blue night robe tightly, lest an errant draft give her the chills, she trotted over to the nearest seat and sat down. The floor was cold and stung her bare feet. Cursing to herself for forgetting her slippers, Perrine drank from the cup and savored the herbal tea for a good while, letting the liquid warm her insides. She took off her glasses and rubbed them against her robe collar before putting them back on. Speaking of collar, that damned warlock hasn’t managed to get my coat redone and sent to me. Granted it’s only been three days since the coven, but surely a tailors like Gieves and Hawkes would be faster in getting the order done? He says that they told him that it was supply issues, yet I think he hasn’t done a thing at all. Bastard, I hate him so much. Suddenly, she caught a whiff of another scent, one that smelled burnt and earthy like a dirty fireplace. Gulping down the rest of the tea, she
sampled the air, letting her nose guide her. Clostermann left the messhall and walked up the hallway, away from the main entrance. A door was slightly ajar a ways up, faint light shining out into the corridor, the odor getting stronger and stronger as she neared it. Curious, she back against the wall and craned her neck just enough to catch a glimpse of what was inside.

Aaron flicked the steel butane lighter and applied flame to cigarette tip, inhaling the burn and smoke, keeping it away from his person, lest some errant ashes get on his pink shirt, denim pants, or black army boots. After a few puffs, he shut the cap, the click harsh and echoing like the snapping of one’s fingers in a cave. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and made a face. *Fucking ersatz bullshit. A concoction of herbs and roots blended with just a hint of tobacco to give you that edge you need to calm down. I’d give my left and right nut to chomp down on a legitimate cigar right now; it’s not like they’ll do anything else but sit there like a pair of fuzzy dice on a rearview mirror, gathering dust and stories.* Glancing around the room with his spectacled eyes, Divale marveled at such a bohemian scene. It was a waiting room for guests that clearly had once functioned as a study. The ceilings were high and bare of decoration, the wooden planks stained walnut, walls following suit, save for around the solid stone buttresses, that were clad in pressed metal plate and heavily decorated with whirling symbols and faces of old kings and queens. Bookcases lined the walls where the support structures held no sway, filled with books, dust so thick on some of the tomes that one could fill a pepper shaker twice over. *Damn shame that such things are neglected like this. Breaks my heart.* A large sitting sofa curled like a reposing cat around a fireplace, dormant and cold, the brass tending tools as powdered as the ancient texts. The only source of light for the entire room was from his own magic, nestled in the far upper left corner, above a massive globe of the earth, ensconced with a spiraling mixture of wood and metal, depicting countries that hadn’t existed for hundreds of years.

To the immediate left of the fireplace was an easel with a half finished canvas, a palette resting on a coffee table nearby with a trio of thin paint brushes standing out of a glass of water like reeds from a river bed. An ash tray sat off to the far side of the little nightstand, four butts sticking up like sandstone colored grave markers. Aaron took a puff, and got down on a knee, oblivious to the fact that he just could’ve moved the easel towards the sofa and sat down comfortably. Staring at the canvas, he reviewed his work. After Sanya revealed his talent for still lifes at the coven, he was bombarded with requests to create commissioned art for several members of the squadron. It got so bad that Aaron went to Minna to resolve the constant harassment he was getting. Graciously, she stepped in and selected names out of a hat, Lucchini winning the draw, nipping the problem in the bud. Over the span of three days, he had been working on and off on this particular work for her, a picture of a setting Tuscan sun over a vineyard. Going off of memory alone, Divale had nearly recreated the picture that Francesca showed him, at least from the sky to the plowed earth. He grimaced as the tremors in his hands started to come back around, symptoms of his alcohol withdrawal. Looking at his slightly quivering hands, he balled them into fists in frustration. “How the hell can I create when I’m in this state? Point a gun to my head and I wouldn’t be able to paint a fucking straight line to save my ass.” he declared with anger to no one in particular.

Suddenly, he had an epiphany. *Like what I said in Bedgebury Woods, God doesn’t work in straight lines and neither does Mother Nature.* With a frenzy, he grabbed a paintbrush with a fine tip and dabbed it into his palette, swirling the fine bristles into a nut brown dollop of color. Flicking the ashes from his cigarette into the ash tray, he quickly moved his hand along the canvas, weaving the tip of the brush this way and that, letting his body’s weakness become a strength. Soon, the vines of the wine grapes began to materialize on the canvas like Lazarus himself, popping into existence in a flurry of imagination and creativity. Within thirty seconds, Aaron had performed a work of vegetative growth that would normally take months. Placing the paintbrush back into the cup, the remaining paint staining the liquid the color of pine sap, he smiled. *This will do nicely. Now it’s time for the leaves and shadowing.* He proceeded to reach for another brush when he noticed something along the side of the glass, a reflection that seemed out of place. With practiced ease, he
thought about what was behind him and soon recognized what it was. *Someone’s watching me again.* Without looking around, he stood up and puffed at his cigarette. “My training taught me the value of being unobtrusive, invisible so to speak. Had no choice when we got into the real world. Got quite good at it and helped teach my men this important lesson through a series of games that I called Regicide, where the main objective was to lay a hand on me without me noticing their presence. If I noticed them at any point during their run, they lost and had to start over.” he stated. Sniffing the air, Aaron added, “And it appears that you have lost Lieutenant. That rose perfume of yours and your reflection in the brush glass there betrays you. So come on out from the door, if you want to.”

Perrine’s eyes widened in shock. *He knew I was here just from smelling my perfume and seeing a sliver of me in the glass?!* Begrudgingly, she entered the room as Aaron turned around and looked at her, inhaling the last dregs of the cigarette down to the butt and grinding it into the ash tray. “You forgot the scent of marigold tea on my breath.” she mocked.

“No ones perfect.” Aaron quipped, the smoke escaping from his mouth and nostrils like a chimney. He looked at her, coming closer from across the room and noticed her wincing a tad as she sat down on the furthest edge of the sofa, the one spot that was as far away from him as possible. *Probably woke up from the pain.* “Rehab not going well?” he asked.

“That’s my business, not yours.” Perrine shot back acidly. “Why are you burning midnight oil on such a pointless enterprise?” she added, gesturing to the painting.

“Why I’m up is because of my body having a hard time getting used to a reduced alcohol diet.” Aaron clarified. “Plus, creativity is far from a pointless enterprise. Would you rather I’d be doing something else?”

“Packing your bags would be a good place to start.” Clostermann answered. “You’ve brought nothing but trouble since you got here.”

“If it wasn’t for me, you’d be in a pine box by now.” Aaron countered, returning to his work. He took out a different paint brush and rubbed it dry on his pant leg. “And that banshee would’ve done worse to Shirley and Yoshika had I not distracted it with words.”

Perrine looked at Aaron and narrowed her eyes. “First you tell us that you have dealings with demons and now you’ve added banshees to the mix? Seems like you have a talent for such things considering that your apple doesn’t fall far from their tree.”

Aaron dabbed the brush into a mixture of two differing shades of green and placed it over the top of the glass. He gazed at Perrine and put on an annoyed face. “ Couldn’t inject enough bile into me at the coven?” he inquired.

“Trust me warlock,” Perrine said, glaring a hole through his eyes, “if it wasn’t for the fact that the commander seems to be under your spell, I would’ve injected my fully loaded MAS into your testicles and blow them to smithereens.” She leaned in and hissed, “Just like you tried to do with your fist to my head during the exercise, and I know you would’ve done it too; don’t even lie.”

“I have enough bad notions inside of me already,” Aaron growled back, placing a hand over his heart, “and they don’t want any more company.”

Clostermann was about to say something else when Aaron suddenly whipped his head around at the direction of the open door. Her line of attack now interrupted, she reacted the only way she could, with a question. “What is it?” she queried.
“Vehicle circling the courtyard.” Aaron murmured. He tilted his head, bidding Perrine to follow him. She complied, curiosity overtaking her and the two walked back up to the messhall. Once inside, Aaron peered at the moonlight, seeing it change from silver to a dull yellow. *Headlights.* Perrine got to the leftmost window first and pulled away the curtain just in time to catch a glimpse of an open air town car, the driver bundled up in the cold March night, features indistinguishable, and his passenger in the livery of a high ranking officer, a general judging by the shoulder epaulettes, the flat top cap over his head flattening out a head of black hair. The brown eyes stared ahead, full of energy and intent, making his long face with a pencil thin moustache look more serious than it should. Perrine recognized him within an instant. *That’s General de Gaulle!* “Holy hell it’s Charles! What is he doing here?!” Aaron exclaimed in a low voice, knowing who it was that passed his eyes not too long ago.

“That man is General Charles de Gaulle, the highest ranking general of all Free French forces.” Perrine venomously retorted. “You’d do well to remember that.”

“General?” Aaron asked in disbelief, pressing his face to the glass to catch the last fleeting moments of de Gaulle’s passage. “He certainly rose up the ranks the last time I saw him.”

Perrine let the curtain fall and she turned on a dime, looking up at Aaron’s face. “How do you know the general?” she asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Falaise, ’43.” Aaron explained. “A column of French armor was in danger of being cut off and, then Brigadier General de Gaulle, was tasked with holding the lines, trying to maintain a three mile gap between them and the enemy. Me and my boys saw the mess they were in and helped out. We disguised ourselves as French soldiers and presented some fake credentials to gain entry. When I first saw him, he was smoking a cigarette, giving orders at a curt pace. He thanked us for our assistance and placed us on the front lines, plugging gaps. It wasn’t long after we got nestled in the hastily dug trench line that the Neuroi showed up in force, deploying multiple units of Cataphracts in wedge formations, attempting to pierce our lines like charging cavalry or feigning towards and then away, firing their cannons. The battle was intense and we held for over four hours, but losses began to take their toll and the line would crumble soon. Then, de Gaulle arrives at the front, armed with a rifle, and urged his men to continue to the fight, popping off aimed shots and giving orders. I thought to myself, ‘This crazy fool is going to get killed and then we’ll all be in a spot of bother’. Yet, he didn’t go down despite the hail of cannon fire, the explosions, the deafening noise of battle. Damnedest thing I ever saw. After the enemy withdrew, I personally went up to him and shook his hand, saying that while he may be proud of us, we were proud of him. De Gaulle thanked me and promised that one day he would repay me and my men for our courage, that he owed it to us, to me. Don’t think he remembers, but I don’t care, the man has my respect.”

“Sergeant Divale!” Mio’s voice rang a ways up the hallway near the study. “Are you there?!” That sounds urgent.

“I’m in the messhall major!” Aaron called out. Within seconds, the doors to the dining opened up and Mio stood there with a relieved look to her face.

“Excellent.” she commented. “You and the Lieutenant are together so that makes my job that much easier. Commander Wilcke needs you both to report to the hanger ASAP. Come with me, Hajikata will be out front with a jeep soon.”

With haste, the pair walked out of the messhall and down the hallway. Perrine paused and asked Mio, “Can I quickly change first?”

“No time.” Mio replied, shaking her head. “You should’ve put on some clothes beforehand.”
“Boom. Headshot. “On a scale of one to ten Major Sakamoto,” Aaron began as he opened the door to the outside, the chilly March evening air blasting through, “how much shit has just hit the fan?”

“I’m not allowed to go into details just yet with you both, but in my opinion we are looking at a nine plus.” Mio replied, craning her neck out and to the right, looking out for her aide. Divale waited until Clostermann passed the threshold before closing the door behind them all. He turned and inhaled the fresh crisp air and the faint aroma of exhaust fumes from the general’s car. The moon was shining and bathed the outside world in a white light, making the dew drops on the grass sparkle and the paved asphalt look navy blue. A light fog hovered over the earth, like transparent ice over arctic waters.

“Jesus it’s freezing out here.” Perrine complained as she huddled in her robe, her breath misting around her mouth and face, moving her bare feet up and down.

“This is mild compared to Russia at this time of year.” Aaron recollected. He then took off his shirt, the released body heat looking like a ghostly spirit departing from a dead body and offered it to Clostermann. “It may not be much, but it will help.”

“Keep your worn out horse blanket away from me.” Perrine viciously declined. *Suit yourself, but don’t ever say that I never tried to do something nice for you.* Mio then caught the faint yellow of headlights and nodded in approval. *Excellent reaction time Keisuke. You’re a good man.* The faint yellow soon became a bright gold as Warrant Officer Hajikata rounded the corner, the vehicle mowing through the fog, the wispy vapor curling away like water, the jeep’s engine thrumming loudly. He stopped with a small screech and quickly got our of the drivers seat, moving at the quick step towards the passenger front and rear side doors, opening them both.

“I deeply apologize for the wait Major Sakamoto.” Hajikata stated with a low bow. “It will not happen again.”

“You did more than fine Warrant Officer Hajikata,” Mio replied, getting into the front passenger seat. “They’re aren’t many people who can wake up, suit up, get to the vehicle depot, and pick someone up in less than ten minutes. You have nothing to apologize for.” Perrine got into the back first and yelped in pain a bit as she crawled to the far side, giving Aaron the inner seat behind the major. “You all right there Lieutenant?” Mio asked with concern, turning around in her seat.

“I’m fine Major Sakamoto.” Perrine answered, grimacing as she buckled herself in. “Just the shock of the cold that’s all.”

*And a little bit of pain from what I hear. Your rehab isn’t going too well. You’re putting to much stress on yourself to get back into the air and that’s hindering everything. Relax a bit, rest.* Mio turned away and gestured with her right hand, indicating that Hajikata could proceed. Shifting gears, Keisuke drove around the inner ring with far more speed than what Aaron experienced on his first day. Looking at her watch she saw that it was 3:55 AM. *Will take us at least five minutes to get there. That’s fine by me, lets both get organized and allows us to plan ahead before Sanya arrives.*

Meanwhile as the jeep rounded the bend and out the gate into the outer ring, Aaron looked over at Perrine and morse coded on the seat between them. (Any idea what’s going on? It has to be big.)

(How the hell should I know? I’m as clueless as you are right now, but if Major Sakamoto says that it’s a nine out of ten, and that General de Gaulle is here, I think you can do the math.)

(It has to be a mission of great importance, probably a ground operation in France.)

(What makes you say that?)
(Remember what I said to Minna at the coven? That I would be the guy she called if something as close to F.U.B.A.R ever happened? I think that this is one of those times. Not taking away anything from you or anyone else here, but when it comes to being a ground grunt, I’m the first, last, and only reliable option you’ve got.)

(Until your bravado gets you killed.)

Aaron left the conversation at that as the jeep sped through the outer ring gate and up along the grassy trail leading to the hanger. *This has got be a ground operation, it would make no sense for Minna to send Mio to get me if it wasn’t serious. Are Resistance cells being attacked? A retrieval operation? Search and rescue mission?* Soon a strange sound filled Aaron’s ears, a steady thrum that overtook the more metallic engine, coming from above. He looked up and could see a descending witch circling around the hanger that was coming closer with every passing second, waiting to get confirmation to land. *That’s got to be Sanya. She’s not scheduled to be back for some time. Must have found something.* Hajikata came to a stop in front of the hanger, the front door wide open, illuminating the surrounding area with an orange glow. All but the driver got out of the jeep, Aaron holding the door open for Perrine who didn’t even give him so much as an approving nod as she stepped into the wet grass. Divale closed the door and walked to and into the hanger, the interior little changed save for the space nearest the launching dais, occupied by three chairs in front of a wheeled blackboard with a map taped onto it, one of Northern France.

Two people were in front of the board, one was Minna, dressed in her full uniform, while the other was a giant of a man, the same dimensions as Aaron, but just a shade taller. General Charles de Gaulle looked at the arrivals from a distance and smiled a warm smile, one usually reserved for placating foreign dignitaries and guests. He took his time gauging them, holding his right hand to his chin, the tips of his fingers stroking his almost nonexistent moustache. His brown eyes stared at them clinically and his tan uniform seemed to mesh with the lighting, as if he wanted to be invisible. The epaulettes of his rank shined brightly, contrasting sharply with his pale skin, while the medals that decorated his left breast ran down to almost to the ends of his ribs. When they were close enough, all three saluted sharply, both officers respectfully returning it. De Gaulle walked to Perrine and gave her a proper French greeting, a handshake followed by the standard air cheek kiss. “J’ai été profondément troublé lorsque j’ai entendu parler de votre mauvaise fortune, mais je suis heureux que vous alliez bien. Nous avons perdu beaucoup trop de bons officiers au fil des ans. Sois fort pour la France (I was deeply troubled when I heard about your ill fortune, but I’m glad that you are well. We have lost far too many good officers over the years. Be strong for France).”

“Je vais général (I will general).” Perrine answered, her chest swelling with pride.

The French general then regarded Aaron and extended his hand in greeting. “Et Aaron Divale (And Aaron Divale).” He looked at his collar and noticed the chevrons of a sergeant. “Oh, je m’excuse. Sergent Divale. On pourrait penser que, vu ce que vous avez fait, vous seriez plus haut dans les rangs (Oh, I apologize. Sergeant Divale. One would think that given what you have done you’d be higher up the ranks).” he stated.

“Je dois commencer quelque part. (Have to start somewhere).” Aaron answered humbly shaking de Gaulle’s hand firmly. “Et regardez-vous, un général à part entière maintenant. C’est bon à voir, vous le méritez (And look at you, a full fledged general now. That’s good to see, you deserve it).”

“Je n’avais pas beaucoup de choix (Didn’t have much of a choice).” de Gaulle admitted with a wistful smile. “Tous les autres officiers étaient morts (All the other officers were dead).”

“Une idée de ce qui se passe (Any idea what’s going on)?” Perrine asked anxiously. Before the general could answer, Sanya entered the hanger through the open portal, descending like an elevator
on the dais, her Strikers slowly going offline as she landed on the concrete and metal platform.

“Je crois que votre commandant peut mieux vous informer de la situation que moi (I believe that your commander can better inform you all of the situation better than I),” de Gaulle remarked, bidding them to sit down with a gesture of his left hand.

The three all sat down in the chairs, Aaron on the right, Perrine on the left, and Mio smack dab in the middle. They still haven’t broke the ice yet. That needs to happen soon, one way or another. Minna saw Sanya set down and walk towards her, taking the communicator out of her ear and fiddling with it like a watchmaker does a gear. After a few steps Sanya nodded and Wilcke smiled. Good girl. Now we can get this show on the road. "I called you all here on short notice because there has been a major development.” Minna began. “While on patrol, Sanya discovered an active distress signal, DN38416, that has been verified by General de Gaulle as part of the 114th Engineers Brigade, assigned to the 5th Division.” Aaron rose a disbelieving eyebrow while Perrine practically jumped out of her seat. That’s Amelie’s unit! She must be alive!

“Where is the signal, who sent it?” Clostermann anxiously asked.

“More like if it is even a true signal at all.” Aaron interjected, eliciting a dirty look from Perrine. “Can we verify that this isn’t some ghost signal being bounced around dead frequencies?”

“I have full faith in Sanya’s hunches and you should too Sergeant.” Minna stated.

“As do I.” de Gaulle added. “You have it on my authority that this signal is genuine.”

“I’m sorry for being a bit skeptical here General de Gaulle, but I’m awfully confused about all this.” Aaron admitted with respect. “I mean, isn’t it proper protocol in the French Army to delete frequencies corresponding to destroyed units? The entire 5th Division was in the worst of the fighting at the Maginot Line and was practically wiped out. I saw it with my own eyes. The odds of someone surviving that mess is next to none.”

“While true,” de Gaulle explained, “only the highest levels are terminated. Individual units are still kept online until confirmation of destruction.”

Aaron’s eyes widened in shock. “Are you saying that there could’ve been survivors there and all I had to do was switch to a secondary frequency?” he asked. Putting his head in his hands he muttered, “If I knew that information I probably could’ve found them myself.”

“Speaking of find,” Mio interrupted, “how did Sanya manage to find it when the Resistance couldn’t? Doesn’t make any sense.”

De Gaulle was about to answer, but Aaron beat him to the punch, sitting back up and stating, “The Resistance doesn’t have access to military grade communications hardware, and most of what they do receive from airdrops is second hand surplus from The Great War. It wouldn’t be powerful enough to pick up such a signal.” He furrowed his brow and deduced, “Her enhanced communicator and magic probably gave her an advantage in uncovering its existence.”

“That it did.” Sanya piped up with a grin. “I’ve also managed to unscramble the signal a bit. Most of it couldn’t be salvaged, all I got was probably fifteen seconds of dialogue, but what I did get was in the open.”

“Then play it! Let’s hear it!” Perrine shouted emphatically.

Sanya held the communicator out away from her and flicked a tiny lever. Static could be heard
followed by a series of explosions and gunfire taking place is some sort of structure given how they seemed to echo, as if traveling down a wide room, followed by yelling and screaming, female and male voices all at once in a deranged chorus. Then a voice spoke. “Mayday, Mayday, this is Sergeant Planchard of the 114th Engineers, requesting immediate assistance and extraction! Is anyone reading this, please respond! We are under attack by.” The message was interrupted at the end by the beginnings of a Neuroi beam charging up.

“Amelie!” Perrine exclaimed, hands to her face in shock and distress. She looked at Sanya and inquired, “Is there anything else? Anything at all?”

“The message cuts out after that. I can get nothing more. I’m sorry Perrine.” Litvyak replied sadly.

“We have to get a rescue team set up and sent out at once.” Perrine declared with force. “French honor demands it.”

“First off,” Aaron started putting his left hand to his chin, “is it possible to replay that message except slower?”

“Of course, why?” Minna asked.

“Please just do it.” Aaron politely countered, concentrating on the ear piece. Wilcke nodded to Litvyak, who did as she was told, playing Planchard’s fifteen second message once more. Aaron listened to the sound at the end again and frowned. *Something doesn’t sound right.*

“What are you thinking Sergeant Divale?” Mio asked, regarding Aaron. *He’s searching for something, trying to uncover truths like he did at the coven.*

After a split second, Aaron looked at everyone in the room and said, “Pardon my French, but we need to get off the balls of our asses and do something about investigating this and possibly getting them home.” Then he looked at Minna and queried, “Have we managed to triangulate the signal’s origin?”

“We managed to isolate it to Northern France, roughly fifty miles away from the Belgian border.” she informed. General de Gaulle picked up a wooden pointer with a pencil and deftly marked the areas mentioned.

“That’s a lot of area to cover,” Perrine observed dejectedly, “and they sounded really hardpressed. If they had to retreat, they could be anywhere.”

“Don’t lose heart Lieutenant Clostermann.” de Gaulle retorted. “If memory serves me right, the 114th had a very powerful aetheric booster, making their communications that much quicker. Given how this message sounds, the signal must have been sent within the hour. They wouldn’t have gone far after that.”

“Forgive me general.” Perrine apologized. Looking at Minna with a frenzied stare she asked, “What’s our next move commander?”

“I’m sending Major Sakamoto into France with Sergeant Divale acting as escort with the objective of investigating this signal and, if survivors are found, to get them evacuated.” Wilcke proclaimed.

“With due respect Commander Wilcke, but I believe that the command of this mission should be given to Sergeant Divale.” de Gaulle suggested.

“Why so General de Gaulle?” Minna inquired, her tone questioning and unamused.
“Major Sakamoto may hold the senior rank, but she doesn’t know France like Sergeant Divale does. The leader in this endeavor must not constantly ask for information from their subordinates. They need to know what to do and why beforehand to make this venture successful. Plus, the sergeant knows the language and terrain, his contacts within the Resistance could prove helpful.” de Gaulle reasoned.

Minna gave it a thought. *The logic is sound, but is he ready for such a heavy responsibility? He may say he does, but I’m not that optimistic. What does she think?* Wilcke gave Mio a look that clearly read ‘are you comfortable in taking the backseat’. Sakamoto tilted her head towards Aaron and winked, giving the a-ok. “You ready to go back across the pond Sergeant Divale?” she asked with a smile.

“Bring it on.” Aaron answered. He got up and regarded Mio. “Let’s get hopping major.”

Clostermann listened to all of this and couldn’t help but fell slighted. *This is my friend. I should be the one to go, not him! I’m not going to let this stand!* “Hold on!” Perrine yelled at the top of her lungs and got up from her chair, causing everybody to stop and look at her. “I formally request to join this mission.” she said, saluting and puffing out her chest with a slight wince. “I’m perfectly capable to undertake such an enterprise.”

“Are you now?” Aaron boldly dared, giving her a mocking look. He quickly veered off in the direction of a tool chest and cracked it open. After a few seconds of searching, he withdrew two five pound monkey wrenches and walked back on the double. He held them out to Perrine and instructed, “Take one of these in either hand and hold them away from your body, above your head, for ten seconds.”

Perrine took both tools in her hands, letting her arms drop to her sides, feeling the weight of the metal. Summoning her strength, she proceeded to lift them as instructed, turning her body into a T. As she got halfway up her chest, the pain flared up, dull and bothersome. *I can’t stop now. I must go on! I will not be defeated!* Moving up past her head, the ache intensified, feeling like a bed of nails being pressed against her, and Perrine could almost hear her newly bound flesh tear from within. *Must... not... fail.* Her face turned bright red from exertion and then, a lance of white hot agony caused her to involuntarily scream and she collapsed to her knees, hands slapping the concrete floor, arresting her descent, the monkey wrenches falling to the ground with loud clangs. Perrine looked up and saw Aaron look at her, shaking his head to and fro. “Your Bren weighs almost twice as much as that and you are obviously not one hundred percent from your injury that you suffered in Bedgebury Woods. You’re staying here Lieutenant, end of discussion.”

Instead of taking his words and backing down, Clostermann growled loudly and sprang up to her feet, angry as a hive of disturbed hornets. She cocked her right hand back and let loose, connecting her palm flush with Aaron’s left cheek, the slap causing him to stagger back. Everyone in the room was in a state of both dismay and alarm at such a violent action. “Bastard!” she yelled, grabbing his shirt with both hands, and looking up into his face. “My friend Amelie is out there and I should be the one to get her out of there, not you!”

Mio got up from her seat and made to grab Perrine and pull her away from him, but Aaron raised his right hand, causing her to stop. “It’s alright major.” he assured without looking at her, a small red handprint becoming visible on his face. Keeping his gaze fixed on Perrine he added, “I could tell from your reaction to the message she was your friend, and though you aren’t coming with me and Major Sakamoto, you have a key role to play here.” Clostermann’s grip slackened as she tried to digest what he was saying to her. “Three months have passed since I’ve last been in France, three months where everything that I know could be radically different.” He looked up across the way to de Gaulle and asked, “How fast can you get the most up to date intelligence from that area to here?”
“Within ten minutes time if I have my office use the pneumatic delivery system. What do you need?” de Gaulle answered quickly.

“Aerial recon photos, Resistance transmissions, post action reports, everything. Leave no stone unturned.” Aaron replied. He pointed a finger at Perrine and gave her a hard look. “You need to be our eyes and ears, getting us to where we need to be without having the Neuroi throw a wrench into the works. Stay in constant contact with me and together we will help get her and anyone else out there out of this mess. I promise.”

He regarded Mio and cocked his head in the direction of Minna’s hanger office and the two sped off, Aaron’s momentum breaking Perrine’s grip on his shirt. She saw him leave and stated with venom when he was about to get to the door, “Just make sure you come back with more than a ribbon to show for your efforts.”

Mio whipped around with a stare that made it clear to Perrine that she went too far. For his part, Aaron gripped the door knob tightly as he opened the door, his hand crushing the brass like an empty tin can, the metallic groans audible in the silence. He trembled with barely contained ire, the tremors spreading through his body, face contorting with wrath, eyes turning orange, and breath coming in and out with phlegm laced heaves. Divale bit down on his bottom lip hard, his mind barely registering the aftereffects of the stinging slap or his pearly white teeth sinking into the flesh, drawing blood. “Bring it back Aaron.” Mio advised in a calm voice. “Bring it back.”

Aaron shook his head and walked past the threshold, letting Mio pass through before slamming the door behind them, causing Sakamoto to jump. “Get us below so we can suit up.” he spat out, flecks of blood spewing from his wound onto the floor. Walking briskly away from him, Mio reached Minna’s desk within a few steps and pressed the button underneath. The elevator slowly rose from the floor and Aaron paced back and forth like a caged lion, seething from the insult, opening and closing his massive fists, sucking on his lip and applying pressure with his tongue, the blood making him almost giddy. The major watched him with a wary eye as the platform stopped, the acme point reached.

“Are you with me Sargeant Divale?” she asked, pulling open the elevator door.

“Oh we are major,” Aaron commented as he cracked his neck loudly, the last drips of blood dribbling along the creases of his mouth, “but deep down I wish I wasn’t if you catch my drift.”

Mio got into the elevator and moved as close to the left edge as possible to afford him room. “She isn’t worth your time, the mission is.” she stated firmly.

“Thank God for small favors.” Aaron murmured, entering the elevator and shutting the lattice iron door behind him with a heavy clank. Sakamoto reached to her left side and pushed the button and the platform began to descend. “Wish this damn thing moved faster.” Divale commented as a few seconds went by, the top of the elevator barely a few feet below the floor above them. “We don’t have the luxury of time.”

“Yet you took up time by listening to the message again.” Mio quipped, looking up at him. “Why did you do that?”

Am I really that obvious in what I’m thinking? Relying on memory, he took off his communicator and copied the exact steps that Sanya took in replaying and slowing down the message. “Listen very carefully to the last three seconds.” he instructed, before letting the transmission play again. Mio furrowed her brow as she leaned in close to the ear piece in Aaron’s hand. What am I listening for? No sooner had she thought it than she heard it, the Neuroi beam charge that sounded more like two
independent sounds at slow speed, but appear as fact at normal speed, and understood why Divale was unsettled after hearing it the first time.

“That isn’t a beam charge at all.” Mio breathed in wonder. “Sounds more like a grinding followed by a crackling whoosh.”

“Which also means that the Neuroi didn’t attack the 114th.” Aaron expounded. “People did, people using a flamethrower.”

*Attacked by their own? Why?* “Are you absolutely sure of that?” Mio conjectured with a hint of doubt. “It could be friendly.”

Aaron shook his head. “Doubt it major.” he replied. “That grinding is that of a flamethrower ignition striker being lit, that point I’m certain. Plus, why the hell would an engineer have a flamethrower, Neuroi are immune to it.”

Mio leaned back against the metal elevator interior and thought out loud. “So it’s not friendly, and given that flamethrowers are specialized pieces of equipment that require constant maintenance and careful handling, the only groups that would have access and the know how to clean them would be ex military.” she surmised. She looked at Aaron and asked, “Why didn’t you share these concerns with us topside?”

“The subject of deserters is a thorny subject to the French.” Aaron explained as the elevator finally ground to a halt, the platform rising up and down. “I kept my mouth shut out of respect for the general. It wouldn’t be proper of me to suggest that French soldiers were shooting at French witches.” He opened the door and the pair stepped through into the weapons depot. “Alright Mio,” Aaron sounded off, “I need you to kit yourself accordingly. Pack light and tight, no jingles. Also, get into something with more of an earth tone, you’ll stick out like a sore thumb out there. Move out.”

Sakamoto power walked to the uniform section while Aaron took off his shirt, folding it in his hands as he walked the opposite way. Following the coven, he was given the chore of cleaning and doing inventory of the weapons depot every twelve hours. Given how often the 501st were apt to be involved in active engagements, it was a heavy job, but Divale took to it like the experienced quartermaster that he was, making sure everything down to the last pistol cartridge was counted, labeled, and put in its proper place. In addition, he created a small cache of emergency supplies for every member of the squadron, himself included, putting in water, food, medicine, ammunition, and spare weapons and uniforms in thick iron safes in case the facility was hit. He gave each person a key and made a duplicate that he kept underneath a fake panel in his locker in case they were lost. If the worst came to pass, he could simply wrench them open. Aaron rounded the corner and came to where the emergency strongboxes were kept, walking to the last one, the metal imprinted with his name on the top. Placing his right hand on the cool door he uttered, “Aperta.” The lock clicked loudly and he opened the door, fishing out his khaki pants, two Colt 1911s, a STG 44, a belt of five grenades, a tan backpack that contained all the ammo, medicine, food, and water, and two tins of greasepaint, one green and the other black. When that was down he gave a quick look around and took off his pants, saving the belt. With haste he put on his khaki’s, the wide bottoms easily slipping past his boots, looped his belt along his waist, and secured it. Throwing his old shirt and denim pants into the safe, he closed it, hearing the lock latch. Then, he placed his glasses into his backpack and cracked open the tins of greasepaint rubbing every square inch of his exposed top half, long daubed lines of green and black, looking like an Indian brave preparing for war. Satisfied, he closed the now empty tins and threw them in a waste bin. *Note to self, subtract two cans of greasepaint from the stock, one black, one green.*

“You just about ready Mio?” Aaron called out as he flicked the safeties off his guns, tucking his
pistols in his front pockets and slinging the rifle strap over his shoulder, askew of his backpack. He gazed at his watch and frowned. 4:20 AM. Need to be faster.

“T’im over by the elevator!” Mio called out. Aaron bounded over to her and saw that Mjor Sakamoto had cleaned up well. Gone was her white officers coat and present was a German made woodland camouflage patterned uniform that fit her snugly. Like him, she had a backpack on, but unlike him, she carried her 20mm cannon with her, with a Thompson slung over her shoulder.

“I thought I said light.” Aaron remarked, gesturing to the gun in Mio’s hands.

“One of us had to carry some sort of heavy weapon.” Mio politely answered, getting into the elevator.

“What do you think I am?” Aaron joked as he fell in behind her, closing the door.

Major Sakamoto chuckled as she pushed the button and the platform began to ascend. “Any idea how to play this?” she asked, flicking the safety off.

“We go in fast and low, using the fog pockets as cover.” Aaron explained carefully. “Roughly one hundred and fifty feet above the waterline at maximum throttle. Don’t go below that elevation or you’ll be in danger of getting knocked out of the air by an errant swell or spotted. Cut the Strikers on my mark and I’ll glide us in, making our infiltration as silent as possible. If we’re lucky, we can make it there and get in cover before dawn breaks and lifts the fog. Any questions?”

“None at all.” Mio commented. “Pretty cut and dry.” She looked up at him and smiled. “Done this before?” she jokingly inquired.

“I’ve had practice.” Aaron deadpanned as the office came back into view through the lattice door. The elevator stopped and he opened the door, letting Mio out first. Suddenly, the pneumatic tube delivery system came to life, gusting air through the pipe until a series of pamphlets shot ot the other side into a box. That must be the intel. By the time Aaron got to it, the container was almost full of papers. Perrine is going to have her hands full. Hopefully she can conserve her energy better than she can her ammo. Grabbing the box, he walked to the door, Mio opening it out of courtesy. As he made his way past the threshold and into the hanger proper, he saw everyone, Minna, de Gaulle, Perrine, and Sanya look at him in wonder as if he was a native that had stepped foot into civilized lands for the first time. Wilcke had her hand to her face, De Gaulle cocked his eyebrows, Perrine looked at the box he was carrying with a face that looked like she was convinced that the world was ending, and Sanya burst into peals of laughter. “What?” Aaron quipped as he set the box down near Clostermann.

“I think someone forgot the memo that Halloween is seven months away.” Sanya guffawed.

“Haha, very funny.” Aaron replied in an unamused tone. “Got any good news for me?”

Litvyak got her laughter under control enough to report, “I managed to isolate the signal. It’s coming from Verdun.”

“Excellent.” Aaron congratulated. “Good work.”

“And, take my communicator. My new one is coming in tomorrow so you can have this one. It’s stronger than yours and you’ll need it out there.” Sanya offered, taking her ear piece out and handing it to Aaron.

“Spasibo (Thank you).” Aaron stated and started replacing his comms. He looked at Perrine who fished out the papers from the box and placed them on a large table that De Gaulle had just dragged
from the far side of the hanger. “You hear that Lieutenant?”

“Loud and clear.” Perrine answered, giving him a cursory glance before returning to her work. “It may take sometime to get this sorted out. The intelligence files are all over the place.”

“You’ll get it done.” Aaron assured gently. “My frequency will be Sanya’s for the duration of this mission. Keep active comms with me and a passive signal for Mio. In case something happens to me, make hers the primary. Find me the quickest path to Verdun. Got it?”

She nodded absentmindedly as she shuffled more pamphlets around, eyes darting this way and that. Must’ve got a little dress down after that snide comment of yours earlier. I hope you got a new hole gouged into you to match the other you bitch. Mio in the meantime made her way to her Strikers and put them on, the machines roaring to life. Aaron unfurled his wings and leapt to the right side of the launch dais, waiting for the restraints on Sakamoto’s Strikers to let her loose. “Good luck out there Sargeant.” Minna called out. “Come back in one piece.”

Aaron looked at her and winked. “We’ll be fine commander. Be back in no time.” Mio’s restraints let go and she walked briskly to the left edge of the dais. Divale looked at her and then looked up into the evening sky. “Roll on in 3, 2, 1!” Aaron counted down loudly over the din of the thrumming Striker engines. At the end of one, both he and Mio took off, soaring into the cold evening air and looping over the castle, with Aaron’s line flatter so as to not impede Mio’s longer more circular trajectory. It didn’t take them long to pass the town of Dover proper, speeding past the famous white cliffs, before diving into the dense fog. He thumbed his communicator dial to Perrine’s frequency and requested, “Can you patch me through to the nearest radar tower Lieutenant?”

“Give me a second.” Clostermann stated. After a few seconds she returned, “It’s all yours.”

“Merci (Thank you).” Aaron replied. “Radar tower control do you read me? Over.”

“Loud and clear outbound flight. This is Radar Station Dover 3. Over.” the radar control operator voiced back, a static pop obscuring the last bit of the message.

“Dover 3, are there any Neuroi shenanigans in our area? Over.”

“Unfortunately outbound flight there are quite a few flyers out and about. Advise caution and to reduce speed. Over.” the operator answered sadly.

Fuck! We can’t afford to go slow and dawn is fast approaching. We’ll be sitting ducks out here, but I have no choice. “Understood Dover 3. Outbound flight out.” Aaron stated and cut the link, swearing softly under his breath as he looked at his watch. 4:25. If we reduce the speed and make for Calais we’ll get there at about 5:10. Sunrise will be at 5:15 or thereabouts. Man this is going to be close. He looked over at Mio who just pulled up alongside him, also looking distressed by the news. “I picked a hell of a day to go back to France.” he sarcastically remarked.

“It could be worse.” Mio observed, flipping up her eye patch and peering into the night sky, watching for interceptors. “We could be doing this during the day.”

“Clostermann to Divale.” Perrine voice cut in over Aaron’s ear piece. “I’ve found a good path to get you to Verdun. Make your way to Calais to the beginning edge of grid block C9. You’ll pop up near the ends of the docks. Be sure to land at Docking Bay 94. Once you set down, make your way straight south down the street for a mile and a half. That will take you to a plaza where you’ll find a metro station entrance. Once you get inside, contact me for further instructions.”

“Wilco Clostermann. Divale out.” Aaron answered, diverting course.
Mio put on a hopeful expression while matching his speed and trajectory and stated, “You both seem to be doing better from earlier.”

“It’s easy to talk to someone that doesn’t like you when you don’t have to see their face.” Aaron acidly shot back.

Mio became cross and let her feelings known. “You’ve had these three days to build the bridges between you two and it’s clear that they aren’t doing much to support any goodwill. I’m very disappointed in you both.” she countered.

“I’m sure you’re not the only one.” Aaron groaned back, throwing his arms up in the air, hands cutting through the fog with ease. “I’m doing the best I can, but, as the saying goes, it takes two to tango, and if she doesn’t want to step up to the plate and have a go, what more do you want me to do? Her damn prejudice sets off my temper. We just clash so much that anything I try to do to melt that ice queens heart fizzles.” He shook his head and added dejectedly, “Maybe I should just back off and avoid her.”

“Walking away from your problems isn’t going to help anyone or anything.” Mio pointed out. “Playing nice and giving people what they want never ends well. Perrine is your wingman and you have to take responsibility for her wellbeing when you two are called upon to take to the skies whether either of you like it or not. You may not have noticed, but you have opened up chinks in her armor at the coven and saving her life and promising her a new coat also aided in that. I commend you for letting her be a part of the mission so that she can take an active role in saving her friend, but you need to change your method of attack from here on out. Focus more on yourself after this and get that temper of yours under control through meditation because that will solve more than a few issues. I’ll help you with that if you want.”

“I appreciate that.” Aaron genuinely admitted. “It will help me get these withdrawal symptoms under control.”

“Are they bad?” Mio inquired with concern.

“Bit of anxiety, restlessness, good deal of tremors in the hands, night sweats, and bouts of insomnia.” Aaron informed. “Not the best time I’ve had, but it’s manageable for now. Started chain smoking just to keep my urges down and to take the edge off. Lucretia hates it and I want to quit doing that, but I have continue the bad habit until this crap gets out of me.”

“And it will Aaron.” Mio reassured. “Just be patient and never give in.”

Aaron nodded and caught a whiff of stale air, heavy with the chemical stink of oil and gasoline. We’re near the continent. “Time major?” he asked anxiously.

Mio glanced down at her watch and answered. “5:09 AM.”

This is really going to be fucking close. “Hold onto me and cut the Strikers now.” Aaron ordered.

Mio did as she was instructed, taking Aaron by the right hand and deactivating her Strikers, the rotors slowing up and eventually ceasing to rotate. Divale held her firmly yet gently like plucking a rose from it’s native bush and flapped his wings, shifting his position so that both descended as if dropped by parachute. As they fell to earth, Mio gazed out at the slowly brightening gloom, catching her first glimpse of Calais since it fell. The first things she saw were thin ribbons of oil, rainbowing as they caught the rays of the dawn. They coiled like tree rings around floating wood, water logged supply crates, and hulls of wrecks peeking up out of the water like the frog eyes in a swamp. Soon they came up to the docks, sections of the piers now devastated charred pathways leading to blasted
asphalt craters in the road. Around the drydocks unfinished ships stood dormant and forlorn like desiccated whale skeletons, the runied dock cranes gnarled and bent over like blades of grass. Squinting, she spied dock numbers painted in white at the ends of the piers. She spied the number 94 and pointed it out to Aaron, who gave her a curt nod.

“We’ll touch down there.” Aaron indicated with a head gesture towards a section of the road near a ruined storage building. Mio got her cannon out and scanned for targets while Divale maneuvered her behind him, lowering her down as the ground got closer and closer with every passing second. “I’ll take point. Watch my six.” he ordered as he took his STG 44 into his free hand, dropping Mio to the asphalt when they were six feet above it. Sakamoto landed in a crouch, panning her cannon this way and that. All that greeted her was the silent dawn, faint breezes passing over, into, and through broken windows and smashed bulkheads that hadn’t felt the warmth of a human being in over half a year. Carrion birds, black and gaunt from lack of food, cawed and pecked from their roosts, eyeing them both with hungry ebon stares. Aaron made earth fall soon afterwards and barked, “Move out on the double! Keep to the walls and don’t stop for anything!”

The pair ran off down the road leading to the plaza like Olympic sprinters, Aaron setting the blistering pace, with Mio right on his heels. They clung to the left side of the street like leeches to a leg, weaving in and around and vaulting over all manner of battlefield debris. Flipping up her eye patch, Mio still couldn’t see any sign of the enemy. So far so good. Chancing a look behind her, she saw the coming dawn erasing the fog as the rays of the sun started to climb over the horizon, or at least try to given the overcast. Looking back around, she finally saw them: three Legionary’s in a standard patrol pattern beyond the building side. “Hold up.” she whispered. “We have three tangos up ahead, nine o clock.” Aaron slowed and speed walked to the edge of the pockmarked stone wall and planted his back against it. Slowly, he peeked out, breathing softly from his mile and a half long sprint. The fog was rapidly fading, causing the Legionary’s to stand out more, the baleful red glowing with pulsating light as they searched for targets. A quick glance to the far right, the plaza came into view, a once clear throughfare now choked with destroyed and over turned vehicles, civilian and military, along with blown out store fronts and deep searing lines of ash where people met their fates from heavy Neuroi beam weapons. He also spotted the objective, a rusty iron sign with a grimy face, the blue M almost invisible, about one hundred feet away.

“Objective sighted at two o clock. One hundred feet or thereabouts.” he informed, turning to her. He knelt down and picked up a rock and Mio instantly understood what he was about to do. Distraction. Sakamoto primed for the sprint as Aaron threw the rock at the side of a truck door, the fog barely holding sway. The stone hit with force, causing the rusty door to come off its hinges, clattering to the ground. Aaron watched warily and grinned as the Legionary’s about faced and raced to the area. Gets them every time. With a swift hand gesture, the two ran out into the plaza, using the cars to hide themselves. That was when they discovered that finding a clear path would be next to impossible. Most of the vehicles were slagged, long lines of metal jutting out like shark teeth, requiring careful maneuvering to get around. Moreover, glass littered the ground, causing them to leap over or avoid them at all cost lest they attract attention. Despite these difficulties, both Aaron and Mio made excellent time through the deadly obstacle course. The metro entrance was coming up in fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, but then, as if fate decided to go against them, the fog finally lifted away and the two had no choice but to dive to the ground and slide under the rear of a flatbed truck. Looking at the reflections in some glass shards near the driver side window, Aaron saw to his dismay that the interloopers were coming back and making for their position.

“Please tell me you have a plan.” Mio whispered through gritted teeth.

Aaron held out his hands to her and said, “I have a plan. If you trust me, take my hands.” Mio nodded and took a hold of Aarons massive paws. “Obscurum.” he muttered softly under his breath and Sakamoto felt a great warmth pass from his palms to her own, flowing over her like warm bath
water. The Legionary’s continued to come closer, their feet crushing shards of glass into grains of sand with every step. Anxiously, Mio looked at Aaron who merely looked in the direction where the enemy was coming from and slowed his breathing. Suddenly, a black and red head of a Legionary popped into view, looking under the truck with its beam weapons pointing directly at their heads. Mio didn’t move or breathe as he focused on her discipline, resisting the urge to reach for her cannon. Aaron, from what she saw from the corner of her eye was strangely calm as if the current situation was a mere hinderance. The Neuroi continued to search for another few seconds before withdrawing, resuming the patrol. As soon it was far away enough to the point that neither could hear the footsteps, Mio sighed deeply and tried to pull her hands away from Aaron, but he refused to let go. “We move as one, me then you.” he said, shifting his body away from her, peering out to where the Neuroi had gone off to. Aaron saw them continue on their way and he bent and contorted his frame under and out from the bottom of the truck unnaturally, using his double jointedness to resemble a cat stretching from a nap. Minding the glass near him, Divale gently pulled Mio along, keeping one eye on the enemies.

She slithered out, getting her feet underneath her, sidestepping anything that could make so much as a whisper of a noise. From her position Sakamoto could see debris everywhere and the path to the metro station entrance was partially blocked by a cored tank, a massive hole through its side big enough for both of them to walk through. That’s our way in. Mio gestured to the vehicle and Aaron nodded in understanding, and inch by inch, foot by foot, with clasped hands like dancers at a ball, the two navigated through the field of wreckage. It took at least two agonizingly long minutes to get to the tank, Aaron getting in first. Taking a peek behind him, he smiled as he saw that the slagged metal wasn’t brittle like it usually was with civilian vehicles. These have more metal to play around with, more surface area to burn. All clear and safe for the time being, he let go of Mio’s hands, stained with his greasepaint, the warmth of his magic leaving her as quickly as it manifested. With measured steps, he walked to the furthest opening and gazed into the world beyond. “I don’t see a thing. There’s no glass from here to our objective. We can make it if we run.” He regarded the major who was by the other hole and asked, “Anything by you?”

Mio popped her head out really quick and took a gander around her. The briefest of seconds went by and she shook her head, gingerly stepping to him. Silently, using only his fingers, Aaron counted down the seconds until they both ran out into the open. Starting with three, they soon became two, than the one, before scampering out of the tank and hitting the road. The last few dozen feet or so came and went, the pair jumping down the steps leading down into the metro entrance proper, shoulder rolling forward in unison. Getting into a crouching position, Divale came face to face with a chain link fence, a solid frame of thin wire with no discernable opening or lock. Feeling a tap on his arm, he turned around and saw Mio unsheath her katana without a sound. He stepped aside and stared as Sakamoto cut the wire with minimal effort on her part, letting the blade do the cutting for her. Aaron took hold of the piece that was soon to come off until she was done cutting, lowering it to the ground away from them with care. Mio flipped up her eye patch and crawled through the hole she made, going down some more steps into a gloomy interior of an arrival departure dock, the tiled floor cracked, the grouting all but invisible from not being swept in over six months. Dust motes flitted in the air like fireflies that lost their glow, some of them catching light from the surface through cracks in the concrete tunnel above. Pillars stood at measured intervals, overlooking a deep pit where the rails would be, a sign across the way with a large bronze 4 etched into it. The air was thick with a wet musty smell, like a recently flooded cellar. Luggage cases lay in huge piles, their contents scattered here and there, footprints and handprints on the powdered ground around them the sole evidence that they had been looted. She furrowed her brow as she scanned the area. Where are the bodies? We are in the middle of a war zone and there’s not a single corpse.

“What’s wrong major?” Aaron inquired as he made his way to her position, his rifle out and ready.

“There are no bodies.” Mio stated softly, clearly flummoxed.
“Every so often, the Resistance staged mock attacks to draw the Neuroi out of the major cities to
search for supplies and bury the dead. They did their best to find something to identify them so that
any surviving next of kin were notified.” Aaron explained. He added after a bit, “Didn’t happen all
that often.” Pressing the stud on his communicator, Divale made his report. “Divale to Clostermann.
We have reached the metro station. What’s next?”

“You will make your way south to dock number 7, about nine miles down the line. The French army
created a subsidiary tunnel that could merge with the main tunnels that linked up with the Maginot
Line, hiding it behind a false wall, just underneath the sign.” Perrine instructed.

Aaron cocked his eyebrow and countered, “Wasn’t that tunnel collapsed?”

“Yes it was,” Clostermann clarified, “but the explosion opened it up to the lands beyond. It offers the
only way outside for miles, allowing you to make your way to the local Resistance cell at St Omer to
access a junction point that you can get to Lille and then Verdun.”

“Wilco Clostermann. Divale out.” Aaron replied. Mio turned a circular ring around her watch base
and opened it, revealing a compass. Locating south, she pointed right. Divale, after cutting the link,
unfurled his wings and looked at Mio who activated her Strikers.

Why walk when we can fly?

Within seconds, the two were airborne, sailing down the tunnel, the thrumming engines sounding much
louder than they should. Dock number 5 came and went like yesterday, the sign appearing as a metallic blur on the outskirts of Aaron’s vision. It was then that he noticed a change in the ground underneath him. Puddles of liquid
were below him and he knew that there were no cracks from up above that could allow such
formations. As the pair continued on their way, the puddles became larger and larger, until the rails
were the only things visible, rusty and eroded islands in a sea of water. “Divale to Clostermann.
There’s water down here and a lot of it. Any idea where it came from?” Aaron commented into his
ear piece.

“Checking it out now.” Perrine answered, the shuffling of papers plainly being heard over the
channel. Aaron saw the passing of the sixth dock and saw that the water level was rising steadily the
further they went down. “Found it!” Clostermann explained. “Dock 7 had a large freshwater
dispensing system for grey water purposes that serviced departures on long runs. Going from what
you’re saying, the tanks have ruptured. So that means that there’s a high probability that the flase
wall you need to open is underwater.”

Oh fuck me. “Wilco. Divale out.” Aaron signed off and groaned as he ended the link.

“Looks like things are going to get a little wet.” Mio remarked.

“Yeah, and in a way that I don’t like dealing with.” Aaron muttered back. Soon, he could see a huge
blockage about three quarters of the way through to dock 7, and both he and Sakamoto slowed down
and fell gently into the water to get a closer look at what was impeding their progress. The liquid was
bone chilling cold and Aaron grimaced as he waded through the waist deep artificial river. The
blockage turned out to be a massive multicar wreck, the lead engine a mangled mass of metal and
wire, trailing car after overturned and flattened car meant for passengers or cargo. Mildewed and
molded luggage bobbed up and down on the surface like buoys. The water line seemed to maintain
itself as they marched towards it, looking for a way to scale or go around it. While they ventured
towards the lead car, Mio noticed holes, not caused by rust but by enemy beams, dotting the sides and
the conductor cabin.

“Neuroi gunfire.” she observed, pointing them out. “Must have been ambushed.” Waded into a
shooting gallery with no hope of escape. Poor bastards didn’t have a chance. Aaron got to the first
car and located a window. He grabbed the edges of it and pulled, using his immense strength to rip it
clean off. More water gushed out followed by more luggage, the random bits and pieces of clothes and other floatable objects like half filled bottles of wine or perfume, hats, and wooden childrens toys, all grimy from the moisture. Towards the end of the deluge, a body flopped out, stil clad in a water logged expensive suit, the tie barely holding onto a rotted neck. As it floated away, carried downstream by the current, the chest wriggled as carrion insects tried to crawl up and out of their lairs, splitting the weakened seams in an ever expanding chittering geyser the color of mud.

“Be careful where you step major,” Aaron advised as he hunkered down and made ready to venture inside, “this could get messy.” The two squeezed through the window and into the car, loaded with luggage suspended and black with mold, flies buzzing around in squadrons of hundreds, maggots crawling along the metal and wood paneled walls. Bodies lay everywhere in various states of decay, buckled into seats, sprawled out on the floor, hung up in the mesh luggage racks, or wrapped around the standing pole bars. Some were picked clean, the insects leaving nothing but bleached bone in their wake, eyeless sockets gazing eternally out at the macabre scene, while others were halfway gone, still moisture ridden with liquid decay oozing from wounds or cracks in the skin like glue from two pieces of paper being pressed together tightly. Flies surrounded them, aware of their presence, blotting out any attempt to discern who the victims were, thick as bride veils. The smell was retch inducing, a combination of fetid rot and bad meat. For several hundred feet, Divale and Sakamoto crawled, keeping their vision forward and hands quick, wanting to spend as little time in this corridor of cadavers as possible. Aaron gazed at his timepiece, the hands reading 6:00 AM. “Hopefully that subsidiary tunnel isn’t too blocked up.” he stated, navigating past a corpse. “ Even taking into the distance we’ve already traveled into account, St. Omer is almost fifteen miles away and I don’t want to be walking there over land in soaked feet.”

“If we have to, we have to.” Mio retorted politely as she meandered around the body that Aaron got around. Eventually, they came to a sharp rise in the final car, an emergency escape hatch wide open above them, the sounds of water lapping against the structure plain to hear. It was high up and Aaron stood up and balled his fists up, clasping them together like he was setting a volleyball. Knowing that he was going to give her a boost up, Mio carefully stepped up on his hands with her left foot and planted her right firmly in the space between his neck and shoulder blade. With a deft motion, Aron lifted her up, allowing Mio to reach up and grab the lip of the opening, pulling herself up and over. She could see a large 7 on the side of the wall, mere feet away from her. Flipping over on her stomach and reversing her position, she backed into the cold water. “I see where it is Aaron. Going to see if I can open it.” Sakamoto informed.

Aaron jumped up and pulled himself up as she vacated the opening. “Be sure to hold onto something. The vortex could suck you down and away.” he warned. Nodding, Mio held her breath and dove below, disappearing under the surface, leaving Aaron alone sighing with relief. Better you than me major. I wouldn’t be able to do it. Please get it open. He waited for many seconds, listening to the water as it splashed against the car and wringing out his soaked pant legs. Bits of his grease paint had come off, patches of flesh visible, green and black drops falling into the water from his face and chest.

Not a problem. I’ll just use mud.

Suddenly, Mio came back up to the surface, inhaling deeply and loudly. “I cant budge the thing. It’s too heavy. I need you to help me.” she instructed. She looked at him with concern as she saw Aaron’s face turn white as he processed what she was suggesting for him to do, looking over the water with fear. He’s scared. We can’t have that. Not now. Sakamoto swam over to him and took hold of the metal. “Sargeant, I need your help to get us out of here.” she firmly stated.

“I know.” Aaron snapped back. “I know.” But I don’t know if I can. He started to tremble, wishing that it was all due to the cold, but knowing it was not. His memories started bubbling back to the surface and he closed his eyes. Keep it together Aaron. Then he felt two hands cluthing his wrists and he opened his eyes, coming face to face with Major Sakamoto.
“You can do this Aaron. I’ll help you get there. If you trust me, take my hand.” she offered. Divale breathed in deep and swallowed hard before grabbing Mio’s right hand. “Now look at me.” Mio instructed. “I’ll hold onto you as you pry it open. I won’t leave you out there, okay?” Silently and shaking with fright, Aaron nodded as he moved his feet over the side, preparing to slip into the water. I must do this. She needs me. Courage Aaron. He breathed in deep and went in. A bright light and the skies are black and red, enemy air units circling like vultures over a graveyard of a swamp, firing at the water, sending steam clouds, battlefield debris, pieces of dead bodies, and superheated water into the air. Screams could be heard from soldiers trying to get away, cries of horror extinguished by a flurry of freeing bolts. Strategos roll along in rows, probing destroyed vehicles and piles of corpses stacked like cordwood, high as seven feet, firing their cannons. Vision pans to the immediate surroundings, bloody water, cold and deep, the ground underneath the surface uneven due to craters. The gaze shifts to regard the cover, a partially blown apart body, the right side perforated with two quarter sized holes. The unseen head within the air pocket, a void where bone, meat, and organ were fully exposed in all their glory gory. The stench of burnt flesh and offal from the ruptured intestines is nauseating and a throat struggles to keep vomit down. Slowly steps are taken, moving with the currents of the water, traveling like a floating body should. Suddenly, the feet slip and the head falls under the surface and comes face to face with…

Mio looked into Aaron’s eyes as she pointed to where the hidden panel was. Nodding, he reached out and pushed using his magic to give him extra power. Mio unsheathed her sword and stuck it into the section of wall above them, readying a point where they could hold on. Within a second, the false panel moved, the small crack sucking in water like a babe does milk from its mother tit. Both could feel the current increase in intensity and force as Aaron continued to push, widening the gap. The water level decreased rapidly, gargling and whooshing like rain water spiraling down a gutter. Once Aaron’s head was exposed he breathed deep, spitting out some brackish fluid, and propped himself, using his arms and legs to restrain himself from being sucked away in the current, letting go of Mio who with her now free hand grabbed the katana firmly, gripping tight and gritting her teeth with exertion. When the water’s current weakened sufficiently, the pair released themselves and fell to the ground, catching their breathes. Sakamoto reached up and pulled her katana out of the wall, sheathing it with precision. Aaron opened his backpack and took out his glasses, relieved to see that they weren’t damaged, and put them on.

Wringing our her uniform as best she could, Mio quipped. “Not a bad swim Sergeant. Let’s do it again sometime.”

Aaron glared at her. “How about no, and never again, today, tomorrow, or any other day after this.” he retorted, closing his back pack and getting up to his feet. He walked to the opening and felt cool wind coming through, bathing him in a chilly aura. The light of day shone through and Aaron whipped up his STG 44 as he stepped into the opening. Mio followed suit and looked to the right, along where Perrine mentioned that the subsidiary tunnel would be and saw that it was completely clogged with rubble. Guess it’s time to get our hiking shoes on. She moved past Aaron who was looking out from a large gap in the tunnel line, rebar and concrete blocks forming a haphazard stairway. Climbing up and over, avoiding the points of metal that stuck up like porcupine quills, she saw the morning sun illuminating a scene that was unlike any that she had remembered when she had last been in France. Evidence of a fighting retreat was everywhere, wrecks littered the landscape like blackened boulders, craters spaced out near them, indicative of precision air to ground fire, and the ground was overgrown with unkempt vegetation. The grass was easily up to her waist and some distance hedgerows resembled patches of dense woods rather than bushes. Tiny birds were chirping from the branches of dead trees, bits of them signed or blown off. “It is now 6:15 in the morning.” Aaron announced after looking at his watch. He looked down at Mio and added with a grin, “Welcome to the jungle major, let’s go.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Mio make progress towards Verdun, having a minor adventure along the way. At Lille, their destination becomes evermore clearer, as do the dangers.

Chapter XIX: Into The Fire

I despair at times when I find survivors here, hoping to get them to see the straits they’re in and let me help them get out, only to have them dashed when they refuse. When it happened early on, I couldn’t understand why. What a fool I was to talk when I should’ve been listening. If only I took the time in those crucial first moments to hear why they wouldn’t leave, I could’ve spared myself much grief. Of course, it wouldn’t be easy, as no one likes to hear the stories they tell, tales of such incredible sadness that could break even my heart, and I’ve been shot there.

Diary Entry October 31st 1943

“Have you ever thought that you were born in the wrong time?” Aaron asked Mio while trudging along the left side of the winding dirt road leading to the outskirts of Ardres, constantly on alert for threats. The grey overcast sky hindered any appreciable light from shining down at all, and the wind blew hard at times, sending waves of dry leaves from the fall into their faces, as if the environment itself was trying to impede their progress and hamper their mission. The road they were on was furrowed by rains, wide deep ruts running for miles at a time, as if a giant pushed a wheelbarrow down it. Both assumed they were the result of heavy vehicles, tanks probably or overladen transports. Grass grew tall along the sides, making the young trees a few dozen feet away look like saplings, the occasional squirrel darting into the road, digging, searching for buried nuts or other tidbits before running back into the swaying green. The pair had been walking for a good two hours, meeting no patrols and making halfway decent progress on their way to Saint Omer, but he wished the pace would pick up.

Can’t really help it though. Perrine told us that some stretches of these roads were mined. God damn the French military at times. They love their mines like the Germans do their artillery.

Mio thought about it for a good five seconds and could come up with no real answer so she decided to throw it back to him. “Have you?” she responded questioningly.

“Many times,” Aaron admitted, “especially in my more lucid moments. I would think deeply for hours about such things, writing them in my diary for reference. Decided that I would probably be better suited living in the early Middle Ages, back when we didn’t have gunpowder, when men and women worked hard, lived hard, laughed hard, and loved hard. Simple times, times that a person like me could get lost in or take advantage of with my natural talents, becoming a warrior king of a tribe of barbarians or of a petty kingdom, conquered and quelled with the duel powers of a sword and statecraft.”
“Interesting.” Mio observed, sidestepping a large puddle. “However, you being a king might not be all fun and games. Monarchs love to play the game of thrones and constantly like seeking out those they can manipulate or eliminate in equal measure. You’d never be able to truly relax, be at peace in such a world.”

“Who said I would relax?” Aaron countered, looking at her with a sly grin. “Rome fell not because of her political intrigues, but because she had built her walls, believing herself safe, that there were no more wars to fight or peoples to defend against. They rested on their laurels, reposing in splendor and opulence, growing fat and weak. Lesson learned Mio: never allow time to pass you by, never settle, or you too will find yourself the victim of changes, with the only thing marking your legacy being scrawl on a page or your bones in some foreign museum.”

_Most fascinating. Hajikata certainly has rubbed off on him._

“For me, I think I’m fine where I am.” Mio stated matter of factly. “There’s plenty to do, opportunities abound, and despite being more crowded, it is still a vast place full of excitement and adventure.” She craned her neck as the duo rounded a small bend, seeing the small township appear out of the vegetative overgrowth. Aaron stopped dead in his tracks and motioned for her to get off the road with a quick gesture of his hands. Mio shouldered her 20mm and followed suit, kneeling beside him in the grass. “What’s up?” she asked. Divale didn’t answer, instead pointing to his ears, bidding her to listen. Sakamoto leaned forward and tilted her head, straining her senses and soon heard the familiar purring of an idle engine. “Resistance?” she queried.

“They never use vehicles out in the near open like this and never during the day.” Aaron informed. “It’s either marauders or slavers.”

Mio nodded in understanding and suggested, “We could use it. Make our progress that much faster.”

Divale cracked a smile. “I love it when people see things the way I do.” he said happily. Then he put on a serious face and added while advancing forward, “Slow and low and check your corners. If you’re spotted, pick your targets and go. Don’t be stagnant.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo you know.” Mio quipped as she followed him.

“Well this is the first rodeo where the bulls are human and have guns.” Aaron retorted, lunging over a small ditch. The two moved into Ardres proper, moving behind a decapitated windmill, the stone walls crumbled, the milling wheel broken. Checking the corner, Mio and Aaron could see a trio of men, pants to their ankles, pissing into the street in front of what used to be a townhouse, their clothing dirty and patchwork. All wore greatcoats in the style of police units with the large brass buttons and high collars. One was positioned just so where they could see a patch on the upper shoulder, a rough picture of a silver wolf’s head, fangs bared, upon a red background. All their shoes were dog eared, toes white as fish bellies poking out, nails grimy and brown from dirt and mud.

“Putain de vin pas cher. Passe juste à travers moi (Fucking cheap wine. Just goes right through me).” the one in the middle spoke up derisively.

“Alors ne bois pas de vin, bois plutôt l’eau (Then don’t drink wine, drink the water instead).” his friend answered mockingly.

“Jamais (Never)!” the middle man retorted violently, his stream flying all over the place. “Le poisson baise dedans (Fish fuck in it)!”

“En parlant de baise (Speaking of fuck),” the last man stated, bending over to the point where his rump could be seen by all, the pale flesh glowing like a headlight, “j’adorerais plonger mon sexe dans un ou deux de ces morceaux de viande fraîche que nous avons ramassés aujourd’hui (I’d love to sink
my cock into one or two of those pieces of fresh meat we picked up today)."

"Les produits endommagés ne se vendent pas bien, et si je vous surprends à les toucher, je les couperai moi-même. Maintenant, allons-y, une patrouille sera dans environ une heure (Damaged goods don’t sell well and if I catch you fondling them up, I’ll cut it off myself. Now, let’s go, a patrol will be around within an hour)." the middle warned, shaking the last drops of urine from his member and fishing up his pants. The other followed suit, but the one that made the rather crude comment pointed to his rump and began to squat, eliciting groans from his companions who simply walked away from him. Soon he was all alone.

With a slight tap of his right heel against the wall, a small knife sprung out of Aaron’s boot. He reached down, grabbed it, and threw it at the hunkered down man fast than you could say what. The blade tumbled through the air and embedded itself deep into the back of the skull, the individual slumping over into the road head first. Death was quick to set in as brown shit bubbled from his exposed rectum. “Find out how many there are and morse it to me.” Aaron ordered, bounding out of hiding, Mio hot on his heels. “Loop around and take up a flanking position in case any try to get away.”

Sakamoto nodded and darted the other way down a small side street while Aaron pulled out the knife, the metal grinding off the bone, and wiped it on the dead mans coat. Not sorry one bit you sick fuck. Hope you get yours in Hell. With practiced ease, he placed it back into the mechanism within his right boot heel. Aaron dragged the body out of the street and placed it against the wall, positioning it in a way that would make anyone who found him assume that he was defecating. Then, Aaron heard the familiar dots and dashes of morse code. (There are five more, two inside the truck and three off to my side, roughly fifty feet from you. Careful Aaron, one of the two is manning a machine gun on the truck roof.)

(Rodger that Mio.) Aaron morsed back, moving up with haste. (Spring the trap when you hear my shots. Watch your fire. There are people in that thing.) He navigated the streets in the direction that Mio indicated until he came to a toppled over horse drawn cart lying on its side, partially sunken into the ground. Getting on his stomach, he crawled up to it and peered over the top. What started as a faint purring soon became a roaring battering of old pistons as a green jalopy of a truck, probably a surplus transport, came into his view, its best days clearly behind it. The canvas draped over the iron ribbed back was frayed and held in check by notched metal bars like bobby pins holding back unruly hair. Sections of the front body were rusted out to the point where Aaron could see with little difficulty into the interior and the driver in the front, manning the wheel and smoking a cigarette, his companion standing on a raised platform between the front driver and passenger seat, watching the surrounding area through the gunsights of an MG42. Too easy. Use the rifle. First shot at the driver, aiming a tad more left to compensate for the angle of the glass. Ride the recoil up and take the gunner, one maybe two shots. He brought the STG 44 up along with the rest of him and pulled the trigger, firing his first shot at the drivers head. A split second passed before the window cracked from the impact and shattered, the bullet hitting home into and through the temple, brain matter, blood, and bone painting the cabin a bright red. The gunner yelped in pain, indicative of the shot striking his leg as well, and he lost his footing. He didn’t even release his grip on the machine gun yet before Aaron sent two more shots downwind. The first buried itself in the gunners chest, rocking him back from the force, making the second enter into the bottom of the lower jaw, the projectile exiting out the back of the head at an angle. The body got caught on the cabin roof and laid there like a Christmas tree being brought back from the woods.

Then Divale picked up footsteps, three pairs worth, and rolled over to his left, changing his position and giving himself a better angle of attack. Soon, the steps were rendered into nothing as the harsh bark of heavy cannon fire ripped through the air, tracer rounds sailing feet away from his position and embedding themselves into a storefront, wood and brick exploding into fragments. Impacts,
these more wet could be discerned, followed by the distinctive crump of corpses hitting the ground and the low hissing of misting blood. A hand came into view, trembling, trying to move the rest of the body forward. Another shot rings out and the appendage spasms and then falls still, crimson vitae spreading, reaching out from beyond sight to envelope it within its still warm embrace. Mio walked into Aaron’s line of sight and looked over his work, nodding in grim approval. He got up from the ground and slung his rifle over his shoulder, clapping his hands with the courtesy of a golf spectator, soft and quick. Suddenly, he saw a part of the canvas move and from a small rip within the fabric, a dainty hand with dirty pale digits emerged. The two merged up and briskly jogged to the rear, unbolting the rear hatch.

Aaron ripped open the canvas with a loud tearing sound and called out, “Salut! Qui est ici (Hello!? Who is in here)!!”

Inside, the bed of the transport was barren and rusted out in parts, the light of day, what little there was, shining through the holes. Cargo crates were in the far back, lashed down with rope and secured to iron rings bolted to the metal. Along the ribs, bound by thin chains and shackles on the wrists and feet, were three young children, two boys and one girl, the oldest probably no more than eight. The boys wore brown shirts stained with dirt and grime while the girl wore a tiny ragged dress that had once been white, but now was frayed from overuse and yellowed from sweat stains, her left leg bearing a faint surgical scar near the knee. They all looked terrible, malnourished and tired. At the sound of Aaron tearing open the canvas, the boys shrank back in fear, squinting as their eyes tried to adjust to the light. However, the girl looked at him with a questioning gaze, her short red hair matted and greasy, blue eyes shining in recognition. “Aaron?” she peeped, her voice soft and steady.

“That voice! That can’t be! “Marie!” Aaron exclaimed, clambering into the back and practically sprinting to them. He grabbed the chains and pulled, the links snapping like twigs from their moorings and he wrenched the shackles off with a twist of his hand. Marie, upon being freed, leapt into Aaron’s arms and gave him as big a hug as a six year old could. “Où étais-tu Aaron? Tu m'as manqué (Where have you been Aaron? I’ve missed you).” Mio looked on in wonderment as the man who just put down three men with the emotionlessness of a murderer break down and start crying, tears streaming down his face as he held the child, kneeling like he did when he first arrived at Dover Castle.

“Tu m'as manqué aussi Marie (I’ve missed you too Marie).” he choked, wiping the tears away on the tips of her dress by grinding his head gently onto her tiny shoulder.

The two gradually parted and Marie turned to the boys who, while the reunion was going on, just sat there, scared to move, not knowing if this new person was a friend or foe. “C’est le Saint de Calais (It’s the Saint of Calais).” she beamed, pointing at Aaron.

Both youths gasped in shock and smiled. “C'est le saint! Il nous a sauvés (It’s The Saint! He saved us!)” they marveled almost in unison.

Aaron nodded and gently raised his hands, bidding all to be quiet. “Oui, je vous ai tous sauvés, mais nous ne sommes pas encore hors de danger. J'ai besoin que vous restiez tous calmes (Yes, I have saved you all, but we are not out of danger yet. I need all of you to remain calm).” With a gesture, her regarded Mio. “Mon ami Mio et moi avons des affaires urgentes à St. Omer. Nous vous y emmènerons tous (My friend Mio and I have urgent business at St. Omer. We’ll take you all there).” He slung off his backpack and opened it. After a few seconds he pulled out three MRE’s and the canteen of water, handing it to Marie. “Séparez-le uniformément du mieux que vous pouvez. Sois juste Marie (Split this up evenly as best you can. Be fair Marie).” he instructed the child. Marie nodded in understanding and went about her duty, opening the MRE’s. For his part, Aaron slunk
away and closed the rear hatch. He made a move to say something to Mio, but stopped halfway, remembering something. “Marie?” he asked, turning back around. “Ta mère est toujours à Metz (Is your mother still at Metz)?”

“Non (No).” Marie answered, the contents of an MRE pack smeared all over her face and hands as she gobbled at what looked to be spagetti and meatballs. “Elle a été transférée dans un avant-poste à l’ouest de Lille (She got transferred to an outpost west of Lille).” Aaron looked down and away, thinking. *If I was a betting man, I would wager that the outpost would have to be St. Omer.*

“So what’s with the girl?” Mio inquired as Aaron searched his memories. “Do you know her?”

Done thinking for the time being, Aaron regarded Mio and nodded. “Yes, but we need to get moving.” he replied, briskly walking to the front of the truck. Mio followed him and opened the driver side door, letting gravity flop the body out, the dead man landing on his ruined skull with a thump. Aaron pulled himself up onto the roof and took hold of the gunner’s corpse with his right hand, pulling him out of his station like a farmer’s hand harvesting a carrot from the field, and tossing him like a shotput against the wall of a nearby building, the machine gun secured with his left. Using her sleeves, Mio attempted to wipe the blood and grey matter off the seat cover. It was a futile effort for the most part, but she managed to get it to where the vitae wouldn’t soak into her panties. Then, she heard more rips and looked up as Aaron tore off the bottom halves of his pants, frayed stitching dragging like squid tentacles just below his knee. He hunkered down and started wiping the windows clean.

“You know that costs money right?” Mio pointed out jokingly.

“Then fucking bill me.” Aaron retorted back with a grin, the blood making that characteristic streaky sound as he moved his cloth covered hands along the windshield. “It not like I can’t afford it.” He looked over at the fuel gauge and his grin grew broader as he saw that the red painted needle was firmly on the F. “With any luck,” he stated, throwing the bloody rags that were once his pant legs up and over the hole in the roof, “we can make St. Omer within an hour.” Divale then flicked his ear communicator on and reported in to Perrine. “Divale to Clostermann. We have procured a transport and will make St. Omer within an hour. Do we have any issues with patrols?”

“Not at this point and time, but there are reports coming in from the Resistance that Verdun is crawling with enemy units. Be on your guard and please hurry.” Perrine replied, her voice straining toward the end with a pleading tone.

“I’m a man of my word and I mean what I say.” Aaron assured. “Will update our status once we have reached the junction. Out.” He then turned to Mio and instructed, “You drive. I know the secret entrance to the outpost by heart since I put it there myself.”

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Mio drove over a small rise in the road as she started to accelerate past what was once a checkpoint, two miles outside of St. Omer, the center of the town’s church steeple it’s most prominent feature, plainly visible from where they were. Occasionally taking one of her hands off the wheel to flip up her eye patch, she scanned the area with a wary gaze. *Perrine may have the best intelligence we have at our disposal at this point, but anything can happen out in the field.* “Right there.” Aaron pointed to his right. Sakamoto followed his hand and saw a clump of five apple trees surrounding a wide stump that was low to the ground about a few hundred feet within a heavily cratered orchard, many of the fruit trees remarkably still alive with some green budding on the tips of the branches already coming out. “Park just askew of that stump.” he instructed. Nodding, she turned the steering wheel, the movement eliciting a loud groan from the old truck. The suspension shifted violently as the wheels translated from road to uneven earth. A thumping sound soon reached both their ears, coming
from a small door panel about three feet up from the bottom of the middle of the cabin interior, a metal slide acting as a peephole. It was meant for the now hour long dead gunner to keep an eye on his charges. Curious, Aaron opened the slide and came eye to eye with Marie, her blue orbs tinted navy from the shrouded gloom.

“Puis-je monter et m’asseoir avec vous? Les garçons ici puent. (Can I come up there and sit with you? The boys back here stink).” she commented, pinching her nose.

*You aren’t exactly a bouquet of roses yourself there either wee one.*

You aren’t exactly a bouquet of roses yourself there either wee one. “Attendez (Hold on).” Aaron called out gently as he inserted his hand through the peephole opening with his left hand. Divale then closed his grip tightly, the metal bending in. With a sharp tug, he peeled the metal back like a banana skin, and flung it up and away through the gunner hole. The way now open, Marie crawled through a bit before being scooped up in Aaron’s long arms, setting her gently on his left knee with a small oomph emanating from his throat.

“Ca va (You ok)?” the girl asked with concern.

“Je vais bien, c’est juste que tu as beaucoup grossi depuis la dernière fois que je t’ai vu (I’m fine, it’s just that you have gotten a lot bigger since the last time I saw you).” Aaron answered, patting her head.

Mio looked over at the pair and smiled, simply shaking her head. For someone who can’t have any, he’s very good with them.

It didn’t take her long to navigate the sod before coming to a stop right smack dab where Aaron told her. “Pouvez-vous mettre votre main sur cette souche et pousser pour moi (Can you put your hand on the top of that stump and push down for me)?” he asked Marie, gesturing with his head and cracking open the passenger side door. She nodded and obediently stepped out of the truck, gently meandering over his lap and jumped to the ground, landing on her feet. Marie then turned and placed her hands on the center ring of the stump and pressed down. The wood gave and clicked as it was depressed, triggering an immediate reaction that resulted in the stump, truck, and five apple trees, lowering into the earth. Mio looked around and saw that it was a cleverly disguised platform used for lowering and lifting heavy loads, pulled by large well oiled metal gears and pulleys. “You built this?” she asked, surprise evident in her voice.

“I had a little help from my friends.” Aaron answered humbly with a wink. Putting on a serious face he then added, “Keep your hands on the wheel at all times and let me do the talking. Don’t move until I give the word.” He then gazed down at Marie who was still standing outside of the truck and patted her head again, leaning out the door just a tad. “Cela vous convient aussi. Ne bouge pas et ne dis pas un mot avant que je le dise (That goes for you too. Don’t move or say a word until I say).” The trio then waited as the gears continued their clunking tattoo, punctuated by the trucks idling engine. Less than a minute later, the massive elevator stopped moving and suddenly, the area was awash with bright light as a series of air raid searchlights came on, blinding the occupants.

“Stay where you are and keep your hands where we can see them!” a woman’s voice called out from a bullhorn, her French accent a touch hoarse as she spoke in English. “Identify yourselves immediately or you will be shot!”

Marie’s eyes widened in recognition and tried to speak, but Divale gently shushed her with the palm of his right hand. Now is not the time to let your mother know. “I’m The Saint of Calais!” Aaron bellowed from the cabin. “The driver is Major Mio Sakamoto of the 501st JFW! We come in peace and mean you or yours no harm!”

Stunned whispers were heard from beyond the origin of the lights, murmurs of men and women in shock and awe. A few seconds passed before the woman asked with a mixture of fear and disbelief,
Aaron? Is that really you?"

“You know the sound of my voice better than anyone here Celeste, you tell me.” Aaron countered.
“And cut the lights, you’re giving me a headache.”

“Get out of the truck, just you, and walk to me slowly.” Celeste instructed.

Aaron gave Mio a quick look and a nod, before pushing open the door fully and maneuvering the little girl aside. Swinging his right leg out as if trying to step over a large puddle, he exited the vehicle and took his time strolling into the open. Gradually with hard clicks, the searchlights shut off, save for one which pointed away, revealing the area to be an improvised concrete floored checkpoint with a quartet of large lights, long thick black cables attached to humming generators and crewed by a pair of straight backed Resistance members, the characteristic long green coats with a red stripe along the side. He was surrounded in a half moon circle, men and women armed with rifles and automatic weapons, two sitting in fortified positions further back on raised platforms, manning quad linked machine guns taken from antiaircraft emplacements. Behind them all was a large gate, a chain link fence preventing entry to a stairway that lead further down and to the right, lit by dull yellow ceiling lights. The one that spoke, Celeste, came forward tentatively, holding an officers bullhorn in her right hand, a small caliber revolver in her left, cocked and ready. Her red hair was in a long braid that came down to her middle back and the azure eyes were rimmed with redness, signs that she had been crying heavily. The posture was slightly hunched and her breathing was heavy and raspy, as if she was suffering from severe asthma. Though appearing asthenic, Aaron knew better. *This woman is one of the strongest people I ever will know.* With reverence, he took off his glasses and gazed at the figure before him. “It’s been a while Celeste.” he uttered softly, a tone that made it clear to Mio that the two may have had a relationship at one point. “You ok?”

Celeste holstered her gun and bade the others to do the same, making a swift gesture with her now free hand. “I’m fine Aaron.” she answered with a small wheeze at the end. “Though I have been having some troubles recently. My daughter was kidnapped by slavers yesterday and I can’t locate her. No one has seen the bastards that took her.” she croaked, struggling to hold back more tears.

“Well,” Aaron began, backtracking the way he came, keeping his front where it should be, “I have something that will make you feel better.” When he got to the furthest edge of the door, he held out his hand and led Marie out of hiding, drawing a gasp from her mother who fell to her knees and dropped the bullhorn to the ground with a clatter.

“Mama!” Marie called out and ran to her as fast as her little legs could take her.

“Marie!” Celeste shouted, the tears breaking the levees and embraced her daughter tightly as if the slightest gust of wind would separate them. “Oh my child thank God you’re safe!”

Not done, Aaron craned his neck and added without swagger, “Vous les garçons, pouvez sortir, mais ayez les mains où les gens peuvent les voir à tout moment (You boys can come on out, but have your hands out where the people can see them at all times).” After a few seconds, the two boys jumped out of the back of the truck and walked towards him, coming to a stop at the foot of Mio’s door. “Me and the major took care of the bastards that did this. They will trouble you all no more.”

Several cheers, applause, and hoorays rounded the room, rejoicing in the deaths of those who committed such an act against one of their own and for such a gallant rescue. Celeste got up from the ground, Marie holding her mothers side, and walked to Aaron, giving him a hug with both arms. “God bless you Aaron,” she stated, the tears still flowing. “That’s twice you’ve saved my little one from death.” Aaron answered with an understanding nod, giving her an almost paternalistic glance. Celeste’s tone changed radically from soft to hard as she added, “But don’t think for a second that this changes my mind. I won’t-”
Divale raised his hands and civilly interrupted with resignation in his voice, “I know Celeste. I know. You made your feelings on that perfectly clear and I accept them now as I accepted them then. This isn’t about proving a point.”

Seemingly relieved and sorry at the same time she asked, “What brings you back if not this?”

Aaron signaled with his right hand for Mio to come out of the cabin. “We both have some business that requires us to take the Underground to Lille,” he explained as Mio came up to the pair. “Is it ready for departure?”

“It will by the time you get down there,” Celeste answered. “The lines just need to be changed.”

“Thanks Celeste.” Aaron stated genuinely. He looked down at Marie and added with a pointed finger. “Faites attention à votre mère Marie. Sois une grande fille (Mind your mother Marie. Be a big girl).”

“Je vais Aaron (I will Aaron).” she replied. “Te reverrais-je (Will I see you again)?”

Divale almost teared up as he lied to her, “Bien sur (Of course).” He then looked at her mother again and gave her a quick gentle hug. Turning around towards the gated stairway, he stopped mid revolution and reverted back, embracing her again.

“Je sais pourquoi tu as fait ça (I know why you did that).” Celeste whispered into his ear.

“Pouvez-vous me blâmer (Can you blame me)?” Aaron hushed back, tears now flowing. Withdrawing he added while putting his glasses back on, “Be well wherever you fare.” Celeste nodded and took Marie away further into the checkpoint to a nearby table. Aaron regarded Mio and ordered, “Let’s go. We have a ride to catch.” Mio hefted her cannon and walked alongside him, seeing Aaron wipe away the last of his tears with the back side of his right hand, smudging the greasepaint. Two gate guards pulled open the fence and allowed them to pass through, casting razor sharp salutes that Aaron returned with equal vigor. All the while, he didn’t look back at the mother and child who he helped reunite, contenting himself with his deed and the mission at hand. Don’t turn around Aaron, you’ll just make it worse. As Mio navigated the stairwell with Aaron, their footsteps echoing down the spiraling steps, her curiosity got the best of her. Silently understanding what she meant, Aaron began his story, “Her name is Celeste Dubois and Marie is her only child. Her boyfriend at the time got her pregnant and fled the scene, leaving her alone to raise her herself. Took up doing secretary work at a bank in Lyon during her pregnancy to save up money for the upcoming birth. Ended up having her in the office of her boss, who thankfully had connections to a local hospital and sent for a nurse and doctor.”

“Why didn’t she go immediately when the pains started?” Mio asked.

“Didn’t want to miss work, fearful that doing so would see her fired.” Aaron explained. “Her boss took pity on her circumstances and gave them a place to stay while Celeste got back up to strength. However, during the early months of ’40, he passed away from pneumonia, leaving them both in a bind. She didn’t have enough money to pay rent so she threw herself on the mercy of a local Catholic church who gave them both sanctuary. After a while, she got back on her feet, finding a place to live in Paris and a new job at a bakery. Towards the winter of ’42/43, Celeste started having pains in her chest. Went to a doctor, who after giving her a biopsy, concluded that she had widespread thoracic cancer, giving her at best six months to live.”

Mio nodded as she and Aaron got to the base of the stairwell and navigated down a long hallway lit by a series of overhead lights. “How did you two meet?” she inquired.
“It was on Halloween last year when I was working on the outpost. Started as a normal day with me and some hands forging the gears that would lower the platform when we got a message saying that a woman was at the Underground junction below us with an injured child. Being the sole medic in the immediate vicinity, I rushed down and saw Celeste holding her daughter in her arms, crying and imploring me to do something. Marie had gotten into an accident and fell into a rubbish heap, cutting her left leg, the wound getting infected with gangrene. It was really bad and I told her that I would do all I can, but if worst came to worst, I would have to amputate.” Aaron continued.

“How did you save the leg?” Mio queried, “Magic?”

Aaron shook his head no and illuminated, “Just so happened that the MRE’s that I had upstairs had gotten wet somehow due to faulty seals and were infested with maggots. Took five of them and put them inside the festering tissue and said to her that they will help kill the putrescence. Over the course of three days, I tended to her child on my off hours, Celeste not so much as eating a morsel or sleeping a wink during that time. After the third day, I opened up the wound, took out the maggots, and saw to my great relief that they had done their job, the infection was all gone. When I told her the news she told me to name my price.”

“What did you say?” Mio pondered out loud, intrigued.

“Didn’t want a damn thing.” Aaron honestly replied. “Told her that I wanted nothing in return. However, she was so determined to pay for my services that, after getting annoyed several times over, I told her alright but let me finish my shift and then we will talk about it. Got done with my stint upstairs and went to my tent, finding that it was already lit on the inside. Curious, I open the flap and there she was, sitting in the center, completely naked save for a strategically placed bottle of wine in her lap. Afterwards, we got to talking, and dumb me, I brought up having me take her daughter out of France for her own safety. Got into a very heated argument and we went our separate ways after that, not so much as crossing paths or talking to each other since.”

“Why did you say that to her?” Mio asked.

At that point, Aaron stopped and turned to face Sakamoto. “Look around you.” he replied, gesturing with his hands around the empty, dimly lit corridor. “There’s nothing here in France for Marie at all Mio. There’s no future here, no hope, and her mother isn’t going to be around forever. This isn’t Eden, it’s Hell, and Hell is no place for children. At the very least give her a chance to survive to become something that will make Celeste proud of her someday, wherever she is. If we hadn’t found her today, she would’ve suffered a fate worse than death, being a living pleasure toy to some sick freak, or worked to death in some coal pit, or sent to recover landmines.” He leaned in close and uttered in a low voice, “If I was any other man, I would’ve ignored her stance on the matter and ferried her over in a heartbeat.”

“Yet, you are not.” Mio informed, putting a hand on his shoulder. “There is no shame in respecting her wishes. She knows the risks she’s taking keeping her here. With luck, what happened will change her mind.”

Aaron smiled and politely retorted with sad look, stepping back and letting her grip on his shoulder lessen, “You dream major.” The two then resumed their journey which came to a halt near a departure station similar to the metro they had oh so recently got out of, except this had a working engine, if you could call it one. It was a manpowered mine cart used for taking miners long distances before the advent of steam, but given a new lease on life with a bulbous, piston operated, quartz crystal powered machine, that raised and lowered the seesaw hand guards far faster and harder than any mortal hands. At the front, was a rather portly conductor, dressed in faded blue overalls, a black cap covering his slat and pepper hair, and wearing a sweat stained red handkerchief around his fat
neck. He nodded with uncharacteristic grace and gestured to the two seats, shaped like church pews immediately behind him.

“Tous a bord (All aboard)!” he rang out with a smile and a salute. Aaron chuckled as he returned it and sat down on the far right side, Mio climbing in after him and planting herself on the left, both strapping themselves in.

“Divale to Clostermann.” Aaron spoke into his communicator as the jury-rigged mine cart stated to go forward. “We reached St Omer and are now on our way along the Underground to Lille. Estimated ETA 10 o clock. Will inform as soon as we depart for Verdun. Out.”

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At 10 o clock exactly, the mine cart screeched to a halt at another station, the metal brakes grinding into the rails like nails on a chalkboard. The conductor turned and said, “Bon voyage mes amis (Safe travels my friends).” Both Aaron and Mio nodded in thanks and unbuckled the straps. Getting out of the cart was a tad treacherous for the ledge was a good two feet higher than the mine cart. They still haven’t filed that down yet. May have to talk to the prefect while I’m here. However, both were up to the task and leapt up onto the concrete and walked down another corridor.

“About how long will the changeover take?” Mio asked as the sounds of the mine cart departing echoed down the hallway.

“Not long.” Aaron answered. “Fifteen minutes at the worst, which is more than enough time to get a small bite to eat. You hungry?”

Mio nodded. “I can definitely use a pick me up for sure.” she stated, the empty feeling in her stomach growing at the thought of food.

“I know of a halfway decent soup kitchen down here called Lucille’s. We can eat there as long as we avoid the crowds.” Aaron remarked.

Mio grew anxious at the mention of the word crowds. “What crowds?” she wary inquired.

“I’m a hero over here remember? These people see me as the best hope they have for liberating their country, contrary to how many times I tell them that one man can’t fight a war, that we need the Allies to do the heavy lifting rather than me and them.” Aaron expounded. The pair came to the end of the hallway where a large iron door with a closed peephole sat. With the butt of his STG 44, Aaron knocked on the door in the upper right corner and took off his glasses. From beyond, Mio could hear the barking of large dogs. Heavy footsteps came near the door and the peephole was opened. The guard’s hazel eyes took in the scene, first locking with Aaron’s then darting down to regard Mio. As quickly as it happened the peephole closed again and was followed by a series of clangs, the indicators of large mechanical locks being released. The door creaked open soon after, revealing a small checkpoint with three heavily armed guards in the livery of the Resistance, one of the them straining to hold back a duo of massive German shepherds, their barking stopping the instant they saw Aaron’s eyes regard them, backing down and laying on the dirty concrete floor. He turned to the guard who opened the door and queried, “Leclerc est-il toujours le préfet (Is Leclerc still the prefect)?” Upon seeing the man nod, he instructed, “Dites-lui de me retrouver près de Lucille et d'apporter une petite escorte pour disperser pacifiquement la foule. Pas d'armes (Tell him to meet us near Lucille’s and to bring a small escort to peacefully disperse the crowd. No weapons).”

The guard gave a razor sharp salute which Aaron returned and Divale gestured for Mio to follow him through an open door that lead into a large hazy hallway, dimly lit by overhead lights, the smell of fire smoke heavy in the air, barely covering up the stench of unclean bodies. He heard the guard
starting to talk into a radio, but Divale tuned it out, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Mio for her part looked to and fro, initially feeling uneasy with being a stranger in such an environment. Though armed and having Aaron around as insurance, she knew mathematically that she would be overcome through sheer weight of numbers. However, Sakamoto relaxed as she saw that there was little if anything to fear from the people down here. Small groups of people, some Resistance, others not, huddled near fire barrels, the snap and crackling of sparks flying every direction like grenade shrapnel, warming their bodies and swapping gossip as the orange and yellow light danced over their pale faces. Some sat against the walls or flat on the concrete, sleeping with caps over their eyes or blankets tucked underneath and over them. The entire hallway was filled with sound, the burning of wood, the coughing of the sick, the weeping of those who had lost loved ones or thought about the painful past, but the one thing that Mio heard the most was “Le Saint.” repeated over and over again as Aaron passed by them, but never as he advanced, hushing as though they were in the presence of some venerable ruler who brooked no idle chitchat.

The end of the hallway drew nearer with every step, the opening less hazy and more well lit. They came to and passed the threshold, entering a chamber as long and wide as a three city blocks with a high ceiling. A central structure dominated the area, tall with a large compound nestled atop thick steel beams and latticework like some child’s tree house, the branches extending out like the spokes of a wheel. On those protrusions, thick black cables coiled around and up to the ceiling like snakes, carrying power to every corner. Buildings and hovels surrounded it, patchwork affairs of varying heights and widths. Everywhere there was activity, people delivering mail, walking along makeshift streets with arrows painted on the ground and metal poles with names on them, groups shining shoes or singing and dancing for loose change, guards assisting with directions or answering a summons, women cat walking or loitering around, some with partners who looked every bit as not sorry as they should for being in such company, and others just minding their own business. All of that slowly ground to a complete and utter halt as soon as Aaron entered, raising his arms and waving in greeting. Those in the streets stared and gaped, mouths wide open, with some running to the nearest structure knocking on the doors and shouting to any inside, “Le Saint! Le Saint!” Without fear, Divale walked amongst them, smiling and waving, even stopping to shake hands or saying some words.

Mio took in the scene with stoic grace as she keep up with Aaron’s pace. I too am famous where I’m from, and elsewhere wherever I go, and can relate to this. It’s like a long lost son returning to a grateful family. If Perrine could be here to see this. It took a few minutes before the pair came to a small blue hovel with a green sign that read Lucille’s, depicting a buxom women with a skinny waist leaning forward. In front of the building was a quintet of Resistance members, four clearly guards given their dimensions and youth while the last one was more aged and short of stature. He looked the part of a sea worn skipper with his flat white cap, weathered tan face with three days worth of snowy white scrag, and gruff aura. The eyes were dark brown and piercing, the posture straight backed. In his mouth was a wooden pipe made of carved walnut, and he was puffing away, the smoke rings sailing up and hovering near his head like an angel’s halo. That must be Prefect Leclerc. Aaron then saw the man and smiled broadly, extending his hand, opened palm, in friendship.

“Gaston!” he exclaimed, recognizing the individual at once. “How are you, you grizzled son of a bitch?”

The old man chuckled as he took Aaron’s hand and shook it. “Not bad at all.” he answered, his voice deep like the ocean. “But what about you and why are you here looking like Queequeg from Moby Dick?”

Aaron burst out laughing. “Long story Gaston, but suffice it to say that we have some business at Verdun that needs to be taken care of ASAP.” he stated with the occasional guffaw.

Understanding the situation, he brought one of the guards over and whispered something that Mio
couldn’t hear into his ear. The guard nodded saluting and briskly walked off. “The lines will be changed over in about fifteen minutes.” Gaston reported. He looked at Mio and inquired, “So who is this Ishmael of yours?”

“I’m Major Mio Sakamoto of the 501st JFW.” she answered with a slightly bow. “Pleasure to meet you Prefect Leclerc.”

“Likewise major.” Leclerc answered with a nod of his own. “Now let’s be off inside so we can talk further over some warm food.” One of his remaining guards opened the door for the trio and they piled into the soup kitchen, a fairly well kept affair with long picnic tables arranged in long lines, the wood worn and heavily carved with messages and symbols like the kind one finds in a public bathroom at a dive bar. The front counter had tall seats, the cushions frayed, and the prefect sat at the one nearest the register, a still shiny brass construct manned by a matronly woman, dressed in a green one piece dress, salt and pepper hair held in check by a black bow near the scalp, brown eyes regarding the aged administrator. She cocked an eyebrow at Gaston who replied by holding up three fingers. Nodding, she pressed a few buttons and the register drawer rang open.

Gaston made a move to reach into his pocket for some money, but Aaron tutted, “No my friend, allow me.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out some bills, still a tad damp from his little swim in the metro, but in one piece, and handed them to the cashier.

“Je n'ai pas beaucoup de changement (I don’t have that much in change).” she stated flatly.

“Alors garde le (Then keep it).” Aaron answered respectfully.

The woman’s eyes lit up in shock at such generosity. “Merci (Thank you).” she stated, placing the bills into the drawer.

“A tout moment (Anytime).” Aaron replied, watching her turn around and enter the doors to the kitchen. He felt a tap on his left shoulder and looked to see Mio cock an eyebrow and tilt her head towards where the woman left. It took him a bit to understand what she was doing, but the moment he did, Divale shook his head violently no. “Oh good God, what kind of a man do you think I am! Never!” he emphatically uttered. Then he furrowed his brow as he thought something. “Though there was this one time if I remember correctly when I was a bit drunk and she gave me a-”

“Best to let the past bee the past.” Gaston politely interrupted before such crass things were spoken in the establishment. He repositioned himself so that he could face the pair and asked, “So if the major is part of the Allies, does that make you the same?”

“Yes. I formally enlisted less than a week ago.” Aaron clarified. “Made sergeant.”

“Sergeant?” Leclerc replied with a bit of disbelief. “If I were in charge, you’d be made a general.”

“Have to start somewhere.” Mio commented. The hostess returned holding a small tray with three wooden bowls of steaming soup, a basket of bread and three full glass tumblers of wine, passing them out to each guest. The soup was green with pinkish bits of meat floating about, smelling of peas and salted pork, the bread was freshly baked, and the wine was dark like octopus ink. “Merci (Thank you).” Mio said to the woman and Aaron rounded in his seat, eyes wide as the tray.

“You didn’t tell me at the coven that you spoke French!” Divale shouted lightly, not truly believing what his ears picked up

“You never asked.” Mio replied with a sly grin as the woman gave a polite bow and left the trio to eat in peace.
“Huh.” Aaron breathed as he turned his attention to his soup, picking the bowl up with both hands. “And you all thought I was the one with all the mysteries.” he commented. He tilted the bowl back and took a deep swallow. The liquid passed into his mouth with the viscosity of warm oil and he felt the warmth spread through him. She hasn’t lost her touch at all. Best damn soup this side of Burgundy.

“Speaking of mysteries,” Gaston began as he took a deep drink from his tumbler of wine, “what compels you to venture into Verdun of all places?”

“We really can’t go into details,” Aaron apologized, “but I will say that it is a matter of great importance to the war effort.”

“Whatever it is, I wish you the best of luck.” Gaston sincerely stated, “The enemy is all over that place like flies on shit.”

“Where are they most concentrated?” Mio inquired, finishing the rest of her soup.

“Around 3 o clock in the morning,” Leclerc recollected, “local cells reported a massive firefight near Fort Vaux. Lots of heavy weaponry was used given the noise they made. Efforts to contact anyone to see what was going on inside failed, but later on, about half an hour later, channels were awash with this strange chanting in a language that no one could identify. Spooked the hell out of my radio operators.”

“Do you have a copy of the message?” Aaron anxiously asked as he downed his tumbler in two gulps. Leclerc fished around in his front pocket and pulled out an old ear piece, similar to the ones the 501st used, but cruder and bigger. Divale placed it near his ear and Gaston turned it on. Mio watched Aaron’s face as he furrowed his brow, listening in and then darken suddenly as if something of grave import was made know to him. After listening for a few more seconds, Aaron turned it off and handed it back to Leclerc. “Does this message repeat?”

“Once every few hours.” Gaston replied. “Do you have any idea what it means?”

“Only that I believe that, until that message stops repeating, stay as far away from Verdun as possible. Send that on all channels, even the scavenger groups. No exceptions.” Aaron instructed. “Is there a back way out of here to the departure station?”

“Yes.” Gaston answered, gesturing just askew of his seat. Aaron and Mio looked down as the aged administrator got off his seat and pull on a black iron handle that he fished out of a small crack in the floorboards, revealing a door that led down, metal ladder rungs providing a safe means of descent. “I’ll make my apologies to the crowd outside for you.”

“Thanks.” Aaron stated, allowing Mio to go down first. As he got into the hole, he stopped, remembering something. “And Leclerc? Get that platform lowered a tad. It’s a safety hazard.”

“Understood.” Gaston nodded, giving him a salute. Divale returned it and went down, the door closing behind him. Mio got to the bottom first and looked around. She was in a long concrete hallway, the only way deeper being to the left, illuminated by small lamps from the ceiling. Suddenly, in the distance, the screeching of metal on metal could be heard up ahead. Our ride’s here, but first… Aaron then made his entrance, letting go of the rungs and landing on his feet.

“Why did you lie to him?” Mio asked, confronting Aaron about his dishonesty.

“I didn’t lie.” Aaron gruffly retorted, turning to face her. “I merely omitted certain truths.”
“Explain.” Mio stated, crossing her arms.

“That guttural language that I heard in that message was Latin Mio, I’m absolutely sure of it. To my knowledge only one thousand people have ever spoken that language, and I’m the only one left.” Aaron importuned gravely.

Mio stood rigid. Hesitantly, she opened her mouth and said with a low whisper, “Is there any way that one of your men could’ve survived?”

“No.” Aaron replied, starting to walk down the corridor towards the departure station. “I would know of it. I would sense it. Plus, whoever was speaking it had a French accent and none of my men had an accent like that.”

“Regardless,” Mio deduced, “this mission just got more complicated.”

“And dangerous.” Aaron quipped as he dialed his communicator. “Divale to Clostermann. Have reached Lille and are now departing for Verdun. Information from the Resistance here suggests that the fighting may have come from Fort Vaux, so we are heading there immediately. Will update once we arrive. ETA 11:30 AM. Out.” I really picked a hell of a day to come back to France.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Mio and Aaron get inside Fort Vaux and locate a lone survivor, Amelie Planchard, who tells them the fate of her friends and her determination to have them rescued. However, their arrival has not gone unnoticed.

Chapter XX: Armata Strigoi

I’ll never know why I survive and so many others don’t. It’s not fair or right that I should be the last one to carry the burden, shoulder the cross that is the tale of my past. Any one of my men was more deserving of that than I am. They were brave, they were loyal, and they were good friends, all of them were. Now they are dead, buried, gone to dust, with me the lone mourner standing over their unmarked graves. One day, we will be reunited, but it seems that no matter how many crazy adventures I embark on, how uneven the odds of survival, or how much pain I take, I keep surviving. If this is some part of a grand scheme, I want no part of it any longer, any of it.

Diary Entry October 3rd 1943

The conductor, this one a younger man skinny as the rails as the cart rode on and scared out of his mind, applied the brakes well over a half a mile away, as Mio and Aaron made their way to the Verdun outpost. Though uncharacteristically cautious, Divale understood why. Word travels fast in the Resistance. No doubt he has heard of the strange message that came out of that place. The metal ground on, hard and shrill, as the cart began to slow all the way to the departure point. Aaron looked over at Mio and put his right index finger to his lips, a silent signal to be quiet. When the major gave him a puzzled look, Divale explained in a hushed tone that was hard to hear as the mine cart brakes continued to whine in protest at being taxed so hard, “The outpost at Verdun is anything but. All it is, is a double thick door leading into a secret room behind a bar counter, a relic of the speakeasy days. From there, we emerge into the streets of a small hamlet located before the forts. We must be quiet as the area is far from secure and if the enemy finds this place out, the Resistance will detonate the charges they’ve place all along this stretch of the Underground.” He gestured with his right hand above them and Mio looked up just in time to see a large grouping of Composite C charges sticking out of the ceiling near one of the light fixtures, with wires leading from one batch to the other, both further down and up the line.

“They wouldn’t blow the charges if we were still inside would they?” she asked giving him an anxious look.

Aaron answered with a sheepish shrug and let the matter go as the departure dock came up into view as they navigated around a corner. He smelled smoke from the red hot steel of the brakes, an iron infused combination of rust and dirt, and breathed it in deeply. Can never get enough of that scent. Best thing to savor this side of heaven, Lucretia’s perfume not withstanding. With a great sigh, the
conductor let go of the brake handle, his brow covered in sweat from the exertion. He took off his blue cap and ran his fingers through his short brown hair, the sweat making large strands stick up and out like jacks. “Fin de la ligne vous deux. Fais attention (End of the line you too. Be safe)” he stated, his voice weary, giving them a salute.

“Vous aussi (You as well).” Aaron replied, returning it and unbuckling himself. Mio followed suit and this time didn’t have to do any feat of acrobatics to get from the mine cart to the dock, casually stepping onto the concrete as the same time Aaron did. Wasting no time at all, the conductor flipped some switches and pulled another lever, and the cart began to rolls backwards, down the tunnel from whence it came. Being polite, Mio waved farewell to the conductor who reciprocated the gesture. Within a few seconds, the cart rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

“Before we go anywhere Aaron,” Mio began, regarding him with a stare that made it seem that she had deliberating with herself concerning what she was about to say, “you said that message was in Latin. You speak Latin. What did it say?”

“Something that I’ve never heard before.” Aaron admitted. “It seems like it’s part of a spell of some sort, I can’t be sure.” He furrowed his brow and nodded slowly to himself. “But I have an idea as to who can shed some light on this mystery.”

Mio’s face immediately darkened and she moved her hands to her katana. “You are under strict orders to not summon Ismenoth without the commander’s authorization.” she warned.

“I’m not going to summon her at all Mio.” Aaron assured taking a step back,. “I’m merely going to flect her.”

“Explain.” Mio demanded, her hands staying mere inches away from her sword hilt.

“Flecting is one of the more common and least punishing ways to converse with Ismenoth. All I need is a smooth reflective surface where she will appear. It functions like our communicators except you actually see the person who you are talking to live. She can’t do anything when doing such things, so you have nothing to fear.” Aaron stated. “We need to know what this is and she is the only source we have of finding out that information.”

Mio narrowed her eyes as she thought about it. *Conversing with an untrustworthy demon is never a good thing to put your faith in, but we have little choice. If the spell is active still and dangerous, it would be wise to know what we are getting into. “I’ll allow it Aaron,” Sakamoto answered, relenting her position, “but just this once.”*

Nodding, Aaron clicked his heels together and out popped his knife again from his right heel, parts of the blade still crusted with blood. He ran it against the sole, stripping the dead man’s clotted vitae, and held it close to his face. “Ismenoth, I need your help.”

Mio walked around him and looked over Aaron’s shoulders, eyes seeing the glinting metal of the knife become clouded as if wreathed in gun smoke, faint yellow light glowing around it like a flame’s aura around a lit candle. Soon, the swirling smog parted and out of the clouds of grey came the pensive face of Ismenoth, licking her lips as if expecting some tasty morsel. “Well, isn’t this an interesting turn of events?” she mused, tilting her head. “What is on your mind my dearest?”

“I heard something not too long ago in Latin that made no sense to me, and I strongly believe it to be a spell.” Aaron informed.

The statement triggered the immediate effect of causing Ismenoth to raise an eyebrow in curiosity. “I find that to be very hard to believe. What did it say?” she inquired. Aaron leaned in close to the knife
and whispered in the same guttural accented dialect that he heard on Leclerc’s ear piece. Within the first few syllables, the demons black orbs widened in recognition and she gasped in horror, an intake of breath that caused Divale to nearly drop the blade to the ground out of surprised shock.

“You know what it means don’t you?” he pressed. The fiend’s eyes darted this way and that, contemplating, thinking. Aaron’s patience ran out very quickly and he hissed, “Tell me what I want to know, or I’ll rip it out of you!”

Growling back him, Ismenoth reluctantly replied, “It’s one of the eight verses of one of the most powerful spells that a warlock can cast: anastatis.”

“Anastatis?” Aaron queried, thinking back on his past schooling when he learned how to read the Bible in Latin. “Resurrection?”

“More than that,” Ismenoth clarified. “It also renews, purging the body of all ills, returning it to a state of oneness.”

“Why don’t I have knowledge of this spell?” Aaron asked with a demanding tone.

“Two reasons,” Ismenoth retorted acidly. “the first being that it requires eight like supplicants to sacrifice their lives in order to project their life energies back into the individual being resurrected. It would’ve been counterproductive for you or your men to know this spell as it would diminish your numbers. And the second is that you don’t have the power to cast this spell, you’re not strong enough to wield it properly Aaron and none of your men were either.”

“You lie.” Aaron seethed.

“Damn you Aaron, you fucking listen to me!” Ismenoth implored. “I may spend my days and nights scheming, plotting all sorts of ways to get my hands on your beautiful soul, but I also look out for you. You are precious to me, and I don’t want to see my hope dashed because you can’t control your foolish impulsiveness.”

The outburst elicited a cruel laugh from Aaron’s throat. “Well what do you know,” he sardonically observed, “even a demon can feel fear. How does it feel being on the other end?” Ismenoth’s jaw clenched in anger and was about to open, but Divale continued. “Can you sense where the spell was cast from here?”

“It is further on past the place where you will emerge from this hole.” Ismenoth reported. “And in Fort Vaux you will.” She stopped mid sentence and looked away from Aaron, staring off into space for a brief second. “Now this is most interesting,” she inquisitively added. “There is another spell located almost at the same location, but the energies of anastatis prevent me from seeing it clearly.”

Turning to face Aaron again, she instructed, “Seek out this residue and purge it clean so that you or I can identify this oddity.” With that, Ismenoth’s face disappeared from the blade and the swirling smoke along with it, the shining steel now fully back in the realm of reality.

Divale placed the knife back into his right boot sole, making sure that his glasses were secure on his face, and took a gander behind him, staring up into Mio’s eyes. “You ready to go topside?” he asked.

Mio answered by shouldering her 20mm cannon and Aaron stood up and walked to the door, a thick brute of a portal with a simple pull latch. Sakamoto flipped up her eye patch and took a look beyond the entrance, shaking her head as she found nothing. With a gentle tug, Divale pulled metal slide out and pushed open the door, a gush of clean fresh air gusting through, sending his hair into a frenzy. He allowed Mio to pass the threshold before getting in himself and closing the door carefully behind them. After securing the latch again, Aaron turned and found himself within an unlit corridor, but his eyes were proof against such obstacles and he could see that towards the end there was a flight of
stairs, leading to another door, this one made of wood, heavily decayed with elemental exposure, daylight shining through the cracks. “I’ll go first and you’ll back me up.” Aaron whispered to Mio, sidestepping around the major. The pair walked slowly, cautiously, keeping their steps soft and quiet. Divale looked at his watch and saw that it was 11:30 AM exactly. He tapped his communicator in morse code. (Divale to Clostermann. Have arrived at Verdun and are now proceeding to Fort Vaux. Any major changes in the Neuroi patrols topside?)

(Little to none) Perrine morsed back. (If anything, they are getting more numerous. Something’s got them agitated and they don’t look like they’re going to leave anytime soon. Be careful out there.)

(Wilco. Will update as soon as we are in Fort Vaux. Divale out.) Aaron reached the door after he finished transmitting and peered through the jagged slits. Through the rotten wood that smelled like an old attic being opened up again after a long winter, he saw the inside of a dusty dark room the size of the bathroom in Dover Castle with a low lying counter and a few bar stools across from it, cobwebs thick around the glasses and cubby holes. He gave Mio a thumbs up and placed his hand on the knob, an iron ball rusted to the point of almost crumbling, and turned it gently and slowly. The mechanism turned with a sound of dried corn being ground against a stone, the grating sounding much louder than it should. All the while Aaron kept his eyes riveted to the room beyond, searching for intruders and focusing all of his hearing to pick up any footsteps. Eventually, the knob refused to budge any further and Divale pushed it open and entered the speakeasy. Mio followed behind him and closed the door, but the click of the latch was more than what the old knob could take and it split in half, the ruins falling to the wooden floor and the concrete with a loud clinking. Everyone froze, not so much as moving their chests in and out as they breathed shallowly. Then they both heard it, a thumping from upstairs, heavy footfalls that caused the planks above them to shed dust and dirt on their heads like rain. Fuck. “This way, on the double!” Aaron exclaimed softly as he power walked with care to the far right corner. Mio was right on his heels and stopped as he bent down and ran his finger along the wall, feeling, searching for something. All the while the steps moved around overhead, bring down more brown debris from the floor above. Finally, Aaron found what he was looking for, a tiny button and pressed it. The switch caused a small portal to open up, ejected from the floorboards by a thick spring. He bade her to go through and scout ahead with a simple gesture. Flipping up her eye patch, Mio got on all fours and crawled through, Aaron covering her six, keeping a watchful eye on the enemy that was surely searching for them, trying to find a way down. After she had passed, he hunkered down and shimmed through the hole, grunting softly as the rough wood tugged at his back, the greasepaint making long green and black streaks.

No sooner did his head emerge out the other side did Mio tap him on the shoulder and put a finger to her lips. No alone here either are we? She then took her left hand and gently morsed on the floor, (We have two in the room on patrol. Both are moving away. There’s more cover if we go around.)

Nodding, Aaron morsed back while continuing his trek. (Understood. You take point and get us to where we can get eyes on the fort. Due west.) He tilted his head in the cardinal direction and Mio nodded, directing her attention to the task at hand. The two had come out of the speakeasy and found themselves inside a dilapidated stable, piles of hay, an old tractor gone to junk, and very little else separating them from the pair of Legionary’s slowly making their way near the main entrance, fully intending on exiting the structure that looked like it could come down with the slightest brush of a mouse’s tail against the walls. She waited patiently as the Legionary’s left the premises and looked around for another way out and found it, a blown out hole in the siding. Gesturing with her head, the pair got up and sprinted to the escape route, Aaron stopping near one of the tractors giant wheels, peering at the door through the gun sights of his rifle. Mio crouched down and listened for the patrol. There you are. Two separate pairs of steps, all moving way to the other side. Perfect.

Just outside the hole, Sakamoto could see another structure, a checkpoint with a makeshift barricade of sandbags, with some arranged in complete squares, their purpose once being emplacements for
heavy weapons, roughly two hundred feet away, the street leading to it surprisingly clear. “We have a checkpoint up ahead. Roughly two hundred feet.” she whispered, turning to Aaron, who vacated his position and came to a halt near her, taking a gander for himself.

“Roll on three, two, one, roll!” Aaron ordered in a hushed tone. At the conclusion of the last syllable of one, the duo rushed out of the stables and made a mad scramble down the street, looping around a well and stopping for a brief second behind it, lest the patrol pick them up or jump out at the wrong time. Nothing untoward happened, and they generally proceeded to sprint. One hundred feet came and went as did fifty more until Aaron picked up the familiar change in the air and a keening sound that would remind anyone of an ice skater’s blade traveling over ice. “Flyer! Get down!” he softly commanded. Mio instinctively combat rolled low and away into a dried up ditch on her left side, Aaron’s bulk thudding behind her, pressing against the opposite side of the narrow channel, his size almost pouring out of it. Within seconds, the flyer, shaped like the tip of a dagger, came into view over top of them, making a quick pass over the little hamlet before making a lazy left to the west. Right where we’re going. “See any more of them?” Mio removed the eye patch and looked around. After a split second, she shook her head no and sprung up out of the ditch, Aaron taking up the rear, panning right and left with his STG 44. They soon reached the sandbags and vaulted over top of them, landing on their backs and rolling to their stomachs, guns out and eyes searching for targets.

“So far so good.” Aaron commented in a low voice as Mio slowly popped her head up.

“I think our luck just ran out Aaron.” Mio grimly remarked.

Curious, Divale peered over the lip of the sandbag wall and saw a large field full of overgrown grass that he reckoned would come up to his bellybutton if he were to wade through it, swaying in the breezes that picked up every so often from the natural winds and the unnatural gusts from low lying flyers that provided air cover and reconnaissance for a substantially large Neuroi force of ninety Legionary’s, thirty six Strategos, and sixteen Cataphracts, split up into two detachments so as to cover more ground, traversing the length and breadth of the area, combing every square inch for hidden enemies and occasionally firing off a salvo of beams. Slightly beyond this green carpet of death was a heavily cratered no mans land of barbed wire and blown out cordons of low lying bunkers, their walls toppled and slagged guns silent, thick coils of rebar jutting out like fibers from a shucked ear of corn. Further on, was the main citadel, Fort Vaux itself, the Great War era walls mostly intact despite the punishment that Aaron knew it took. Probably because the French simply chose to abandon it rather than make a desperate defense. Can’t really fault them for that. The garrison at maximum would’ve been probably been a thousand men at most. Not even remotely enough to provide adequate resistance. Covered trench works could still be made out, leading to the various redoubts. One of them had its protective cover blasted open, the faint contrails of white grey smoke billowing out near a low crater.

“Those blast points weren’t made by Neuroi fire.” Mio observed, taking in the scene with a clinical eye. “I can see powder marks from charges. A beam would’ve cause it to turn to dust or slag.”

“True that,” Aaron countered politely, “but why is there smoke? The attack occurred close to eight hours ago, it should’ve dispersed by now.”

“We’ll never figured that out if we sit here and dawdle. You using your spells to get us there?” Mio asked.

“Not at all,” Aaron replied, eliciting a stare of utter confusion from Sakamoto, “for you see, the first rule of magic that I ever learned from Ismenoth is to never use it unless you need it, for if you call upon it wantonly, you’ll find out that one day when you really need it, it won’t be there.” He pointed to the long grass and added, “We will use that natural vegetation as cover, moving slow and low.
Use your eye and we will predict their movements easily. The journey should take us about an hour or so. Once we get into the craters over yon, we’ll lose them easily.” He noted Mio’s anxiety as she stared off into the field again and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I know this isn’t the best plan, but it’s the perfect plan.”

_Easy for you to say. “Your call.”_ Mio muttered, hefting her 20mm.

“Oh, me.” Aaron instructed and the two extricated themselves from the sandbags and started to crawl into the jungle that was the fields. With foot and hand, the pair slithered and slunk amidst the thick foliage, Mio panning left and right, keeping her hand constantly on her eyepatch, ready to douse it if she even suspected that they could be discovered, with Aaron leading the way, carving a path that was barely discernable despite his efforts to do otherwise. A bright light and all is darkness, save for the stuttering yellow glow of a flashlight, the battery in need of changing, illuminating the scene, one that was ribbed and metal, parts rusted and molded with all matter of brown and black hues. A moment of realization passes; this is a pipe. The reek of excrement and ammonia is thick and heavy, like mustard gas pockets in shell craters, the effluent coming up to a pair of unseen knees and coating an unseen hand with a lukewarm sensation that was anything but pleasant. A throat retches and vomit spills out the mouth, the discharge violently impacting the slurry and sending splashes of it scattering all along the length and breath of the shit shaft, the color nearly matching the fetid liquid. Teeth grind and a growl erupts from the throat, the kind that made it clear that this one would not accept defeat, that they would not be stopped in their quest. Suddenly, something moves from the deep beyond, the flashlight finally giving up the ghost. All is darkness again for a split second before a whine is heard that reminds one of falling.-

Aaron snapped himself out of his memories as he soon realized with horror that the keening whine was not within his mind, but from without, and it was getting closer with every passing second. _Those are mortar rounds. Big suckers too. Fuck us hard, this is like Balaton all over again. “Stay down!”_ Aaron yelled over the din as the 81mm antipersonnel munitions, crammed full of shrapnel and designed to cause maximum lethality to anything within twenty feet of impact, made earth fall, the detonations loud and heavy, sending flame, smoke, sod, and bits and pieces of dissolving Neuroi flying through the overcast sky. Mio quickly scrambled right next to Aaron, less for protection and more for communication. The tremors of repeated strikes were added to by the discharge of enemy cannon fire, making the reverberations of both combine to create an otherworldly din that belonged more in a foundry at full production capacity than a field of grass. “Can you see who’s doing the shooting?” Aaron screamed, his voice barely audible.

Thankfully Mio could read lips and flipped up her eye patch, revealing a world in absolute upheaval. Neuroi were advancing at the double, some crouching down and taking pot shots at a distant overgrown series of hedgerows, the boughs outstretched to the point of being as tall as chimneys, some parts burning as they were struck. They didn’t linger long lest they be blown apart by explosive shells, wiping out whole sections. It was at that point that Mio came to a sudden realization. _Apart from the opening salvo, these shots are well aimed, as if they had time to preposition their weapons. Were they waiting for them or for us?_ Forcing down her unease, Mio replied loudly, “No I can’t, but whoever they are, they had time to set up.”

“Best guess is that they’re the one’s who attacked the 114th and bugged out when the Neuroi showed up, bringing in the big guns to finish the job.” Aaron deduced. “Course if they did that, there has got to be survivors in there that would warrant the use of such ordinance.” Another explosion rocked the earth, showering them with dirt and bits of grass. “We can’t stay here. Sooner or later they’ll have to retreat. We advance at the run, keeping low until the craters. Ride the elevation changes and roll over the lips. Watch for debris and please call out errant shots if you please, it would really suck if we got pasted right now. Move out!” As one, the pair rose side by side, the tips of their crowns cresting the wildly waving grass, and they ran, both keeping a wary eye on the enemy, who
thankfully seemed to be more interested in what was in front of them than behind. More rounds came in, these poorly aimed out of apparent misjudgment and fell some distance in front of them, clearing out their cover. Without the safety of concealment, Mio and Aaron dove into the newly pockmarked earth and crawled forward until they made the next patch. At their pace, it didn’t take long for them to reach the craters, rolling over the lip of the nearest one and riding the tumble until they reached the center of impact.

Looking around, Mio smiled as fortune now seemed to smile on them. The positions of the bunkers also had trench lines that ran much deeper into the earth, giving them a path that didn’t involve exposing themselves at all. Aaron saw it to and beamed while running forward, “Finally some real luck.” Mio followed Aaron as he sprinted through the winding fortifications, sidestepping rocks and rebar. Mio copied his steps exactly, keeping up the blistering pace. A journey that would’ve taken at least an hour was shaved down to ten minutes as the roar of battle started to decay at a precipitous rate as they made the last crater and started to scale the slope. Taking off her eye patch, Mio saw with dismay that the Neuroi had overwhelmed whoever gave them the time to get there and were slowly turning around. Suddenly, Sakamoto felt two arms grab her, lassoing themselves around her midsection as Aaron called out, “Hold on!” leaping low into the air with all his strength, his placement firm and takeoff perfect at an angle, corkscrewing counterclockwise. Mio looked on as the world behind them came into brief view, the enemy, bloodied and battered, still revolving around, attempting to rejoin and redistribute their numbers effectively to continue the search. The patch of hedgerows was gone, a blazing inferno of leaves and wood, sending plumes of acrid smoke into the air. Shell craters were everywhere, dotting the surface at regular intervals, the air around them hazy as fine particulate matter drifted down. It all seemed to happen at a snails pace for a long drawn out moment before time caught up with reality and the pair sailed through the blown out covered trench works and landed hard, Aaron on the ground and Mio right on top.

Recovering far quicker than her unfortunate partner, Mio pointed her weapon down the trench and scanned for targets. Nothing dangerous was in view, except a drifting ash colored smoke that carried with it a disturbingly familiar chill, like the kind one feels when stepping outdoors into a winter night. *Like the kind I felt when Aaron summoned Ismenoth at the coven.* “Aaron, do you feel that?” Mio asked, anxiously looking down at Aaron’s grimacing face, not moving a muscle.

“Oh I feel something alright.” Aaron quipped. “I feel that someone is overstaying their welcome.” At first Mio, couldn’t understand what Aaron was getting at, until her eyes traveled the length of his form and saw, much to her embarrassment, that she was essentially straddling him, her rump squarely over his pelvis. Blushing red, Sakamoto quickly vacated her position.

“I-I’m sorry.” Mio stammered, the redness visible even in the low light.

“Don’t worry about it.” Aaron replied, sitting up and turning around. “You’re not the first woman I’ve said that to, and I’m sure you won’t be the last.” He took his STG 44 and waved it through the smoke, sniffing the air like a dog searching for a scent. *That’s definitely warlock magic, but it’s different somehow, like it’s polluted, tainted.* Looking alongside the earthen walls of the trench and the ceiling, ice crystals could be seen, twinkling in what little light trickled down through the hole. Aaron got up, unfurling his wings and placing them in front in a shield wall and said, “Let’s see what Fort Vaux has in store for us.” Mio followed behind him as Divale took point, wings angled to deflect any incoming fire. They came to a corner and stopped at the wall, placing their backs against it.

“Looks like there was a firefight here.” Mio pointed out, gesturing to the far side where bullets holes the size of quarters could be seen, some of the rounds poking out like spark plugs in a car engine.
Aaron nodded, looking over the spent munitions with a clinical eye. “Those are machine gun rounds. Easily .3 inch like the MG42. The defenders were packing some heat.” He then took a gander down the hallway and saw more smoke, floating over what looked like even elevations coming up from the ground, the features indiscernible. Further down, a fairly beat up iron door stood slightly cracked open, the face dented and cored from numerous impacts, mist billowing out from beyond it like it was trying to hold back a batch of London fog. A large circular port hole could be seen, clearly meant as a way place for defenders to house and fire a machine gun without exposing themselves, but now thankfully vacant. “De vi murum.” Divale intoned softly, pointing his left hand around the corner. His spell spewed forth, clearing the haze in the trench by sending it back towards the door, the swirling mass shoved through every nook and cranny. Aaron’s eyes narrowed and his mood became dark as he saw bodies, piles upon piles of bodies lying everywhere, a few up to his chest, in various states of dismemberment, their faces rictus locked in pain and agony, weapons clutched firm in cold dead hands, spent shell casings littering the ground like coins in a wishing well. “Looks like we missed the party.” he commented as he turned the corner.

Mio did the same and gasped. “Mother of God.” she breathed, unable to fully comprehend the sight before her eye. She looked over the nearest corpse and saw that it was dressed in the kit of a French soldier. “You were right,” Sakamoto acknowledged, nodding and picking up the pace, getting as close to Aaron as she could without crowding him, “they were ex military.”

“I know and I wish I wasn’t.” Aaron agreed. He furrowed his brow as he played the battle over in his head. So the bad guys blew a hole in the trench line back there with charges and piled in, hoping to catch them unawares. Good tactic, but something must’ve gone wrong, maybe they were found out, spotted by a lookout, giving the defenders time to get organized. Wandered right into a murder hole. If they used machine guns and other like minded weaponry, the ammunition counts would’ve dwindled with every assault, and the attackers from the looks of it were more than willing to sacrifice themselves to do it, maybe to pin them down while another group flanked along another trench that we couldn’t see. Casualties must have been horrific. There’s easily over two hundred bodies down here and I’ll bet there’s more behind that door. With tentative steps, making sure not to disturb the dead or get tripped up by an errant limb, the pair walked down the rush hour traffic congested trench. Despite their best efforts, they often had to graze up against the cold hulks that had once been human beings in order to make progress. It got colder with every step they took towards the door, their breaths starting to add to the smoke now attempting to come back and reclaim its former domain, blanketing the dead.

Mio shivered as the chill got worse, her boot glancing off the side of a skull, frost from the skin coming off like snow. “Have any of your spells made an aura like this?” she asked through gritted teeth, trying to keep them from chattering.

“No,” Aaron answered, seemingly oblivious to the cold, the only sign of his discomfort being goosebumps, “nothing like this at all.” Moving his eyes only, he took a look at the ground and saw that there were signs of multiple grenade detonations, their small craters and gnarled fixture pins scattered here and there. Divale detected no blood near the door, which to him meant that the one or two manning the position and laying down that murderous stream of fire didn’t get killed. Curious, he peered through the hole and saw more bodies, well over seventy, stacked like sandbags three feet high in lines that stretched from one side of the room to the other, the area the size of the hanger back in Dover. A giant hole dominated the scene, gouged out by some massive explosion in the left hand side. Everywhere the magical aura from anastatis coated everything in white, a crust of cold. Knew it. Got flanked. Managed to beat them back and get some ad hoc defenses up. Steeling himself for the pain that was going to follow, Aaron placed his hands on the door, his hands instantaneously adhering to the iron, the cold burn making him grimace and wince. Summoning his strength, he pushed with all his might and the door opened with a rusty whining, like a cart wheel in dire need of an oil can. While laboring in pain, Aaron also picked up the furrowing of soil from beyond.
Mio heard the sound too and deduced with a nod. “Must’ve pulled bodies from close by to brace the door. Clever, would’ve done the same thing.” With a grunt, Divale gave the door one past push and pulled his hands away from the metal, the skin of his hands and fingers ripping off in frozen chunks, blood barely pouring out from the cavities, the environment restricting its flow. He took his next breath sharply as he held them against his sides, closing his eyes and concentrating. “You alright?” Mio asked with concern, pulling away one of his hands to see the damage. The meat of his palm was visible and thawing out at an alarming rate, vitae welling up and dripping over the fingers and knuckles like water from a shower head at full blast.

“Augendae.” Aaron stated and Sakamoto looked on in awe as the blood dried up within seconds and flaked away, pushed outwards by the new skin that was growing and knitting itself back up, leaving behind faint scars that gave his palms the look of the top of a crosshatched picnic basket.

Clenching and unclenching his hands, Aaron winked, “Just a minor complaint.” he answered. As he turned away, Mio caught the sight of a thin drop of blood cascading down the right side of his face, originating from his right ear.

“You sure?” she pressed.

Aaron understood why she said that and nodded. “I’ll be fine.” He then crossed the threshold, tucking in his wings due to the spatial limitations, his boots crunching from the snow and ice buildup. Through the hole in the left side, he could see that more bodies were lying down another trench line, this one less crowded and towards the right, leading down a hallway, were more corpse barricades, arranged the same as the one he saw through the hole, spaced out every seven or eight feet, each one higher than the other. Elevated for more chances to take down the enemy and impede his progress. Regarding Mio, he pointed down the hallway and instructed, “I need to make my report. Find out where the defense ends and that will lead us to the nexus point of the spell. Once you find it, get me.” Mio nodded and trudged off, drawing her uniform closer to her body as she ventured down the hallway. “Divale to Clostermann.” Aaron stated, his breath misting in the air. “We have reached Fort Vaux.”

“Any survivors?” Perrine inquired anxiously.

“Unknown at this point and time. There seems to be powerful magic at work here, making the area intensely cold to the point where we have been walking through inches deep snow. I will say however that there are a lot of bodies down here, easily over four hundred in total.” Aaron answered.

“Over four hundred?” Perrine asked with a puzzled tone. “The 114th only had sixteen members. Where did the bodies come from and what is this magic you speak of?”

Aaron swallowed deep and asked a question of his own, “Are you alone Lieutenant?”

His tone clearly had an effect as Clostermann didn’t respond for a good four seconds. “Yes, but only for a short time as Minna and de Gaulle are brewing some coffee. What is happening down there Sergeant?”

“While we were in Lille, the prefect there provided us with a message that his people picked up at around 3:30 or 4 o clock in the morning, one that features strange chanting, chanting in Latin.” Aaron began to explain.

“What!” Perrine hissed loudly. “Are there more of you out there you didn’t tell us about!”

“There isn’t.” Aaron deadpanned, ignoring the insult to his honesty. “I don’t recollect the voice as it is heavily French accented.”
“Are you implying that French soldiers attacked French witches?!” Perrine retorted with a mixture of disbelief and anger.

“When Mio and I went down to the weapons depot to get kitted out, I played the message back much slower at the final three seconds. The sound that we all took for a Neuroi charging and discharging a shot was actually two separate sounds, one of which was the distinctive click of a flamethrower ignition striker. Fire is useless against them so no one in the 114th would’ve used one, so that left the sole explanation being that they were attacked by ex military units.” Aaron further clarified.

“Why didn’t you tell us this in the first place?” Perrine asked.

“Because everyone would’ve reacted the same way you did.” Aaron replied. Plus, it would make no sense making a judgment based solely on the basis of a transmission, the insult to the French military and General de Gaulle notwithstanding.”

“If they are French military, they should have a unit insignia somewhere on their uniforms, right near the collar.” Perrine observed. “Can you see one?”

“Hold on. Checking now.” Aaron answered, crouching down near one of the many bodies near the door. He took his now fully healed left hand and scrapped away some of the snow build up at the collar. After a few passes he saw a bronze pin with the numbers 3/128 with two crossed rifles underneath it. “We have 3rd Division, 128th Infantry Regiment.”

“Oh, I’ll have the necessary intelligence forwarded to me within minutes. Let me know as soon as you find survivors.” Perrine informed.

Or bodies at this rate. “Wilco. Divale out.” Aaron said, killing the link. He made his way to get back up when he noticed something odd near the soldiers neck, two wounds right along the jugular vein, that were partially exposed when he searched for the insignia. Again, he brushed away some more, and when he saw what his hand revealed he wished he hadn’t as his blood ran colder than the air in the room. The wounds were two small holes, thin and tapered with the widest near the skin and the point some ways within, clean and free of debris, the inner cavity scarred over. No powder marks could be discerned nor the jagged slashes of shrapnel. Aaron’s mind traveled back to a story he read during his time in France before he went over to Great Britain, a tale that spoke of a mythical undead being that stalked the night, drinking the blood in the innocent and making slaves and thralls of those it fed upon. Vampire?! But that’s impossible! However, if I could combat a succubus in Transylvania and those things in and around the countryside corrupting souls and transforming people into whatever they are, anything is possible these days. Good almighty God, what the hell did we just stumble into?

“Aaron!” Mio called out from the hallway, her head poking out of a fully opened side room. “I found it!” With haste, Divale bounded over, leaping over the dead bodies, his feet crashing down on ice block hard limbs and chests, rolling ever so slightly in every direction due to the curvature of skulls, elbows, and hosts of bullet casings. The snow grew deeper as he came closer to the open portal, the frozen water now up to his ankles, bit of it finding its way into his boots, the cold feeling most unwelcome. He rounded the corner and stopped in front of the threshold, beholding a scene that could best be described as Stonehenge in winter, with eight large columns arranged in a circle, wide at the bottom and tapered toward the top, the acme pressed right to the ceiling. Surrounding them, crackling with otherworldly white and green lightning was a large ritual site, the shimmer of its boundary visible only a foot into the room. The symbols swirled like the smoke in the trenches, never stagnant, always moving. Mio looked at Aaron, who stood straight, moving only his eyes, clearly thinking. “Are you sure you can stop this?” she asked.
Aaron turned and nodded without mirth. “All warlock spells have a way to clean up ritual residue like this, yet all take time to fully clear it. This particular one may prove to be problematic and for that, I need to concentrate. I must do this alone. Stay outside of the threshold at all times Mio. Do not come in here for any reason, no matter what you see or hear, don’t interfere.”

Mio nodded, but as soon as she did, her eye widened in realization. “Aaron?” she asked. “Is it possible that this aura was left here for the purpose of acting as an alarm, a means to let those that did this know that someone is here? If you disarm this, we and any survivors could be caught in a trap.”

“That did cross my mind,” Aaron admitted. “but there is no alternative here. This needs to go. If someone comes in here and breaks the seal around the aura, the consequences could be dire.”

“What kind of consequences?” Mio inquired.

“Think Old Testament level bad.” Aaron illuminated. “Real wrath of God type consequences. Fire and brimstone falling from the sky, rivers and seas boiling, the dead and worse rising from the grave, earthquakes, plague, famine, you get the picture. Now, remember what I said, and all will be well.”

With measured steps, Divale entered the room, diverting his full attention to the task at hand, stopping before the lay line and looking over it like a siege expert does fortifications, judging its strength and probing for weaknesses. He closed his eyes and pressed his hands against the shimmer, his palms finding purchase amongst the aetheric energies, playing about his fingers like flies looking for a spot to plant themselves. Then, he began chanting, a low bass tone reserved for leading prayers at some mass, and began levitating, arms hanging limp at his side, legs bent as if sleeping. Mio watched his body enter the aura and the swirling intensified, circling faster and faster, creating a current of wind that beat the air like thunder, sending loose frost, ice, and snow into the walls or her face, causing her to back away, shielding her eye with her hands.

Colors and shapes started to form within the maelstrom of magic, three vast shapes in chaotic harmony hovering around Aaron’s helpless form like sharks around a fresh kill, looking for the precise moment to strike. Suddenly, the first came into being, that of a giant devil, his mouth full of teeth, dribbling ichor, the horns ebon black and twisted like a pigs tail, brandishing a barbed mace, the face that of a winged angel being defeathered by a pack of wild dogs. and a long serrated chain of black steel, red hot sparks trailing vaporous mists that resembled shrieking faces of mortals, weeping tears of blood and pain. With a flick of his wrist, the chain moved as if possessed with a life of its own, coiling around Aaron and drawing him closer to the fiend, the tell tale cracking of his bones, akin to a babies rattle being shook, plain for all to hear. The demon smiled and raised the mace high into the air before sending it crashing down onto Divale’s skull. It took very ounce of discipline for Sakamoto to not run in or fire her weapon at the behemoth having his way with the warlock. Remember, do not interfere. Miraculously, the blow caused no damage and splintered into pieces, showering Aaron with metallic dark dust. Thwarted, the demon howled in defeat and disappeared.

Next up, came a gigantic skull, the entire surface inscribed with runes that glowed green and made Mio wince in pain as she gazed upon them, her gorge rising. She forced it down as from it’s unoccupied sockets a host of scorpion tails emerged, flailing this way and that, the venomous barbs jabbing outwards. The cranium made its way to Aaron, it’s new found appendages impaling his skin, making it bloat as the poisons were injected into him. Blood and yellow ooze seeped out of his ears, nose, every open wound and orifice as he body struggled to deal with the onslaught. When every stinger was applied, the skull opened its mouth impossible wide, and bit down. However, like the demon, the head reared back in agony as the pearly whites cracked and broke with sound of glass and wood mixed together.

As it too faded, the third and final entity made its way forth and it made Mio gasp. From the depths
ventured an exact copy of Aaron himself, yet it was altered somehow, changed from the man she
knew, moving with an unnatural grace that belied it’s true identity. He came up to Aaron and ran his
hands along his face with his nails, tearing into his own flesh, piercing eyes, and ripping the nasal
cavities and cheeks loose until they resembled flaps. The doppelganger suffered no ill effects, but
Aaron did, his face becoming almost unrecognizable, crimson blood gushing out, covering his head
and neck. Not stopping, the clone balled his fists and beat himself in the chest and abdomen, raining
blows that could split granite. Through the patches of greaspaint that still lingered on Aaron’s frame,
bruises swelled, turning black and purple, spreading like a rash. This beating continued until the copy
looked at Mio directly and smiled a cruel smile as he took his head into his hands, one hand on each
side, and violently twisted the neck, snapping the spine. Instead of falling down lifeless, the true
Aaron’s eyes opened as did his mouth. “You lose.” he said and his assailent threw up his arms in
defeat and slunk away into nothing. The magical aura ceased to exist and boundary disappeared as
Divale gently lowered to the ground. As he made earth fall, he hacked up gobbets of bloody phelgm
and spat, the globular blobs smacking the ground with a wet sticky sound, and wiped his mouth
clean with the back of his hand.

With the enchantment now broken, all the ice, frost, and snow in the area began to melt at a pace that
was uncanny, turning into water and then evaporating into nothing just as quickly. Through the mist,
the pillars of snow revealed their true colors. Arranged in a circle, with each plinth aligned exactly
with the eight cardinal directions of the compass, suspended from thick rope that extended from the
ceiling and coiled around thin lifeless wrists, were the bodies of eight women in French uniforms, the
flesh on their faces dried out like old wallpaper, their features wizened and their bare legs the
thickness of young saplings, the bone structure jutting out violently. Each bore an expression of fear
and pain on their faces, the last moments of life clearly unpleasant. Off in one of the corners was a
pile of land Strikers, bulkier and more armored than their air based counterparts, broken beyond
repair. Mio looked at the dead and then at the Strikers and furrowed her brow. “I count sixteen pairs
Aaron.” she rattled off, coming toward him. “And there are only eight bodies here. Some must have
gotten out, casting off their Strikers for added mobility.”

“That may be,” Aaron replied, carefully getting up off the ground, staggering a bit, “but there’s no
way out of this room as far as I can see.” He then pointed at the neck of one of the corpses, adding,
“And take a look at that.”

Mio turned and regarded the dead body, swaying ever so gently in place from the chaotic dispelling
of anastatis. She squinted and saw two small bite marks along the jugular. “What weapon did this?”
she asked, whipping her head around and giving Aaron a look.

“The fangs of a vampire.” Divale grimly answered, wandering from body to body, taking off the
shoes. “Those that attacked them also bear the same marks.”

Mio was stunned and started to dart her eyes this way and that, evidence of her anxiety. “Have you
ever faced one of them before?” she inquired.

“No,” Aaron admitted, finishing his grisly task and reaching within one of the shoes, “but thankfully,
I have been trained in how they operate and how to deal with them.” After fishing around for a brief
second, he pulled out his hand, clutching a thin aluminum dog tag and put it in his back pocket,
throwing the now useless article of footwear behind him and reaching for another. “Most of the old
legends are bunk, but a few do ring true. All vampires are extremely sensitive to sunlight, which
nowadays in France isn’t a problem for them, and share one mortal weakness, their heart. If you can
destroy the heart of a vampire entirely, the creature dies. The only problem is getting close enough to
do it. They’re very intelligent, agile, strong, and incredibly resilient, shrugging off anything that isn’t
lethal. Moreover, if they can see you, they can focus you down with their defensive magic, making
them even more harder to take down. The trick is to somehow attack it from multiple angles in the
hopes that you can split its attention, giving you enough time to line up a killing blow.”

“What about making more of their kind?” Mio queried, recognizing what Aaron was doing and helping him with the recovery.

“While some do band together for a specific purpose,” Divale explained, pocketing another dog tag, “most are solitary by nature. Plus their respective power is directly linked to how many thralls they have in their possession.” He looked outside the door and shook his head. “And if I’m a betting man, I’d say that this particular subject has a lot of thralls, or else it wouldn’t bother sending them into a meat grinder like this.” Looking over the ritual site again, he saw a pair of footprints larger than the rest crisscrossing this way and that to each plinth before coming to stop in the center. Sadistic bastard drained them all one by one slowly, making the survivors watch their friends die, knowing that they too will be next. He also noticed a collection of purple shards some small ways apart from the Strikers, mostly buried deep into the concrete as if shoved into the solid structure with immense force. After pulling out the last dog tag, Aaron walked over and hunched down, feeling with his right hand for a loose piece. As luck would have it, he found one, and wrenched it out with a grinding sound.

“What’s that?” Mio asked, making sure that the tags she recovered were safely stowed away before kneeling beside him.

She watched he turned the tiny sliver around and rub it with his three fingers before pausing and nodding slowly as understanding began to settle in. “Traicio,” he muttered with a frown, “a spell used for making a quick getaway. The runes are normally etched onto glass and infused with the magic, giving the bearer the means to mark out any location in the world and, upon breaking the vessel, take the bearer and anything within a certain radius with him.”

“Can you find out where this vampire went?” Mio inquired.

Aaron shook his head sadly, “The magic is too weak. He could be anywhere right now.” He stood up and dialed into Perrine’s frequency. “Divale to Clostermann. We’ve found eight bodies belonging to the 114th. What does Saregant Planchard look like?”

A hard swallow was heard from the other end and Perrine answered, “About my height with short red hair, a shade lighter than Shirley’s, with blue eyes and a scar in the shape of a seven on the back of her right knee.”

Quickly glancing at the bodies, Aaron could see that none matched the description. “She’s not among them.” He could hear Clostermann sigh with relief. “Search for other survivors ongoing, but I have some bad news Perrine.” Pausing, he tried to frame what he was about to say to her, and decided that it was best to just say it. “Those that attacked the 114th, the 128th, didn’t do so out of their own volition.”

“They were ordered to do so?” Perrine replied with horror. “Why would they do that?”

“Every one of the corpses here, the dead of the 114th included, have the marks of the blood kiss.” Aaron informed.

Again, the line went dead as the reciever tried to make sense of this development. “Vampire?” Clostermann breathed. “God help us all.”

“It gets worse,” Aaron went on, “the creature also used another spell, using it to transport himself away from here after draining them. Mio located sixteen pairs of Strikers and it’s highly probable that if there were survivors that they were captured and taken to parts unknown.” Divale tried to speak
again, but found that he couldn’t, his dispair at coming so far and falling so far short crushing his spirit. I've failed. “Perrine-” he began to say, but Mio, while Aaron was conversing, looked over along the far wall and, after noticing something odd, whistled loudly. “Hold on.” Aaron hastily replied, walking over to her. Divale gave her a look and Sakamoto simply pointed down at the ground. Glancing at the concrete, he squinted his eyes and saw with shocked amazement that some dust particles were flitting around and away from behind a part of the wall that had crumbled from some hard impact. Wind gusts, which means that there is a secret tunnel leading deeper within.

“Major Sakamoto has found a secret passageway leading to another part of the fort. Proceeding with operation. Will update as soon as new information comes up. Divale out.” he excitedly reported and cut the link, smiling at Mio. “I could almost kiss you right now, you know that?” he remarked while reaching out with both hands, feeling the wall for some sort of release hatch.

“I deeply suggest you don’t.” Mio deadpanned. “Lucretia might not like that.”

Aaron stopped what he was doing and reached into his backpack, rummaging around for a few seconds before withdrawing an unbroken clear plastic bag, filled to the brim with foil wrapped candies in the shape of tear drops. Opening it, he took out one and handed it to Mio, saying with a sly grin, “Not all kisses are with lips major.”

Mio then started laughing and took the candy kiss from Aaron’s hand. You and your plays on words. She opened the foil wrapper and popped the chocolate into her mouth, the milk and sugar making her smile as it melted in her mouth. In the meanwhile, Aaron found the mechanism for opening the door, a slide made to look exactly like a stone slab, and moved it around. With a soft click, the false wall opened, making a hole the size of a small person. Peering inside, both could see the faint orange of light coming from deep within a long rough dirt passageway that led down and to the right. Please let there be someone down there. “Well,” Aaron quipped gesturing to Mio, “ladies first.” Hefting her cannon, Sakamoto ventured through the opening, Aaron following right behind her, closing the false wall behind him. The whole corridor was dry and cool, cobwebs stretching from side to side like barbed wire, save for a small patch here and there, evidence that someone had been down here recently. Tried to cover your tracks. Very good, but not good enough. The pair used their weapons as makeshift machetes, hacking their way through webs as they made their way forward, their angry eight legged occupants skittering away into the gloom.

Mio suddenly had a thought and turned to Aaron who flicked away an arachnid the size of a half dollar off his gun sight. “We should’ve covered our tracks before we got in here. If those thralls come back to investigate, we’ll lead them right to us.” she remarked, grimacing.

“The Neuroi topside will continue their patrols for a good while longer thanks to that fracas they caused. With any luck, it will by us the time that we need to get out of here.” Aaron assured. The way this day is going, I sincerely doubt it. Eventually, they came around the corner, turning right, Mio taking point with Aaron following behind, every so often checking their six. Two sconces of witch fire were burning brightly, illuminating another iron door, further down the line. Upon bringing himself facing the twelve o clock position, he saw a reflective glint in the distance. Scope. Without even thinking, he yelled, “Sniper! Get down!” and barreled into Mio, sending her and him to the earth, clouds of dust and broken cobwebs emanating from the impact. He placed her away from his body, putting his before hers, waiting to deflect the inevitable shot. Strangely enough, nothing of the sort came, and Aaron curiously took another look down. It was then he realized that he had been duped, the reflective glint that he though was a sniper scope was in fact a broken drinking glass. Son of a bitch.

No sooner did that thought cross his mind than did he and Mio hear the distinctive kachunk of a shotgun being pumped directly behind them. “Both of you, put your weapons on the ground and go forward slowly, keeping your hands were I can see them.” a woman’s voice commanded. The now
cornered duo gave each other a look that plainly read, take it nice and easy and did as they were told, letting their guns drop to the ground and moving forwards, hands and fingers splayed out. “Now stop and turn your heads from side to side. You short one, lower your collar while doing so.” the voice instructed. As they did before, Mio and Aaron followed the instructions exactly, down to the letter. “Now turn around.” the feminine voice demanded.

“Would you like us to sing and dance as well?” Aaron joked as he revolved around, squinting his eyes in an attempt to locate the speaker.

“Shut up.” the voice replied without humor. “You’re not one of them and you don’t have the look of marauders. Who are you?”

“Before we answer, we need some of our own.”Mio boldly ventured, sick of being held a gunpoint. “Who are you?”

With a sharp click, a release was snapped, sending a human sized block of the passage ceiling falling down, landing with a faint crump. On the platform, branching a Great War era trench gun, the barrel sawed off, was a small woman dressed in the livery of the French army, the uniform dirty and tattered about the sleeves and shoulders with short cropped red hair, greasy from lack of showering, the blue eyes, tired from lack of sleep, never so much as waver from them. Her legs were bare and streaked with soil. Three bandoliers of shotgun shells crisscrossed her chest with the last looped around her waist. Those are double o buck for sure as well as solid shot. At this range, that thing would shred man into meat. How did she find us out? “I’m Sargeant Amelie Planchard of the 114th Engineers assigned to the 5th Division. Now, who the hell are you?” she asked again, leveling the shotgun at Mio’s head.

“I’m Major Mio Sakamoto of the 501st JFW and this is Sargeant Divale of same said unit. We have been charged with getting you and any other survivors out of France ASAP.” Mio answered.

Planchard’s face lit up with joy and she collapsed to her knees. “Oh thank God someone heard that distress call.” she uttered softly, bowing forward and kissing the ground. “I need to get in contact with your commanding officer, to relay information necessary to extract the prisoners.” she added, getting back up.

“I am the commanding officer.” Aaron replied.

Amelie stared at him like he was speaking in a foreign tongue. “Where are the rest of the reinforcements?” she inquired.

“We are the reinforcements.” Aaron answered, equally puzzled.

Planchard’s jaw dropped in disbelief. “You two are all they sent? My message specifically called for an entire division!” she exclaimed.

“Most of your transmission was unclear.” Mio explained. “We only got about fifteen or so seconds of actual dialogue.”

“Merde (Fuck)” Amelie shouted, her voice carrying all the way down the tunnel. “That puts us back to square one.”

From the looks of it you haven’t even gotten on square zero. “While the situation looks pretty bad right now, there is still two people here willing to help you sergeant.” Mio pointed out. “Let’s get out of this tunnel and talk in private.”
“Not so fast.” Amelie replied, gesturing to Aaron with the shotgun. “How does a man get into a witch unit?”

Aaron lowered his glasses, revealing his eyes, causing Planchard to fall backwards in shock, the gun clattering to ground. “Because he earned it.” With trembling hands, Amelie tried to fish up her shotgun, but Aaron leapt forwards and pinned the weapon to the ground with his boot. “You try to point that toy at me or the major again and you can kiss goodbye any chance of you getting out of this hellhole.” he stated flatly, giving her a hard look that meant business.

“It’s okay.” Mio called out from behind him, walking towards the pair slowly, trying to defuse the situation. “He’s a friend. He can be trusted.”

In a flash, Amelie back rolled into a crouch, pulling out two trench knives, the points long and tapered with a solid serrated metal bar with raised knuckles protecting her hands. “I don’t trust him.” she growled through gritted teeth. Suddenly, her hands erupted into orange and red flames, the heat intense, yet causing her or her weapons no harm. A ginger pyro? Now this is indeed something. All this time I thought it was only blondes that had the fire.

“You may not, but your friend Perrine Clostermann does.” Mio retorted.

Her words had an effect and Planchard’s eyes glowed with recognition. “Perrine?” she gasped. “She’s alive?”

“That she is.” Aaron acknowledged. “I’ll also have you know that she has been assigned as my wingman and that I’ve already saved her life once. The major and I were selected to get you and anyone else out and I promised Clostermann that I would do so by any means necessary.” He then stood up slowly and kicked the shotgun towards her, the butt resting against her left boot. “However, I have operational command here and if you want us to help you get the remains of the 114th out of what trouble they’re in right now, lose the tone and bluster, and I’m not going to ask twice.”

By infinitesimal degrees, Amelie looked at Mio and then back at Aaron, and gently lowered her weapons, the flames on her hands stuttering out without so much as a smoke trace. “Okay,” she agreed, picking up the shotgun. “but any funny business, the deals off.”

“Perfectly fine.” Aaron replied nodding. Planchard got on top of the platform and waited as Mio and Aaron got on top. When all were aboard she reached up and grabbed a gossamer thin wire and pulled down. With another click, the elevator rose up, swiftly reverting back to its original position. It wasn’t long before the trio found themselves in another tunnel, this once much wider and more clear of webbing, but much darker.

“Stay to the right.” Amelie cautioned, gesturing to the ground. Mio and Aaron looked and saw tiny bumps in the soil, the tell tale sign of landmines lurking under the surface. Following the sargeant’s advice, they hugged the right wall like a long lost friend and tread carefully down the corridor. As they walked, Aaron noticed that the wall wasn’t solid, parts of it echoing loudly as the butt of his STG 44 clattered against false panels. Probably push traps meant to shove intruders into the minefield. Ingenious.

“How did you find us?” Mio asked.

“I normally watch this tunnel as it’s one of the more primary means of getting to where I am. The cobwebs rustled when the door was opened.” Amelie answered.

“Did you set these all up yourself?” Aaron inquired, minding his footsteps.
“The false panels were installed during the Great War to funnel the enemy to one side, making the kill zone that much thinner.” Amelie explained, setting the pace. “As for the mines, yes I laid them down. The fort is full of unspent ordinance from that time, munitions that can still be put to use.” They continued for another few minutes, before coming to an iron door, one that Planchard simply pushed open with ease. Light flooded the corridor, bathing the trio in a golden light that felt warm yet lonely. Past the door, Aaron could see a small room, the hard packed dirt walls with the occasional root of some dead plant sticking out like an old man’s ear hair encompassing an area probably not much bigger than his bedroom back at Dover. Several beat up wooden ammunition crates lay in a corner, stacked and labeled, containing either spare rounds, weapons, food and water, or medical supplies. A small pit was dug into the center of the room containing witch fire, the flames licking the bottom of an overturned Great War French army helmet, the cavity filled with liquid and some sort of small animal, skinned and almost fully cooked, bobbing up and down from the roiling boil. A simple woolen blanket lay near the fire, clearly marking the spot where she slept. “It may not be much,” Amelie grimly said as she crossed the threshold, “but it’s home.”

Aaron and Mio went inside and Amelie closed the door behind them, sliding no less than four latches into their locked positions, two one the side, one on the top, and the last on the bottom. “So what’s on the menu?” Mio asked.

Divale sniffed the air. “Judging from the size, the amount of fat swirling around in the pot, and the smell, I’d say that it’s poached trench rat.” he replied. He turned to Mio and added with a grin, “They do make fine eating if you fatten them up a bit.”

“You actually like that?” Amelie gasped.

“I’m a simple man, with simple needs.” Aaron answered, shrugging his shoulders. “Speaking of which…” he added while taking off his backpack slowly as not to appear as threatening. He rummaged around and took the last two MRE’s out, holding one in each hand, reading the labels. “Do you want country meatloaf with potatoes or hotdogs with pork and beans?”

Instead of answering, Amelie snatched the country meatloaf out of Aaron’s right hand and ripped the package open. Grabbing a cloth from the ground, she wrapped it around her left hand and lifted the helmet away from the magical fire, tilting it ever so gently to pour some water inside. She practically threw the makeshift pot back onto the fire, small drops of water falling into the flames and evaporating with a hiss. Without even waiting for it to cool down, Planchard sat down on the blanket and dug into the package with her bare right hand, scooping up white mashed potatoes with meat, and shoving them into her mouth, gorging herself. “Not so fast.” Mio warned sitting down on the blanket next to her. “You’ll give yourself a stomach ache if you eat that fast.” Her entreaties fell on deaf ears, as Amelie stuffed her face. Within ten seconds, the bag was empty and she threw it over her shoulder, tears falling down her face and mixing with the fat of the meat and the flake of potato that still dotted her lips.

“That was the most food I’ve had in months.” Amelie sobbed softly.

Aaron sat down in front of the two women. I can relate to that Sargeant. “Now that that’s done, lets get to the real meat and potatoes here.” he started. “First things first, how in the name of God did you and the 114th get out of the Maginot Line alive when the majority of the 5th Division didn’t?”

“We were still in training when the attack came,” Amelie explained, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. “Me and the fifteen others had some sort of mixup with our enlistment paperwork and we were delayed in the training pipeline for several weeks. After the Maginot Line was attacked, our training was cut drastically short, just covering the basics and we were sent in. However, it was at around that time that our intelligence bureau uncovered the real attack and we got diverted from
reinforcing the front to Grenoble. That was where we got our first taste of battle.” She looked at her right leg and extended it at an angle so that Aaron and Mio could see a scar in the shape of a seven. “Got hit right there badly, nearly lost my leg. Thank God we had a good medic.”

“After Grenoble, what happened next?” Mio asked.

“It was fighting retreat after fighting retreat. The Neuroi just poured in nonstop. We couldn’t hold them back. Once they pushed us to around Le Mans, we got the order to evacuate when Paris fell. Our supplies were very low then, particularly our aetheric fuel cells that powered our strikers. Most of our heavy weapons had no ammo left so we cast those aside and scrounged up whatever we could find. Even so, we had to continue at half speed to conserve fuel. We advanced under the cover of darkness hoping that we could somehow sneak through to Caen. Unfortunately, the Neuroi had cut that route off. All efforts by our commanding officer to get some boats to Nantes failed and we were left with no choice but to accept that we weren’t going to get out.” Amelie recollected. Her eyes brightened with pride as she added, “But if we were going to stay, we needed a place to hole up and the only spot that made the most sense to all of us was Verdun. Throwing caution to the wind, we went full throttle.”

Aaron’s eyes widened. “Le Mans is close to two hundred and fifty miles away from Verdun, and in enemy controlled territory no less.” He shook his head and made the gesture of tipping a hat. “Damn bit of marching.”

Planchard nodded, “We arrived the day after the evacuations were called off. The march cost us all of our fuel so we cast the Strikers off. Over the next week, we set up shop, locating supplies and such, settling in for the long haul. The CO wouldn’t give up on the idea of getting out of here, dispatching some of us from time to time to see if we could find a high powered radio of some sort so we could send a distress signal. Most of the expeditions turned up with nothing and some turned up with trouble nipping at their heels.” she went on.

“Marauders?” Mio inquired with a cocked eyebrow.

“Yeah.” Amelie uttered in a low voice. “They acted all nice, but as soon as they turned their backs on them, they started shooting. I was part of a detail that was sent to Troyes when something like that happened.” Pausing, she looked down at her hands for a good five seconds. “Never though that I would be pointing a gun and shooting at the very people that I swore an oath to defend and serve. After that, the CO told us to keep as far away from any patrols so as to protect our hideout’s location.”

And that’s why we never had the information on their whereabouts, why the Resistance had nothing on them. Almost half a year of being incommunicado Aaron reached out with his right hand and took hers, his glowing eyes subdued and understanding. “You did what you had to do.” he assured. “No one will ever blame you for defending yourself.”

“You must’ve managed to locate a radio at some point.” Mio deduced. “Where did you find one?”

“Paris.” Amelie reported, withdrawing her hand from Aaron’s. “Right on the highest levels of the Eiffel Tower no less. Was an absobute bitch to retrieve since they sent me, the sole person in the unit that has a near crippling fear of heights.” She chuckled a bit at the memory. “Took me hours just to scale that thing and hours more just to get back down. Scared shitless, figuratively and literally. This was about a week ago. Got back yesterday and set up the radio, but we needed more power for it reach as far as we needed it to. Had the bright idea of using whatever bits of fuel we had left to power the aetheric booster that we saved from our old radio that got destroyed on the way over to Verdun. Managed to get it all set up and ready to transmit before-” She paused and started to shake, the memory hitting hard. “they came.”
“Do you have any idea who sent them? Any at all?” Aaron anxiously queried.

“None.” Amelie replied. “All we knew was that they knew we were there. No clue how they found us, maybe me and my team were followed from Paris, I don’t know, but they blew the covered trench line and poured right in. The fighting was brutal, like nothing I’d ever experienced up to that point. They didn’t attack like men, but like wild animals with no inkling of their own mortality, like they were possessed. It wasn’t until we dragged in a few to buttress the door that we discovered the marks, the signs of the vampire’s work. At that point we knew that we were the target of some dark nefarious plot. Wave after wave came crashing against our defenses with us beating them back barely time and time again. Went on for hours, with every assault draining that much more of our already small ammunition and magical reserves. Got pushed out from our main defense when they flanked the position and cornered us in that room you no doubt came from. The CO told me about the passage and to get out, to escape. I didn’t want to leave them, that my place was with them, not in some hole, but I obeyed. While in that tunnel, I watched as they were all taken prisoner and tied up. I had no weapon on me because there were no bullets left, so I couldn’t intervene. The men all leered at them, taunting them, rubbing themselves all over them, the beasts. Then, a shrouded figure walked in, a tall individual, not quite your height Saregant Divale but close, holding a weathered tome. It walked to the center of the circle, bidding the men to vacate the room with a gesture of his hand. They do so and this person, a man judging by the voice, begins to chant in this voice that chills me when I remember it. The ground lights up and these symbols appear everywhere along with frost and ice. It swirls around the boundary between me and them, clouding my vision, but not enough to stop my eyes from seeing him take off his cowl and ask my CO which one would die first.”

It was then that Amelie broke down and cried again, leaning into Mio, who took her in her arms and comforted her as best she could. “I watched him bite their necks, draining them dry one by one. Never felt so helpless in my life, so useless, so pathetic.” he heavily sobbed into the front of Sakamoto’s uniform.

“Don’t blame yourself Amelie.” Mio said, rubbing her back and holding her close. “There was nothing you could’ve done. You would’ve been killed too.”

“There were only eight up there. Did you see what happened to the other seven?” Aaron questioned.

Sniffing deeply, Planchard rubbed her eyes and face dry with the back of her hand and continued, “When he was done, he beckons one of his men forward, one with the oak leaves of a major on his coat collar and demands of him to locate the last one, that there needs to be eight, and hands him a glass bottle. The major nods and shouts at his men to get to high ground and to stay low, for the enemy would investigate. The leader then raises another bottle and says something in a language that I didn’t understand and he and the rest of my unit vanishes without a trace, consumed by a maelstrom of blue energy. I have no clue where they are.” Her face went hard with determination and hate. “But I will find them. I will not let them be prisoners to that thing. That bottle he gave the major is the key to all of this, I’m sure of it. I don’t care how long I have to stay in this room, or how many I have to kill to get to him, but I will find him and take that from him, even if I have to do it with my own hands. And when I find that vessel, I will go to the vampire’s lair, rescue my friends, and shoot him in the face until there’s nothing left.” she growled through gritted teeth.

“I think you are forgetting a few steps.” Mio cautioned politely.

“I don’t think so.” Aaron playfully retorted. “She did say shoot him the face.” He was about to say something more before his communicator went off.

“Clostermann to Divale. I have the intelligence that you requested. The 128th was under the commander of a certain Colonel Maurice Boucher who was tasked with defending the key ports of
Bruges and Ostend during the evacuations. His service record is exemplary, but there is a key note here concerning an altercation he had with the authorities when he demanded that he and his men be given priority over certain units, namely the 114th, who had not yet arrived. There is also mention later on during the night that the port of Ostend was attacked by an armed body. Whether or not Colonel Boucher took matters into his own hands is unknown because there were no survivors to tell of it.” Perrine reported. “Did you find any survivors? Any at all?”

“I have.” Aaron replied. “And I believe she wants to speak with you. Hold on.” He unhooked the communicator from his ear and handed it to Amelie. “It’s for you.” he said with smile.

Planchard took the ear piece from Aaron, hooked it up to her sergeant chevrons, and spoke. “Hello?” she asked. When she received the reply, her eyes bugged out and she began to speak in earnest. “Perrine! Oh mon cher ami, tu m’as manqué! Je pensais que tu étais mort (Perrine! Oh my dear friend, I’ve missed you! I thought you were dead)!”

Divale tuned out what the two long lost friends were taking about and got up from the blanket, walking to one side of the room, giving her some privacy. He gestured with his head for Mio to come join him. “You thinking what I’m thinking?” Divale asked in a low voice, turning his back to Amelie, facing the wall.

“You’re not serious are you?” Mio asked, leaning in when she got close enough. “There’s no way us three can wade through that much firepower and get that bottle from the major.”

“I’d be inclined to agree with you, but the mission does state to get every survivor out of here Mio. I’m aware of the risks and the situation that I’m about to put us into, but we have to try. She’s right, we can’t just stand here and let them rot somewhere.” Aaron answered. “If worst comes to worst, we knock her out and get her ferried over.”

“We also don’t know where the major she’s talking about is.” Mio pointed out. Aaron opened his mouth to speak when a series of explosions reached their ears, the deafening booms of landmines going off from behind the door.

“We’ve got company,” Aaron observed, gathering up his backpack and rifle, “and they don’t sound like the nice type.” He regarded Planchard who ran over to the ammo crates, tossing them aside in a frenzy. “You have a way out of here?” he asked her, bounding over and lending a helping hand.

“I do,” Amelie responded curtly, pressing her hand on an embedded rock. It clicked and the wall slid away revealing another passage, long, winding, and dark. “Stay to the right and keep close. I have a few surprises waiting for them.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The trio emerge victorious from the flight from Fort Vaux and proceed to rescue the remainder of the 114th. However, locked in a race against time, will their plans survive first contact with the enemy?

Chapter XXI: Push It To The Limit

Of all the things that I’ve learned in this short life I’ve led, and an even shorter time truly living it, I’ve come to the conclusion that no matter where you go, there is always someone out there, one who has no business being involved in these dire circumstances at all, who sees the sole possibility in an otherwise impossible situation and rides the turbulent and capricious winds of chaotic fate to ultimate victory. Very often, that individual is crazy. More often than not, that individual is me.

Diary Entry March 8th 1944

“Okay, okay.” Aaron blurted out while shutting the thick iron door behind him and sliding the locks into place. “You were right Mio and I was wrong. We should’ve covered our tracks.” Once he fastened the last of the deadbolts, Aaron turned around and his anxiety grew. For the past several minutes, the trio had been running as fast as they could down a series of winding tunnels, passageways that were heavily mined and booby trapped to the point that he felt that if it wasn’t for their ingenious placement, the enemy would’ve caught up to them in no time. While scrambling down, the sounds of explosions beat a violent yet rhythmically constant tattoo, indicating that they were doing their job in slowing them down, creating casualties. The thralls had apparently not figured out the golden way through, which suited Aaron just fine as that meant fewer thralls and fewer thralls meant a weaker adversary. He had grown confident in his determination that they would make it out and take the fight to the vampire, but now, he had to rethink that assessment.

Amelie had led them into a large ammunition storage room, boxes upon boxes and lockers upon lockers stacked up to the thick concrete ceiling of large caliber artillery shells, no doubt meant for resupplying the cannons of the outer bunkers and redoubts. Large lifting platforms with gears rusted to the point of being almost toothless lay silent and heavily laden with munitions, waiting for the command to ascend or descend with their still volatile and active payloads. Some of the lockers, resembling huge bank safes, lay open and empty, their only tenants being those of the eight legged variety. Oh fuck us. If one of those concussive effects from the mines causes as much as one of them to tip and fall, this place goes off like a Fourth of July fireworks display. He then spotted Mio and Amelie at the far end of the room, straining to open a small hatch like portal. An air duct for heat dispersal. “When you said that you had a way out, I meant out to safety, not out with a bang.” Divale griped, bounding to them to see if he could lend a hand.

“It’s our best shot.” Amelie fired back, her face red and sweaty with exertion, her hands white as she
and Mio gave the door another go. With a gesture, Mio bade her to stop and unhooked the katana from her belt. She then shoved it across the submarine porthole looking wheel lock, turning the scabbard and blade into a makeshift lever. The pair tried again, and this time, the wheel turned easily. Gusts of air, chilly yet welcome with the scent of freedom and escape, whistled through their hair. More explosions, these much closer, rocked the area, causing some loose shells to shake. “This heat dispersal tunnel will take us to the base of a large hill that overlooks the fort from the rear. It was used by artillery observers to coordinate strikes during the Great War. The main compound up there should be still unoccupied, allowing us to make a stand.” Planchard explained as she got on all fours and crawled through. 

Doubt it sargeant. These are ex military types and if they had any common sense, they would’ve already sent a token force to occupy that position and hit us in the rear. Which means that if we don’t want to get caught in a vise, I need to...

Mio then went in next, positioning her body in a way that the tight and cramped space wouldn’t hinder her progress after strapping her katana back on her belt loop and started to crawl and shimmy her way after Amelie. Looking forward, she could see shining light pouring down, most of it blocked by Planchard, her hands, knees, and boots smacking and clunking the corrugated metal tubing that lined the way out, the signs of a waterproof and antitrust coating keeping it in remarkably good condition. Glancing behind her, Sakamoto saw that Aaron had not come into the tunnel, instead facing away from the portal and towards the door, his rifle held at the ready. “Aaron!” Mio called out, her voice echoing. “What are you doing! Come on!”

Without even turning around, Aaron replied calmly, “The way is too narrow for me Major Sakamoto. Though I can modify my size, the spell takes time to take full effect.” Another explosion, this one much closer than the last ones, was heard, followed quickly by the pounding of rifle butts clanging against the iron door leading into the room. “Time which we have run out of.” He then turned and faced Mio, the look of a man who knows what he has to do etched on his face. “Get out of here and take Planchard to safety. Though she says that the position could be clear, don’t put too much credence in it. If you suspect that it’s compromised, hide and find a way around. Do not engage if you can help it. Wait for me to either show up or send a message. If you don’t hear from me in ten minutes, consider me KIA and proceed with secondary protocol. Get Amelie out Mio. That’s an order.” Then he placed his hands on the portal and added with emphasis, “Go. Now.”

Mio opened her mouth to say something, but Aaron closed the portal and wheeled it shut before the words came out. Just get out of here Mio, I know what I’m doing… I hope. Regarding the door, Divale could see that it wouldn’t last much longer, the strength of the surviving thralls denting the metal, large patches bulging out like the way skin bubbles after it has been burned. He took a grenade from his bandolier and held it in his left hand, thumb looped into the pin, ready to pull it loose. With his right, he pointed the STG 44 at the point where he thought the door would fail first with the ease of someone holding a pistol and slowed his breathing. Come on in and play fuckers. I have a wonderful game to show you. I call it Sudden Death.

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As Mio crawled up the tunnel, the light becoming bigger and brighter with every movement, all she felt was darkness, emptiness, and sadness. She didn’t want to leave him, pounding on the door and screaming for him to open it, yet all her pleas fell on deaf ears. It wasn’t until Planchard called back down to keep moving that her training and discipline kicked back into her, making her move towards safety. You didn’t have to do that Aaron. There must have been some other way for you to get out. There still probably is. Sakamoto felt drops of moisture fall on her hands from above. Despite the danger of doing so, she paused and took a cursory glance at the ceiling of the narrow tunnel. The metal was bone dry and solid, no cracks in the surface whatsoever. Another droplet was felt and it was then that Mio realized that she was crying without her even realizing it. Forcing the tears back down, she continued her trek, the scent of the outdoors beckoning her onwards. It took her another
few seconds to emerge from the exit, the winds of freedom brushing her cheeks. The exit was located a feet dozen feet behind the outermost trench lines, camouflaged as a rotted tree stump. Off to the north was tree line, leading up a rocky hill that from her position was bare at the top, the faintest outlines of a compound roof visible through the branches and foliage. Amelie, who had been waiting for her, covered the pair with her shotgun out and ready. “There’s you.” she commented as Mio got out of the tube. Planchard leaned over and looked down the tunnel. Her brow furrowed in puzzlement and she turned to Sakamoto, asking, “Where is Sargeant Divale?”

“She stayed behind to hold them off.” Mio simply said, shouldering her 20mm. Amelie’s eyes bugged out in shock. “Is he insane?” she exclaimed, taking Mio by the shoulder and turning her around forcefully. “We have to go back down there and get him out! We can’t do the rescue without him! I’m not going to have him sacrifice his life on a pointless—” she ranted, but Mio with her right hand grabbed Amelie by the shirt collar and squeezed tight, ending the tirade instantly.

“He’s doing his job so that we can do ours. Now let’s move out before—” Mio started, but her order was rudely interrupted by a deep rumbling, a tremor from some massive explosion no doubt, causing huge flights of birds from the nearby treeline to fly away in droves. Orange light could be seen emanating from the tunnel, like a precursor to some catastrophic volcanic eruption. Knowing full well what was going on, Mio gunned her Striker engines and held Amelie tight. I hope I can generate enough lift with the excess weight in time. “Hold on!” she yelled as the rotors thrummed to life and the pair sped off. However, they didn’t get very far at all, at the most fifty feet before the entirety of Fort Vaux’s ammunition dump cooked off. The exit shaft became a geyser of flame and then fragmented into a large cloud of scorched metal and vitrified earth, the upper structure of the ancient fortress some distance away disappearing in a ball of blazing red and bowel loosening noise, the trench lines quaking as if in fear of such a scene being played out before they too vanished in a sea of fire. Mio didn’t even chance a look back at the devastation, keeping her mind focused on getting enough lift, riding the concussive blasts as best as she could through the thick tree line and rocky terrain. However, they proved too much to handle and her elevation dipped at the worst time, the left rotor grazing against a large rock, sending her into an elevated forward tailspin that no amount of flight experience could correct in time, sending them careening over the treeline towards the overlook. As the pair tumbled through the air like mating birds, the world looking like it was traveling in slow motion, the major saw a large group of men in faded French uniforms regard the sight of Fort Vaux’s demise with awe, diving down into the earth or hiding behind tree trucks, shielding their eyes from the fire glare. One of them who was looking up, pointed and shouted something, the words lost in the din. We’ve been found out! “Brace for impact!” Mio shouted, clutching Amelie that much tighter.

The briefest of seconds passed and the duo made earth fall, striking the ground with bone crushing force. Mio’s grip on Amelie broke violently as the momentum carried her uphill, racking her body against fallen bramble, small rocks, and gnarled roots. Over and over she turned, the wind in her lungs knocked out repeatedly, until finally coming to a stop against the thick trunk of an oak, the back of her head grinding into the bark. The world through Mio’s eyes faded in and out, the images of reality fuzzy and hard to determine. Pain soon caught up, her brain causing her to give voice to the hurt, grunting and growling in agony through gritted teeth. Breathing was ragged from the impacts, but Mio was trained by the best to separate pain from the mind and soon recovered. Taking a cursory examination of herself, she saw with much relief that nothing was broken, but her left Striker was horribly dented near where the rotors would emerge. Guess I’m not taking to the skies again. “Sargeant Planchard!” she yelled out, gingerly getting up, using the trunk as a support. Something stirred in the trees, it’s form indistinct. Quickly, Sakamoto located her weapon and pointed to where she had last spotted the visage. A voice cried out as a foot tripped over a root, sending the form of a woman falling to earth, one that wore a French uniform. Despite the pain, Mio clenched her jaw and ran to Amelie who was in just as rough a shape as she, save for the fact that Planchard had suffered a
head injury, a nasty cut that ran from the furthest edges of the left eye and along the temple, dribbling blood.

“Can you stand?” Mio asked taking a quick look at the wound while placing her hands on Amelie’s back.

“I’m fine.” Planchard mumbled back, groggy from the fall and the injury. She winced in pain as sat up on her knees, breathing heavily, running her left hand over the cut. “It’s superficial. Nothing to worry about.” The area above them, started to darken and the two looked up to see a sky full of debris, some parts still ascending to the heavens, but not all. Large chunks of concrete, metal, and earth were getting closer, dropping like bombs from a wing of ground attack aircraft. “Move! Move up to the compound!” Amelie screamed as the first of the objects, a mostly slagged ammunition locker crumped into the ground twenty feet away from them, shattering and snapping tree trunks like branches. Mio took her by the hand and the pair ran in a zigzag pattern up the slope, using the natural features of the terrain as cover, leaping over roots and looping around trunks and boulders. Not that it will do much good. Given the speed and momentum generated by the explosion, we could hide behind a dozen trees and still wind up like bugs on a windshield. The manmade rain continued to downpour tons of ruins atop their heads, some bits sending pieces of themselves or the soil they landed on everywhere like shrapnel from a mortor round. A large coil of rebar, sliced through a large clump of rocks like a hot knife through butter, sending them tumbling down the hill towards them. Mio saw a decently sized rock and yelled, “Get behind that!” She got there first and saw Planchard struggling to make it, the exertion taxing her immensely. “Come on!” Sakamoto called out, holding her right hand out. “Jump to me!” With the last of her strength, Amelie leapt forwards and caught Mio’s outstretched hand and was pulled to safety mere seconds before one of the rocks hit a stump and sailed over their heads, slamming into the area where Planchard would’ve been if she hadn’t jumped.

She nodded in thanks and observed, “The overlook is just ahead.” Suddenly voices could be heard from below their position, saying words of encouragement that didn’t sound all that encouraging to either of them. Mio and Ameleie broke into another run, a mad dash for the top of the hill. We won’t be able to hide from them. We have to make a stand there. Soon, the pair made the peak and took a look around. The compound was hit by massive slabs of concrete, probably the remains of the covered trench lines, flattening the structure into pancake thickness. Felled timber was arranged in a flared V formation in front of it with a simple iron tower overlooking it all around a dozen feet behind the improvised defense works, remarkably intact

It took Mio less than a second to take it all in and come up with a plan. “Okay Sargeant Planchard, we can’t outrun them, so we have to outfight them.” She pointed to the beginnings of the descent and instructed, “We will start the fight there, picking them off as they try to advance. When it gets too much to handle, we fall back to the timber and then the slabs. Most of them probably bought it in the explosion so they can’t have many left. If we can beat them back, we will be in good shape to slink off away from here.”

“Good plan and all,” Amelie agreed, making her way to the hillcreast. “But if you think they’ll just let us go, you have another thing coming. They lost hundreds trying to get everyone else and they’ll spend hundreds more trying to get me and you.”

Mio ignored the defeatist attitude and took up a position around six feet away from Amelie, not to avoid her, but to make sure that if she was hit by a grenade that it wouldn’t get her too. Course they wouldn’t use those would they. They want her alive not dead. “Take my Thompson.” she called out, tossing the submachine gun over and the ammo for it. Planchard caught it with one hand and placed the magazines in her pockets, moving the shotgun over just a tad.
“Here’s some grenades.” Amelie responded, underhand throwing them to the major. After Mio shoved the explosives in her pockets, she looked over the scene. From their position, they could look down and around for several miles in either direction, the woods ending less than ten feet away from the hillcrest. Beyond the trees, what was once Fort Vaux still burned, the dust cloud from its demise still lingering, the pieces of its once proud walls still falling. *I may have hardly knew you Aaron, but you were a good man. Wherever you are now, know that I count you as a friend.* “Is there anyway that he could’ve survived that?” Amelie asked, seeing the look on Mio’s face.

“I don’t know.” Sakamoto replied without emotion, taking the eye patch off entirely and placing it in her back pocket. Looking at the world with the help of her magic, she could see the enemy making good headway up the steep slope, using the trees and rocks to screen their movements. *That’s a good one hundred and fifty men down there. Have to even these odds quickly.* “How good of a shot are you?” Mio inquired, looking over at Amelie.

“Scored the highest in the unit why?” Planchard queried back.

“If you see any explosives or grenades on their person, aim for them. We don’t have enough ammunition to just spray and pray out here. Got it?” Mio explained.

Amelie nodded and gestured with her newly acquired Thompson, “Here they come.” she grimly stated. And come they did. Emerging in and out of the foliage like chipmunks running from a predator, the thralls advanced at the quick step, scanning for them, fanning out to cover more ground. Some were slow in doing so, clearly exhausted from the trek and Mio smiled. *To bad for you.* She popped up, took quick aim and fired, Amelie doing the same. The enemy had no time to shout out their positions before triggers were pulled, sending shots downwind. Mio’s cannon did horrendous work, 20mm shells as big around as a bottle cap screaming through the air. The first twenty shots downed seven men, the first three taking rounds into the chest, sending them flying backwards into their fellows behind them, two more had their heads turn into pink mist, bone and grey matter splattering nearby rocks and tree trunks, while the rest lost arms and legs, blown clean off by the sheer force of the weapon. Planchar, following the major’s advice, took careful aim at a thrall who had a German potato masher grenade strapped to his right side and fired. The bullet sailed through the air and hit the explosive dead on, turning a man into meat within near instantly, the residue of his passing and shrapnel downing several more. Her other nineteen shots took out three, the .45 caliber rounds sending their companions scattering, trying to find some shelter to return fire from.

Sakamoto continued to fire, keeping the trigger depressed, swaying the cannon back and forth, turning the thralls into bloody chunks, trees into splinters, and bits and pieces of stone into pebbles. She saw something travel through the air, coming from Amelie, a grenade. Whipping the gun hard right, she fired a three round burst, one of the bullets striking true, causing the explosive to fragment in midair at waist height, wiping out a substantial gap in the center line. Despite their initial surprise attack, the enemy adapted quickly, hunkering down and returning fire as best they could, covering those in the back with forward elements. Most shots missed given the pair’s position at the lip of the hill, while more pockmarked the ground before them, sending plumes of dirt and soil into the air, obscuring vision. Slamming home another clip, Mio grabbed one of her grenades and pulled the pin, counting down two seconds before throwing it down the slope, bullets flying through the air.

“They’re trying to flank right! Least twenty coming your way!” Amelie screamed, letting loose again with her Thompson as the grenade went off with a bang. Nodding in thanks, Mio rolled away from her position and moved low and quick across the way, relocating a dozen more feet away from Planchar, looking for the flanking group, the enemies shots not even bothering her in the slightest. It didn’t take long to find them, their forms picked out by her eye like neon bulls eyes. She cooked another grenade before tossing it towards the front of the moving mass, diving to the ground just before the hillcrest. It went off, sending bodies into the air or backwards down the hill and Mio opened up. *It’s like playing a card game with you knowing your opponents hand. I don’t feel sorry*
Having enough of being shot at, the thralls of the would be flanking group retreated, flying away like scared cats from a dog. Quickly regarding the center position that she vacated, she saw a massive charge building beyond it. “Watch the center!” Mio called out, getting back up and running back.

“Let them come!” Amelie defiantly countered, her hands glowing red hot. “I’ve got a nice warm welcome prepared.” As if answering the challenge, a staggered line of twenty men ran up the slope, hollering like devils. “Eat this!” Planchard bellowed over the din and let the magic contained in her hands go, long lines of flame streaming forth and dousing the thralls in witch fire. It was like applying a match to old parchment and the enemy charge faltered and died within seconds, their bodies bathed in a blaze that consumed their flesh. They screamed as they expired, falling into smouldering heaps on the ground or rolling down the hill, setting dry foliage alight. Proud of her work, Amelie mockingly quipped loudly, “How does it feel to be on the receiving end you bastards!” However, a smattering of shots plinked against her shields, the chiming causing her to turn her attention frontwards. She saw ten more running up for her. Eschewing the Thompson, she grabbed her shotgun and pulled the trigger, pumping and hip firing shot after shot, not even aiming as the distance was more than enough to guarantee a hit. The double o buck decimated the advance, leaving just a sole soldier, who to his credit kept on running. Without hurrying up, Amelie simply loaded a single solid slug into the reciever and pumped it home. The thrall got within spitting distance before Planchard pulled the trigger, aiming at his waist. In an explosion of blood and intestines, the entire lower half of the enemy soldier blew off, sailing down the hill, sending the remains of the top half falling into the ground, tumbling end over end until coming to a stop right in front of her. Amazingly, the thrall was still alive, the throes of death yet to sink in. Screaming in triumph, Amelie swung the butt of the shotgun onto the thralls skull, crushing it like an egg shell.

Mio power slid to the center and took a gander over the lip, the haze of battle now making the area hard to discern, even with her magic. In the distance she saw a small trio of thralls setting something up behind a large boulder, a small box right nearby being opened quickly. *It’s a mortor!* “To the second line sargeant! Move!” Mio commanded, pointing to the timber fortifications. Amelie nodded and started to make a move to get up and run, but the coughing of the mortor firing a round reached their ears, sending her back down. The round whistled as it descended, hitting just under the lip of the hill, gouging out a massive hole like a spoon excavating ice cream from a sundae. It took out a majority of the earth underneath Mio’s position, the weight of her and her Strikers causing the rest to crumble and fall away. Within a split second, Mio was weightless with no solid ground to stand on. The world seemed to move in slow motion as she gently tipped over the edge into the enemy ranks. However, it was not to be, as Amelie, who knew where the shot would land, ran over and grabbed Mio by the belt with both hands, pulling her back to safety. Rolling into and over the ground, the pair ran to the hewn wood, vaulting over them and laying as close down as they could, again spacing themselves out. “What’s the count sargeant?” Mio asked, checking her cannon ammo.

“No grenades left, half my Thompson is gone, but I still have a lot of shotgun shells left.” Planchard reported.

*And I have a little over half of my 20mm left.* “Make your remaining shots count. They’ll use that mortor to furrow the ground to give them some cover to run to.” Mio instructed. She then spied a few heads peering over the lip of the hill creast, scouts that hastily shouted orders down the hill to the mortor crew. “Hold firm! Here it comes!” Mio shouted. Within seconds, more mortor rounds flew up into the sky, looking like black ravens. They hit with force, sending the ground ahead of them out and way. The timber shielded them from the worst of it, but sometimes some errant shrapnel sliced through the wooden defenses, sending splinters into the hair and eyes of the major and sargeant. Nothing too serious happened as round after round pelted the area. Then as the final two rounds came down, another round of yelling was heard and Mio knew what was going on. *Making their*
charge as the rounds hit, keeping the defenders heads down as they close the distance. Clever methodical bastards. “Take your targets!” Mio commanded, putting her cannon over the log she was hiding behind. “Shields on double front!” Amelie obeyed just as the shells hit, mere feet away from them, their shielding chiming wildly as the shrapnel was deflected or stopped dead in its tracks. Just as she predicted, the enemy bounded up over and scrambled towards them. The forward advance team had smiles on their faces, grins of triumph turning into frown of despair as they saw that their clever ploy failed. They met their end hard as Mio’s cannon spewed lead, causing some to dive down into the craters, shouting at the follow up teams that the area was still hot, firing at the witches with everything they had. With both sides now on mostly level ground with little in the way of protection, the rules of the game became a deadly version of cat and mouse in that the head was now the only target that presented itself, causing the attackers and defenders to move cautiously and slowly, lest they become a living parody of the Headless Horseman.

Amelie, true to her words as being the best in her unit in terms of accuracy, picked her targets well, using at most two rounds to put her quarries down for the count, coring skulls with the skill of a trained marksman while Mio concentrated on preventing more from coming up over the hilltop. Sakamoto saw another small group attempting to go over top and pulled the trigger, but instead of feeling recoil, she felt nothing as the motion failed to elicit response. Fuck! A jam! Knowing that she didn’t have time to clear it, Mio let the weapon go and rolled over to Planchard who was searching for another magazine, but coming up empty. “I’m out.” she hissed.

“I know, so am I.” Mio replied. “Prepare for close quarters, they have to be almost at the end.”

With a lull in the defensive fire, the thralls rose up again and charged, in numbers that easily would overwhelm any resistance, the odds roughly twenty to one. An even fight, a winnable fight. Mio calmly stood up and unsheathed her katana while Amelie pumped the last few rounds in her shotgun and got out her trench knives, the killing fists making her grip on the shotgun a tad awkward, but more than manageable. “Courage Planchard.” Mio intoned, focusing on the advancing enemy. With howls of glee, the thralls proceeded to leap over the fortification, swinging their rifles like clubs. Faster than any would’ve thought possible, Sakamoto stepped into the fray and swung out with her sword, the tempered steel finding purchase in the the chest of a thrall, his rib bones splying out like a raw beef brisket. The blade continued its path, grazing across the stomach of another soldier, his ruptured guts spilling out like candy from a pinata. Not done, the tip of the sword entered into the neck, severing the arteries and windpipe up to the spinal cord, the weight of the head causing the slit to open up more like a Pez dispenser. One who managed to get behind her, grabbed Mio and held her in a bear hug, rendering her sword arm useless. However, Mio was not without options. With a simple non verbal command, she brought her Strikers to life, the rotors biting into flesh and bone, arterial spray dusting the back of Mio’s legs with a warm crimson. The grip slackened and Sakamoto flipped up and over the soldier who had touched her, keeping his neck firmly in her grasp. A spasmatic twitch of her arm snapped the neck and her free hand pulled out a holstered pistol. Using the dead man as a shield, Mio fired shots into the mass, each one carefully aimed, dropping seven men with seven rounds.

Amelie’s shotgun boomed as the leaping enemy soldiers were sent backwards or simply vanished from the realm of existence, bloody limbs and heads popping off in a haze of red like clay pidgeons. One misjudged the jump and managed to land squarely on the barrel of the shotgun, impaling himself up past the ejector port, crying out crimson cries of pain and anguish. Without skipping a beat, Planchard merely kicked the mortally wounded thrall off with her left foot and fired into another with her last slug, taking everything from the left arm to the neck away in a spray of gore. She had meant to use the weapon further to crack skulls, but a soldier batted it away with his own and swung in a downwards arc. Predicting the strike, Amelie moved in with her trench knives and drove the points into its heart, picking up the body and tossing it away, using the momentum to aid her. She lashed out with her left hand, catching another in the jaw, the bone giving easily as the teeth ground into the
lower brain pan and cut arteries. Pivoting in place, Amelie kicked up with the ball of her right leg, the heel of her lead lined boot connecting with the throat of a charging thrall, the windpipe cracking like a chicken wing and damaging the spine. Still riding the strike, Planchard stabbed out with the trench knives and impaled a cranium hard up to the hilt, the impact splitting and ripping the skin.

All was chaotic melee as the thralls surrounded the witches in an attempt to overrun them, but the swarm tactics were no match for their skill or rage, and their numbers dwindled, causing them to back away and run around them in order to get behind them. Mio turned and began to bark out the order to fall back to the ruins of the compound, but the words died as she saw that they were undone. Standing amidst the stone slabs, guns pointed squarely at them, were thirty enemy soldiers. Out positioned and outnumbered, the math was simple; the fight was over. They have the high ground and we have no cover. Could probably take a few down, but the bullets will tax the shields too much. A gentle clapping was heard, and the enemy line parted just so to allow a lone figure through. It was a high ranking officer judging by the coat, which strangely showed no signs of wear or tear, his gloved hands making the claps sound heavier like applying a baseball bat to a medicine ball. Probably hid behind the lines watching his men do the dirty work. He was tall, roughly 5’10” with pale skin and hazel eyes that looked at them with a mixture of admiration and desire. His unkempt brown hair wavered ever so slightly in the breeze and he sniffed the air, inhaling the aftermath of the battle. “You both have fought well,” the major stated, his voice low and heavily accented, gesturing to the piles of dead around them, “and you have earned my respect. However, your resistance is at an end. Lay down your arms and I give you my word that you will be treated with dignity.” He paused and leered at the witches before adding, “At least one of you will. Our master has need for only one of you for his plans, making the other effectively excess baggage. Since I’m a fair man, I’ll let you both decide who comes with us and who stays behind to provide some, shall we say, entertainment?” Some of the thralls who heard the comment grinned and chuckled, the meaning behind the words obvious.

“Your want a piece of me?” Mio dared, keeping her katana at the ready and her stance low. “Then come and get me.”

Impressed by her candor, the major turned to his men and pointed at Sakamoto. “Outnumbered, outgunned, out positioned, and with no hope of rescue or escape, she still fights on. This men is a real woman.” He regarded Mio and smiled a wicked grin that was anything but friendly. “I’ll enjoy crushing that defiant look from your face as I rut you like the sow you are.” All while this was going on, Amelie despaired. After all we did, we came up short. This isn’t how this is supposed to end. God save us. Suddenly, an object landed right in front of her causing Planchard to jump back in fright and sending everyone’s gaze at this intruder. It was a backpack, part of the still falling debris cloud that was once Fort Vaux and its contents, but eerily enough, and disturbingly so, this article was undamaged, not so much as sporting a frayed thread or singed clasp. On the front of it, a little handwritten note was attached by a knife. Curious, Amelie picked up the pack and read the note out loud.

“Hold my bag.” she read, the last word causing a fog to mysteriously roll in, coming from behind the compound, a thick haze that was bone chilling cold, causing breath to turn to vapor. Mio stood there, in shock and awe, her brain trying to believe the unbelievable. Aaron. He lived?!

She looked at the major who was visibly distraught over these strange circumstances, his pompous nature quelled, and said without humor, “You and your men are all fucked.” As if it were the last part of an incantation, the sound of thunder was heard followed by incessant screaming as the thralls met fates that one could only imagine in their darkest nightmares. Some expanded like balloons, eyeballs and organs popping out of every orifice before their bodies ruptured, intestines spilling out of belly buttons, lungs forcibly ejecting from throats, and brains dribbling out of ears. Others were crushed as if they had been decompressed at the bottom of the ocean, the cracking of bone loud like
gunshots. More simply erupted into flame, incinerated alive, the blood evaporating, the fat popping, the skin crackling and curling like old wallpaper. A few melted away, skin, flesh, and bone vanishing in red waterfalls before their eyes, like water being applied to the tiers of a sand castle. As for the major himself, icy skeletal arms grabbed his feet and neck, pulling him backwards into a position reminiscent of a 2 with the top curve missing, holding him firm. Mio stepped back in a cold sweat while Amelie simply vomited uncontrollably, dropping the bag to the ground before coating it with a whitish brown slurry of half digested meatloaf and potatoes.

“What devilry is this?!” he yelled, straining to break the bony embrace, but failing miserably.

“What devilry indeed.” an unseen dark menacing voice echoed, filling everyone with dread. As soon as the voice finished speaking, the vertible lake of blood moved as if pulled by an unseen force right next to the prostrate major, the sound of its passing sounding like waves lapping against a sea shore. After coming together, it rose into a pillar, soaring into the air and swirling. Glowing yellow eyes regarded the high ranking thrall with hunger and violent intent as a bloody mouth with no lips smiled. The column of crimson vitae began to coalesce into bones and muscle, the fibers, tendons, and ligaments, stretching over a large form, followed closely by the building of skin. Mio and Amelie watched this horrifying metamorphosis in terrified silence as the form of Aaron Divale came back into the realm of reality. Long gone was his greasepaint, his unadorned and scarred figure naked to the elements, still retaining his weapons and his pants that looked like they had been left in an oven, spots blackened by flame or simply burned right through. He turned and looked at the speechless witches commenting with a wink, “Sorry I’m late. The air traffic was heavy.” Turning his attention squarely on the major, who had a large wet spot near his groin that reeked of ammonia and was expanding rapidly, he leaned in close to his face and peered into his eyes. “Now, since I am a fair man, I’ll give you one chance to redeem yourself.

“You want the location of the rest?” he spat out, shaking in fear. “I-"

Aaron interrupted him rudely by reaching into his coat and pulling out a green glass vessal, etched with intricate runes. “That will not be necessary major.” he quipped, tossing it to Mio, who caught with one hand. “I have it right here, which means that you have nothing at all to offer me now.” Reaching into one of his pockets with his right hand, he pulled out a Colt pistol and pulled the slide back, cocking the weapon. “When you see the devil, tell him I sent you.”

Slowly, Aaron started to level the gun at the major’s head. In an attempt to save his skin, he blurted out, “I know where they are kept and how many guards there are on the way to them! I’ll tell you everything! Swear not to kill me, and I’ll talk!”

“Either you tell me willingly or tell me under torture.” Aaron flatly countered. “So spill it.”

“Not unless you agree.” the major retorted, incensed that such an offer was refused in such a disrespectful manner. “My lips are sealed. Do your worst.”

Aaron started to laugh, a cruel chuckle that came from a mind that had already decided to venture down a dark path. “You should’ve chosen your words more carefully.” With his free hand, he curled his palm up, like he was pushing an object. A cut formed on his left wrist and out came forth a series of wispy strands that moved as if alive, twisting and turning, circular lamprey like maws filled with jagged teeth straining to find purchase. “Last chance. You open your mind and mouth, or I’ll open them for you. I’ll peel your psyche like an onion, inch by inch, layer by layer, piece by piece until there’s nothing left of you but a bag of skin.” The major’s answer was silence followed by a stream of spittle that struck Aaron on the side of his face. “Very well.” Divale mused, wiping the saliva off. Extending his hand over the thrall’s head, he uttered, “Sanguisuga.” Quickly, the long filaments shot downwards, colliding with the ear holes, nostrils, and tear ducts, burrowing like drill heads. The
major screamed in agony as the greedy tendrils, dug and dug into and through the flesh of his face, the hard bone of his cranium, and into the grey matter, blood pouring out of the entry wounds. Aaron’s eyes darted this way and that as the spell did it’s work, looking like a librarian searching for a certain text in a long crowded aisle of bookcases.

Slowly, Mio and Amelie, who had recovered from their fright and heaving respectively, ventured forwards toward him, keeping a wary eye on what he was doing, watching for any sign of problems, the thrall braying like a wounded donkey. They looked at each other briefly, their orbs locking together for a brief moment in time, giving one another a look that didn’t need words to explain. Thank God he is on our side.

“Hmm.” Aaron voiced, his curiosity piqued.

“What is it?” Amelie cautiously ventured. “Do you know where they are?”

“I do.” Aaron answered, giving a slight twitch of the hand that elicited another round of yelling from the major. “They are all deep underground inside a bunker located on the outskirts of Namur. The losses they have taken have been severe, leaving a small force protecting the complex. One problem though, the chamber housing your friends is protected by witchbane.”

Mio’s eyes widened. Witchbane? How did he get his hands on that?!

“How much is there?” she inquired.

“Enough to dampen the power of seven witches and probably more.” Aaron reported, practically shouting over the noise. “Meaning that if we do get to where they are kept, I’ll have to do the honors of dueling the vampire. You two will be powerless to help me, literally and figuratively.” He paused as he looked off into the distance, past the ruins of Fort Vaux. “We need to wrap this up quickly. The Neuroi will be back to investigate.” With that said, he withdrew his hand, the threads of the spell pulling out of the holes they had made with a sickening squelching sound, the thrall whimpering, his resolve and mind broken to the point where he was drooling out the corners of his mouth. Standing up, he produced both his pistols and gave one to Mio and the other to Amelie. “If you would be so kind.” he stated, the meaning behind his vague suggestion clear.

“Gladly.” Amelie intoned, grabbing the pistol, pulling the slide back, and firing point blank into the major’s chest, the rounds causing geysers of blood to erupt from the entry and exit wounds. Eight times she fired, spraying blood all over the place and partially covering her cheeks red like a whore’s rouge. Mio didn’t even reach for the gun in Aaron’s hand, letting Planchard have her way. It’s only fair that the one that has suffered the most gets the honor of the kill. Amelie ejected the clip and handed the Colt back to Aaron, who stowed both away.

“Now pick up weapons and ammo, as much as you can carry. Go for a common arm, nothing exotic.” Divale demanded. Nodding, the pair went off and Aaron tuned the communicator to Perrine’s frequency. “Divale to Clossermann. We have located the remaining survivors. They are in Namur. That said, we are hatching a plan to rescue them. We need to get an extraction team sent out to the Schelde near Flushing. Are there any surface vessels that can be sent out to aid in this endeavor?” he reported.

“Nothing at all.” Perrine grimly replied. “The Neuroi patrols have rendered any attempt like what you are suggesting impossible.”

“Then let me rephrase the question.” Aaron began again. “Are there any vessels at all that can pull this off. I’ll even settle for a life preserver at this point.”

“Give me a second.” Clossermann stated and cut the link for about thirty seconds before coming back
on. “You’re in luck sargeant. There is a submarine nearby, the Nautilus, that can make the trip, but there is a catch here. The captain of the vessel has strict orders to make for Dover with all due haste as he is carrying VIP’s. He is diverging from his orders slightly to accommodate you, but can only wait at the mouth of the Schelde for only two hours. If you are not there by the time he has to go, he will not linger. I’m going to modify my signal to latch onto the Nautilus’ communication array. You’re callsign is office and theirs is driver. As of right now, you can only contact me if the comms between you and the Nautilus are severed. Good luck out there sargeant.”

“Wilco. Divale out.” Aaron replied, cutting the link. He looked up into the sky and closed his eyes, deep in thought. *Two hours. Fighting through that mess will take up the most time and the extraction itself with take Lord knows how long. This is going to be close. What if we don’t make it? How will I be able to get them out with them in our rear and the Neuroi in front with no shelter, no intelligence, or food and water? Don’t think on that now Aaron, deal with that when it comes.* Footsteps brough him out of his gloom and he saw that Amelie and Mio had gathered up quite the treasure trove of weapons, each bearing an MP40 and two Lugers, clips bulging out of their pockets. He walked over to his puke encrusted backpack and put it on, the still lukewarm slimy vomit cascading down the straps and along the top flap. “Alright, listen up. We have a narrow window of two hours to get the 114th out and ourselves to safety. Needless to say, we need to move fast. To that end, bring it in and synchronize watches on my mark.” The trio held their timepieces, their hands pulling the activating pin that allowed them to manually set the time. “Three, two, one, mark.” Aaron said, all three pressing the pins back in in unison.

He then produced the flask and intoned, “Traicio.” The runes on the glass burned brightly and the vessel started to shake in Aaron’s grasp. “You ready to give someone the good news?” Divale asked, directing the question to Amelie.

“I was born ready.” Planchard replied coolly, racking her weapon. “Let’s do this.”

“One quick question,” Mio hastily interjected, “how did you survive?

“Got into an empty ammo locker with some bad looking restraining bolts and hopped into it, closing the door behind me before throwing a grenade I cooked off. Some parts of the metal melted away, burning my pants during the journey, but other than that, I was fine. Landed behind the compound about a mile off. Couldn’t interfere with the fight as I needed time to get the spell primed.” he answered With that said, Aaron slammed the glass bottle to the ground and the world became a stuttering tornado of purple and gold. The outside world ceased to exist and the brave trio winked out of existence, leaving only shards behind to mark their passing.

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The lone thrall guard who was most certainly not thrilled to be next in line for watch duty scratched his groin area feverishly, his grip on his rifle loosening the point where the gun butt slammed into the concrete floor of the main entrance area for the bunker, making a hearty clunk that echoed loudly amidst the rasping grate of fingernails on cotton. *Herpes is acting up again. They used to call it lovers pox back in the day, but there is nothing loving about it. Fucking Metz sluts. I should’ve known that they were tainted.* Sating his itch, he shouldered the weapon and leaned against the iron ladder leading up to the exit hatch, spitting at the ground. He pulled his coat tighter over him and took a gander at the heavily barred door where the main security checkpoint was for new arrivals around seven feet away. *Should’ve asked for a better coat. This one’s falling apart at the seams.* Suddenly, the hatch wheel started to creak open and he groaned loudly. *Don’t tell me that they’re doing this to me again. Come the fuck on you bastards, stop getting me into the shift early so you can go sit around with your thumbs up your asses.* Light started to pour into the chamber as the door opened, the illumination obscuring the figure standing over it. “You’re too early!” he called up,
brandishing his watch like some politician with a piece of legislation at a party meeting.

The only answer he received was a sword thrown down at his head, the point going into his mouth at a steep angle and out his spine towards the kidney area, embedding itself into the concrete. Severed from communication, the legs gave out and the thrall slid down the length of the blade, its sharp edge cutting through his upper jaw, back, ribs, and skull as he descended as easily as one would tear a tissue in half. The butterflyed pieces landed sloppily on the ground with a soft thud followed by the slightly harder ones made by the brave trio that had stealthily eliminated the topside detail. “Note to self,” Aaron quipped quietly, adjusting his glasses as Mio pulled the katana from the manmade structure, “never get on your bad side.” Without waiting for a response, Mio, Amelie and Aaron, made quick but quiet time to the only door in the place, the witches on the left side and Aaron on the right side. “Okay, here’s the plan.” Divale began,cocking his weapon slowly so that the sound wouldn’t be too loud. “I go in first and clear the way up to the next few rooms, then I’ll morse you to advance up. According to the information I gleaned from the major, the 114th is located in the furthest reaches of the bunker, but not too deep below the surface. Take the second left and you will come to a flight of stairs. Go down a level and follow the main tunnel until you come to big mechanized door, like the kind we have at the vehicle depot in Dover. You’ll know when you get near it as your powers will refuse to manifest and that includes shields. Keep your distance.”

“Resistance?” Mio inquired.

“Minimal to none.” Aaron replied. “Most of the main defense will be my way and I’ll do my damnedest to prevent anything from trickling down to you.”

“What about you?” Amelie asked, copying what Aaron was doing with his STG 44. “How will you meet up with us?”

“Give me your right hands.” Aaron instructed. Though puzzled by the order, the two obeyed and Divale took their hands gently, uttering. “Locus.” Two small marks appeared on the tops of their right hands, each one in the guise of his symbol, that of three black triangles arranged in a pyramid. “These are temporary locator runes.” Aaron explained as he withdrew his hands and shouldered his weapon. “These allow me to not only know where you all are at all times, but to come to you as well. If any of you need me, take your first three fingers and tap those triangles three times.” He got in front of the door and closed his eyes, taking off his glasses and placing them in his back pocket, concentrating and clearing his mind for the task ahead. Take your targets quick and use minimal magic. You’ve already used a lot today and you will probably need to use more before the day is finished. Opening them up, Aaron licked his lips and muttered, “Bring it on.” before kicking the iron door in with cataclysmic force, the reinforced hinges unable to withstand the blow. The metal slab flew through the area and into a far wall, surprising the thralls inside the checkpoint to the point of rigidity. It was a well fortified position with a pair of machine gunners manning an MG42 on either side, with three more standing watch by another passageway. One of them was unfortunate enough to have been knocked down, the victim of the door being slammed into his face hard and was having a great deal of trouble trying to get out from under the metal. “Knock knock.” Aaron remarked before unfurling his wings and slicing them at the machine gunners to his right and left sides, taking their heads clean off, blood jetting out. The remaining two guards didn’t even have enough time to process what was happening before Aaron brought up his STG 44 and unloaded it at full auto. The bullets made short work of the thralls, taking them out with brutal efficiency. Disregarding the last one still struggling to get the heavy metal portal off him, Aaron calmly took the MG42’s, holding both in one hand and walking towards the threshold of the next corridor, the heads of enemy soldiers staring at the scene and him with fear popping out like acne on a teenager. Yelling could be heard, calling for reinforcements and that there was a break in, but Aaron paid them no heed, instead opting to direct his attention to the thrall next to him, who ceased his struggles entirely, looking up at his eyes in fear. Using his right foot, Aaron stomped on his skull hard, the cranium exploding in a rush
of gore, painting his mostly bare leg up to his knee in blood.

It was then that Aaron regarded the passageway and shouldered the machine guns, one in each hand, breathing the words, “Calor imago.” His world of color became a palette of greys and blacks with the occasional blobs of bright reds and oranges, clearly marking out the positions of the thralls who were scattering to and fro, trying to arrange some sort of defense. Divale could only shake his head. *Useless, useless all. They have no idea what they are dealing with. So let’s inform them.* With measured steps, Aaron advanced, letting loose streams of .3 caliber bullets into those that had the audacity to traverse the hallway, sending them spinning around like ballerina’s backwards or into walls before crumpling into bloody chunky heaps. The first chamber was to his left and he panned with the MG42’s blazing away. The occupants, two guards at a radio station, quivered as the shells hit home, stray rounds making the apparatus they were working on spark violently as internal systems were damaged. Pistol shots hit Aaron’s side and he slowly turned, eyeing the shooter, who did not expect him to still be standing after peppering him with a series of 9mm cartridges. Seeing him slowly rotate caused the thrall to turn to flee, but he didn’t even get two steps away before Aaron pulled the triggers. Blood and shattered vertebrae erupted from the back like popcorn bubbling out of a heated covered pot.

Having dealt with those threats, he advanced down the way, moving his wings in front of him as he heard the distinctive metallic tinks of grenade pins being pulled. Through the a slit in the wings, he saw the explosives, mostly German stick grenades tumble towards him. “De vi murum.” he intoned and the potato masher looking devices flew back, returning their deadly payloads back to their senders, exploding soon afterwards, sending bits and pieces of concrete and bodies flying everywhere. Screams of those that took horrendous wounds that Aaron could only guess at rang loudly. He came to another door to his right and shot just above the door knob, obliterating the lock, and kicked the door open. It was an improvised triage of sorts, with a team of doctors working in bloody streaked smocks, armed with only their scalpels and bonesaws, attending to their duties with a score of wounded thralls lying in beds or on the floor with various injuries. *Must have been the survivors of the initial assault on the 114th or of attack on the Neuroi as me and Mio made our way in. No matter; they all die just the same.*

Meanwhile, Mio and Amelie could only stand by the door and wait, listening to the carnage raging down the hall, a wicked symphony of gunshots, explosions, and the cries of the dead and dying. Taking a great risk, Amelie leaned over to take a gander down the way and withdrew her head slowly, her face ashen pale. “Is he always like this?” she asked Mio, who was waiting patiently.

“I’ve known Aaron for about a week sergeant and I’m about as clueless as you are.” Mio admitted, doing her best to calm her down. “But I do know that he has his head and heart in the right place, he just has an odd way of showing it sometimes.”

“What’s it like living with someone like him?” Planchard inquired, wincing as a particularly heavy detonation caused her ears to ring slightly.

“Well,” Mio explained, “at first it was very scary. The commander actually had me spy on him to make sure that he wasn’t going to do anything. Once we had a coven with him, things got a lot better overall and tension has died down considerably. In time, I think that everything will work out with him.”

Suddenly, Mio’s communicator stated to beep with morse code. (Alright Mio, the way is clear. Move up and watch yourselves down there. Remember what I said about the runes.)

(Wilco sergeant. Happy hunting.) Sakamoto tapped back and shoulder her submachine gun. “Let’s move sergeant.” she ordered, taking point. Amelie followed her and was simply taken aback at the
level of destruction and death that Aaron had unleashed. From the opening doorway onwards, there practically wasn’t a single square inch of floor or wall that wasn’t covered in blood, bullet holes, spent shell casings, or powder marks from grenades. Gunfire still echoed a far ways down the corridor and Planchard shuddered as she remembered the fate that befell the thralls at the artillery observation post outside Fort Vaux. They may have been thralls, but no one deserves to die like that.

Mio noticed this and took her by the hand as she bounded to the position that Aaron mentioned, the second left that led to the stairway. She flipped up her eye patch and looked through the door. About six enemy soldiers were coming up the stairs, taking them in twos and threes. “Contacts coming up, ambush in three, two, one!” Mio barked. At the conclusion of one, Sakamoto kicked open the door and took position on the left side of the frame, Amelie on the right. The first thrall that came up stopped dead in his tracks and promptly got run into by the one behind him, causing him to fall forwards onto the concrete steps, his mouth connecting with a meaty smack that neatly knocked his front teeth out. Wasting no time, both witches fired at the stuttering advance. Normally, the 9mm rounds of their weapons would simply strike their targets and go in about a few inches, but at this close range, the power caused the bullets to pass through them, hitting the ones behind them who thought themselves safe. Twenty rounds were expelled and six thralls were peppered with lead until they fell, with two rolling down the stairs like a rubber ball bouncing it’s merry way down after being dropped by a child at play.

With a gesture of the hand, Mio bade them to advance on the double and the pair walked as quickly as they could down the stairwell, taking care not to get tripped up by bodies or blood slicks. Taking a quick look behind her, she saw Amelie’s complexion remain the way it was when she regarded her back at the main entranceway. Combat shock. She morsed to Aaron, (Planchard is shook up Aaron. Is there anything you can do to calm her down?)

(Give your comms to her.) Divale morsed back.

Doing as she was instructed, Mio took off her ear piece and halted off to the side so that she wouldn’t make the same mistake that the now dead enemy point man had made. Amelie looked at her in confusion. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It’s Sergeant Divale.” Mio replied, handing Planchard the communicator. “He wants to talk to you really quick.” She hastily added, “Be sure to lower the volume.” as Amelie started to attach the device and resumed the descent.

“Hello?” Amelie hesitantly asked, following the major.

Despite the lowered loudness, the sharp crack of gunshots still rattled Planchard’s ear drums, causing her eye muscles to involuntarily twitch. “Are you alright sergeant?” Aaron’s voice asked from somewhere beyond.

“Yes,” Amelie lied, “I’m perfectly fine.”

“I may be visually silenced, but I can tell you’re lying to me Planchard.” Aaron replied, not happy with what Amelie was attempting to do. “So, I’m going to ask again: Are you alright?”

Amelie swallowed hard, panning with her MP40 in an attempt to locate the exit to the next level. “Not really.” she reluctantly admitted. “I’ve never seen such brutality in war, even at Fort Vaux. This makes everything I experienced look like a propaganda film.”

“You’re suffering from combat shock.” Aaron explained, a loud scream nearly drowning out his last few syllables. “It’s a common occurrence when one encounters something that they don’t expect, the brain failing to adequately process what is happening.” He paused as he sighed deeply. “Listen to me.” he intoned. “I realize that these men are French soldiers, but one thing needs to be made clear,
and I don’t like repeating myself if I can help it Amelie so listen carefully. They are no longer the
defenders of France, they are thralls now, slaves to a master that seeks only to destroy everything you
and your nation stands for. The hold that this monster has on them is absolute and unalterable; they
are his forever, bound to execute his dark whims. If this vampire commanded them to find a pregnant
woman and cut out her unborn child from her womb with a letter opener, they would do so without
hesitation. Moreover, when we kill this thing, the servile link between them will be severed harshly
to the point of scrambling their brains. They will all become feral and attack anyone on sight with
anything at their disposal. It may seem cruel to you what I’m doing right now, but believe me when I
say this; I’m doing them and us a favor by putting them out of their misery. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Amelie answered, nodding and feeling a touch better, but not much.

“Keep your head up Planchard. Put Mio back on.” Aaron commanded, a sound that reminded one of
a broken open door racing along the radiowaves. Amelie did as she was told and handed the ear
communicator back to Sakamoto, who was flipping up her eye patch again to catch a glimpse at
what lay on the other side of the exit door that they needed to go through. The room up ahead was
wide enough to berth a cruiser with sixteen rooms, eight on either side, doors all open and filled with
thralls, at least three to four packed like sardines in a can. So upwards and onwards of forty at the
very least. Not a whole lot of cover where we are at. Will have to go in fast and hot.

“Here’s the plan.” Mio explained, turning to Amelie after she put her eye patch down. “We have our
work cut out for us, at least forty plus down here. Somehow, someway, they knew that we were
coming, but that doesn’t mean we’re without options. I need you to burn out the closest left and right
hand rooms clean, protecting our flank and giving us some cover. I’ll cover you as you take time to
regain your power and we’ll rinse and repeat until we clear the hallway. Understood?” Planchard
nodded and concentrated, her hands glowing orange. Satisfied that she had he power fully charged,
Mio silently counted down, using her first three fingers on her left hand to let Amelie know what the
count was. Slowly the ring finger dipped down, then the middle, and as soon as the pointer met her
palm, Mio shoulder barged through and took a lunging step in before veering off towards the right
hand room, diving forwards. The thralls started to aim their guns at her, but hesitated as the real threat
entered. Amelie didn’t take her time, projecting her witch fire like a flamethrower in either direction,
dousing the rooms and the enemies inside of them. Covered by the stream of magic fire, Sakamoto
fired her weapon, the shots taking down the soldiers quickly, sparing them the pain and suffering of a
painful death. Riding the roll with her shoulder, she got up and backed against the wall near the door
frame, holding her weapon out and taking potshots across the way, keeping the defenders heads
down. With her work done, Amelie ran to Mio and leapt inside, just seconds before the wall was
pockmarked by a bevy of incoming fire, sending concrete shards everywhere.

She landed and skidded along the tiled floor of the room, a bathroom in great need of cleaning and
repair, reeking of ammonia, mildew, and, thanks to her magic, burning flesh and smoke. Planting her
hands to the dusty grimy floor, she pushed herself back up and backed against the other side of the
doors frame, the front of her uniform streaked with filth. Together, in unison, the two popped their
heads out and fired down the hallway, taking care to place their shots where they could do the most
damage. Accuracy and precision was needed now, not power, and their tactics paid off in the form of
headshots that would make any hardened company sniper proud. However, numbers mattered in the
equation too and the thralls knew that, advancing up room by room, covering themselves all the way.
A close shot struck the concrete at an angle, sending dust and sand grain sized stones into Amelie’s
eyes, causing her to duck back in pain. “I can’t see!” she cried over the noise of gunfire, holding her
hands to her eyes.

“Don’t rub it!” Mio barked, felling another thrall who tried to push his luck one step too far. “You’ll
just make it worse! Rinse it out at the sinks!” Going off of memory alone, Planchard made her way
like a blind man to the porcelain sink, which looked more ecru than eggshell and fumbled with the
risky metal spigots. She heard water coming out and, not caring if it was good or not, cupped her hands under the faucet, feeling cold water lapping her skin. Suddenly, she felt something else, a pair of strong hands that grabbed hers with a vise like grip, pulling her forwards with such force that Amelie was swept off her feet, going from vertical to horizontal in a blink of an eye. She screamed and Mio turned just in time to see Planchard’s weapon fall from her hands and clatter to the floor, her lower half disappearing with haste down the black molded sink drain. Despite her best efforts to assist, Mio didn’t get to her in time to do anything except watch as the soles of the sergeant’s shoes gargle down the pipe, the echo of her cries for help echoing in her ears. *The bastard has her now, which means that I’m expendable. I have plenty of ammo to hold them off, but I need help.*

Remembering what Aaron told her, she tapped the symbols on her right hand three times with the three fingers of her left quickly while making her way towards the door. She didn’t get two steps toward it when a thrall blocked the threshold, holding an MG42.

“Die you witch bitch!” he screamed as he leveled the weapon at her. Mio saw the world go slow as she watched helplessly as the thrall’s fingers started to pull the trigger. Gunshots were heard, but these came from somewhere other than the door as a stream of bullets peppered the soldier in the upper chest, sending him flying backwards, blood misting the air. With slow eyes, Mio looked down at her right hand and saw to her amazement and horror that a barrel of another machine gun was projecting out of her skin like a colony of barnacles on the underside of a ship. The gun then moved forwards as more of what lay within the magic started to manifest, beginning with the receiver, then the firmly clenched handle, followed by the hand, arm, and head of Aaron Divale, viewing his work with the coldness of an art critic.

He turned to face the major who was looking at him with an expression that seemed to be more along the lines of trepidation than thanks, and quipped playfully, “Peekaboo. I see you.” Aaron then emerged fully from Sakamoto and quickly ascertained the situation and the fact that she was alone. “Where’s Planchard?” he asked with great concern.

“I don’t know.” Mio explained regaining her demeanor. “Some dust got in her eye and she went to the sink to rinse it out. I heard her scream and saw that she was being dragged into it. Couldn’t move fast enough to stop it. There was nothing I could do.”

Aaron walked to the door frame and let loose a long buzz saw sounding salvo of shells before saying with a grim tone, “Then he has her.” He paused and added with emphasis, “Yet all is not lost. The ritual will take time to prepare.”

“Then let’s get this job done.” Mio stated, ramming another clip home.

“I’ll take care of this lot.” Aaron politely countered gesturing down the hallway. “You go any further down, the anti magic aura projected by that door will strip you of your powers. You’re staying right here until we execute a Kansas City shuffle.”

“How?” Mio asked. “If I can’t use my powers, I wont be able to help you.”

Aaron then gave her a look that filled Mio with apprehension. “Oh you will major,” he assured, “but not like that you won’t.”

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Amelie again strained as she tried to pull against the ropes that bound her wrists together, trying to push the symbols on her right hand that would cause Aaron to manifest and save her. However, they were tied in such a way that prevented her from doing so as she frantically twisted and turned to find some sort of weakness. All around her, arranged in a circle were her companions, the last seven survivors of the 114th, all tied up as she was, bound at the wrists and ankles and strung up like pigs
in a slaughterhouse awaiting the first man who would deliver the first fatal cut across the throat. They were tired and weak, faces resigned to the fate that would soon come to them. No! I refuse to fall into despair! There is a chance! Our liberation is at hand! Stopping for a second to catch her breath, she looked around the chamber she was in. It was a large gathering hall, the type of place whose purpose it was to bring the defenders of the fort together for some final briefing before sallying forth to deal with the invaders on even terms, the only other exit from the room a barred door ten feet away from the furthest edge of the chamber. The ceilings were ten feet above her and the floor was planed smooth, save for a small patch near the door, one that was made of thick plated steel and aligned in a way that it would only open through being pushed up from below like a garage, that had mysteriously been reconquered by nature, the grasses and weeds that had forcibly pushed up through the concrete, wizened and dead from lack of light and water. Nothing shined down here save for a circle of candles that burned brightly all around the eight witches, the red wax dribbling like blood from severed veins into their holders, casting eerie shadows across three silver and gold veined blocks of stone. The rock was witchbane, the only known means of depriving a witch temporarily of her powers, a substance so rare that it could only be found from meteor impacts, and even then in trace amounts. It must have taken years, decades even to find this much. Beyond the door, situated to her left which made looking at it difficult due to her position at the south-southeast position. she could still hear the dull pops of gunshots and the booms of explosions.

She’s still alive. Please Major Sakamoto, get Aaron down here and save me!

Her eyes then regarded the figure near her, one that was hunched over, clothed from head to foot in a long black robe, chanting in some language that she could even begin to understand, using a piece of white chalk to mark the concrete, writing symbols with the precision of a surgeon. It had been doing this for a good few minutes now, going about the business without a care for what was happening just outside the chamber. The figure rose up from its haunches and placed the chalk piece into a pocket within the shroud it wore and commented with a deep masculine voice, “As I’ve said to your friends countless time already Sargeant Planchard, don’t resist, you’ll just die tired.”

“I’m not the one that’s going to die you bastard!” Amelie stubbornly retorted, again pulling at the ropes. “Help will arrive, and I hope that chanting was a prayer to God for mercy, because when they get here, you’re getting none at all!”

The hooded individual than turned around slowly and faced her. Two thin looking hands took a hold of the cowl, the flesh grey and dry, and pulled it back, revealing it’s face, one that made Planchard gasp in horror. It was the face of a man, the entirety of the skull bare, grey and heavily tattooed with letters in some sort of golden ink, the script flowing from scalp to neck in long lines, glowing with power and purpose, the outlying features of the rest of him lost within the folds, except for the tips of a collar that featured the single silver star of a colonel. The lips were daubed with some sort of light red lipstick, something akin to a heavy carnation pink, adding stark contrast to the dazzingly white teeth, the bicusps long and pointed, extending far below that of the canines. The man’s eyes held her in a trance, the dark soulless brown regarding her with a mixture of curiosity, lust, and hate. Slowly it advanced towards her, the tall frame casting a long shadow over her, yet taking great care to not mar the scrollwork that it had etched into the manmade stone. “Look into my eyes witch and tell me if I fear the eventual coming of the so called Saint of Calais.” he dared, pressing his face so close to her own that Amelie could smell his breath, one that carried the faintest aroma of copper, the last vestiges of her friends unswallowed vitae. “I want him to come here, so I can see the look of defeat in his face as I execute the final stages of my transformation.” he added with force. He then reached out with the index finger of his left hand and ran the tip all along the area of Planchard’s throat that corresponded to the position of the jugular vein, his grating touch far from gentle, causing her to shudder and whip her neck around to avoid him. The vampire breathed in deep and he stated with a tone bordering on ecstasy, “I feel your fear, your unbridled horror at what you see and know. This world will soon pass before your eyes and your internal contribution will cause you to be birthed in a realm of purpose, one that will make all others seem paltry by comparison. You and your
friends will serve my need.” He paused and added with delight, “Would you like to be a part of it? To be by my side as I rise again?” Amelie hocked up whatever moisture in her mouth that was left and spat right into the vampire’s face in defiance, her eyes glowering at him with disgust. The fiend chuckled as he wiped the saliva from his face and asked, “Since you are the ranking officer here sargeant, you have a very important decision to make. After I deal with your friends, who will be first?”

Planchard gazed at her comrades, their faces full of fear as she regarded each in turn, visibly trembling with fright at being called out. “I will.” she simply answered, face rigid in vindication.

Nodding in approval, the vampire smiled. “How very noble of you to take the first blow before your friends feel its bite. You would’ve made a fine officer with such devotion and boldness. Fortune favors the bold you know.” he rambled, looking at the door. It was then that Amelie realized that the noise of battle had gone silent, that whatever was happening behind the portal was now open to interpretation. Suddenly, loud explosions were heard, ringing the ears of everyone present. Four charges of some incredible magnitude went off at the four corners of the door, causing it to collapse to the ground like a snake that had its head cut off, the death throes rippling from the steel like waves, sending dust and smoke into the air. All was silent for a long drawn out moment as the mist gathered around the edges of the threshold. Then, the sounds of footsteps broke the quiet, followed by the distinctive glow of Aaron’s eyes as he made his way into the room, taking measured steps, his gaze locked to the vampire, who ducked behind Amelie and bared his fangs at her throat. He licked her neck with the tip of his pink tongue and whispered like a lover into her ear, “For luck, you’ll need it.”

Divale looked at what the vampire was doing, shouldered his STG 44, and announced with unusual calm, “I’m sorry if I’m interrupting a rather tender moment between you two Colonel Boucher, but I bear an urgent message from France herself. She demands of me to bring back some property that was stolen from her, and to take out some trash into the bargain, some refuse that I’m looking at.”

“Forgive me for my rather obtuse remarks vaunted Saint of Calais, but I must refuse your master’s requests.” Boucher replied, holding Planchard tightly to him, her form nearly covering him at all angles. “They are quite precious to me.”

“Of that I’m sure.” Aaron observed. “Yet that still leave us at an impasse. I’m going to get them out of here and you won’t stop me from accomplishing my task. In bonds or body bags, they’re coming with me.”

“It may well be the latter my friend.” Boucher remarked, moving his right foot towards the lettering of the ritual with intent, watching Aaron’s eyes flash with surprise. “I suggest you rethink your options.”

Divale looked upon the vampire in disbelief, “Are you really as daft a cunt as I think you are?” he spat out, not believing the sheer bluster of the former French officer a bit. “You’ll blow us all to kingdom come and kingdom past. What purpose does that even serve?”

“It will end your mission in failure,” the colonel answered, “and hurt you more than you know.”

Aaron blinked several times, trying to process the situation that he was in, but failing miserably. With jittering movements he placed his right hand to his right ear and leaned forward, as if he didn’t hear something clear enough. “Can you repeat that in my good ear for me again Colonel Boucher because I think you just said that you can hurt me.” He regarded the vampire and threw out his arms. “Do you have any idea who you are talking to right now? Do you have any fucking clue who it is that is standing before you?” Taking one tentative step forwards, he added with barely constrained ire, “Since you clearly have no clue who it is you’re dealing with, let me fill you in on some particulars. I
wasn’t always like this you know. Long ago I was a man just like you, a boy that was destined for a dark fate, one that saw him and countless others warped and corrupted by the twin evils of man and magic, the worlds of the scientific and aetheric combining to create an unwilling living weapon, a tool to wage war against those who seemed be on the cusp of forging a peace that no other had the determination, strength, or balls to pen. For well over fourteen years, I was a living experiment, trained to wage war against all comers with guns, knives, explosives, my bare hands, and magic. Though liberated from my prison, I was pressed into this war, a conflict that I had no interest in being involved with, to defend a people that I never knew, in lands that I had never seen, against an enemy that I never met. And fight I did. Over the span of over four years, I and others fought, bled, and died. I watched each and every single person who meant a damn to me be cruelly wrested away from this realm of existence, one by one, day by day, week after week, month after month, year after year. I’ve endured and felt pain and suffering that no one in this room can even begin to imagine.”

Divale paused as he stepped off to the side. Through the now clearing haze, the prostrate form of Major Mio Sakamoto lay on the ground, face down in a pool of blood, the back of her uniform featuring exit wounds from a large caliber weapon. Amelie looked at the major’s corpse and felt a deep sense of loss. She’s dead, because of me. “Pain and suffering that I still feel and endure.” he emphatically stated, tears falling from his face before resuming his position, placing his body between the corpse and himself. “I wrote the book on pain Colonel Maurice Boucher, yet you stand there, all pompous and self assured that you can somehow insert an addendum to those tear and blood soaked pages that I call my life. I dare you, I defy you to try. Give it your best shot.”

Boucher’s lips curled in contempt. “Like you I was not born a monster. It wasn’t that long ago that I was counted among those that answered the call when France beckoned for her sons and daughters to defend her. I joined up and served as a loyal son should, by bravely sallying forth from our lands to do battle with the enemy. I led men, men who would’ve followed me into Hell had I wished it, men who died in the hundreds as we protected key positions and covered retreats. The losses hit me hard as did the betrayal that the high command weaved behind the scenes, leaving us behind as others who were unworthy of being saved got the golden ticket to depart.”

“You weren’t the only ones left behind.” Aaron interjected. “Many more than you were called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice.”

“Those who did so were weak and blind to what was happening.” Boucher shot back, spittle erupting from his mouth like Mount Etna. “I wasn’t one of them, and I swore to myself that I would get my men, men who I bled and fought alongside with for years, justice. At Ostend, I confronted the harbormaster, an old man who should’ve been replaced years ago, demanding that my men be given priority over these wretches.” He grazed his teeth over Amelie’s exposed neck, dipping the points just enough for Aaron to know his displeasure at being within the vicinity of those that caused him so much grief. “He refused, sending me back to my men in disgrace, but on my journey, I was drawn by a strange light to a meadow with a lone headless cross standing silent vigil over God knows what. Though afraid, I went forward, bewitched by the glowing orb that danced about like a pixie luring mortals into mischief. As I drew nearer, it circled me. In a voice that seemed so distant yet so near, it spoke to me, imploring me to let it help me, to exact vengeance for the insult that I suffered. I agreed and the spirit entered me, turning me into what you see now, the strengths of man and monster, with the weaknesses of neither. With my new found power, I converted my men to my way of thinking and launched an attack on the port of Ostend that very night. Those who resisted us where crushed utterly and the harbormaster himself suffered greatly as I had him keelhauled repeatedly until only scraps remained.”

“Why didn’t you leave?” Aaron asked, cocking an eyebrow. “You had the port in your hands and boats to get your men out. Why did you stay in France?”
Colonel Boucher put on a sad face and explained, “The weight of what I had done out of my delusions prevented me from taking the easy way out. I realized that I had done an incredible wrong, a stain that no amount of self righteousness could erase. I made a grave error in letting whatever it was inside of me, to cloud my judgment. It was then that I decided, that for better or for worse, I had to cleanse myself of this taint. As if sensing my desire to rid myself of its malignant influence, the spirit directed me to one of the oldest libraries in Ostend, to a secret corridor containing forbidden literature, including the book that gave me the knowledge to forge myself anew. The Latin took a great deal of time to decipher, time that I used to find a lair for myself and new recruits to swell my ranks and power, but when I cracked the code, the way to my salvation became known to me. To save my soul, I needed the vital essence of eight powerful individuals to purify myself, and at first, I despaired as the only ones that had the power that I needed were witches. However, fortune smiled on me, as on the day that I discovered the secret, one of my men caught a glimpse of a witch making her way towards Verdun.” He gazed at Amelie with respect before resuming his gaze at Aaron. “I owe this one greatly. So what do you say to that?”

Divale listened to all of this and simply shook his head. “How many Colonel Boucher? How many cries of mercy filled your ears, begging you to stop, to spare them what you had planned for them? How many reflections of yourself did you see in the tears and eyes of those that you condemned to a fate worse than death itself? How many did it take for you to realize what you were truly doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t care.” Boucher replied with confidence.

“You care enough to do continue doing it.” Aaron pressed. “How long did the blood of the eight that went before last? Probably no more than an hour or two at most I’ll bet.”

“Shut up.” the French officer demanded, his patience nearing an end.

“You were a damned fool to do what you did.” Aaron declared, pointing a finger at the vampire. “Eight powerful individuals you ask? Look at those witches strung up around you and tell me that they are powerful enough to help you in your quest for redemption. You spent so much time looking for the solution that you became blind to the alternatives that could’ve done you much more good that this lot.”

“Oh really?” Boucher dared. “And I take it you know of these alternatives? What are they then?”

“There is only one.” Aaron intoned. “And it’s standing right in front of you. Observe.” With a quick movement of the jaw, he bit the left side of his cheek and sucked at the wound, gathering a quarter spoonful of blood on the tongue. Regarding the dead garden next to him on the right, he uttered with a slight slurring, “Incrementum feram.” and spat the whole wad at its center. The instant the blood drops struck the dried out stalks and leaves then did the whole plot explode into shades of green, the grass growing a hands width into the air and the flowering parts of the weeds blossomed, unfurling in a concert of colorful movement. Everyone in the room gazed upon this miracle of nature in awe, the vampire in particular, eying the scene with an expression that could best be described as hope. “That area will remain as verdant as it is now, without soil, water, or light for a full week, from one drop of my blood. Imagine what a pint could do.” Aaron stated giving the vampire a nod.

Boucher maneuvered his head away from Amelie’s throat furrowing his brow in deep thought. “Are you suggesting that you would take their place? To stay here while they go free?” he asked, intrigued by the situation.

Aaron nodded without hesitation. “Yes colonel. I will stay here as long as you swear that you will let all eight of them go and take them with haste to the mouth of the Schelde on the outskirts of Flushing, alive and unspoiled with two hours. In return, I will not only donate my vitae to treat the
symptoms of your condition, but work day and night to permanently cure you of this affliction. You have my word on this, but do I have yours?"

Amelie’s eyes widened in shock. *He’s not doing what I think he’s doing is he? Why doesn’t he just kill him?* The French officer now fully moved away from Planchard, his form now fully in view of Aaron. “A peace forged at the point of a gun is no peace at all.” he expounded, pointing at the rifle in Aaron’s hands. “Lose the rifle and any other weapons on your person and you have a deal.”

Aaron then directed his gaze at Amelie who was violently shaking her head no, to stop what he was doing and think sensibly. “There is no other choice Planchard.” Divale said, ejecting the clip from his rifle and racking the bolt, sending the lone bullet left in the chamber spiraling into the air for a brief second before clattering to the ground with the sound of a coin falling on a bar top. “He has all the advantages here. Mio is dead and I can’t chance to fight him one on one, not with him that close to the ritual circle.”

“Aaron!” Amelie called out, tears starting to form in her eyes. “This is insane! Think about what you’re doing! You don’t have to do this!”

“I gave my word to Perrine that I would get you all out,” Aaron continued, placing his rifle on the ground and slowly reaching into his pockets to pull out his Colts, “and that is what I will do, for better or for worse. I will give you my communicator before you leave. The callsign for the submarine is driver and yours will be office. When you get extracted, cut the link connecting the subs comm array to the ear piece and radio the 501st squadron leader Minna Dietlinde Wilcke.” He paused, nodding in defeat. “I want you to tell her that I tried my best, that I died doing what was right for the greater good, and that I’m sorry.”

“I’ll do more than that,” Planchard sobbed, looking at him in admiration for the courageous act of self sacrifice, “I’ll tell them you died a hero.”

The cold steel of the pistols rested on the ground next to the rifle and Aaron shook his head. “Don’t Amelie. I’m no hero, I never was. I’m just a man doing what needs to be done, nothing more or less.”

“Is that all?” Boucher impatiently said, his posture agitated from being so close to ultimate victory.

“Yup.” Aaron replied. He then furrowed his brow a tad as he tilted his head to the left, thinking on something. “Unless of course you count this as a weapon.” he added, pointing to his groin. Though a crass gesture by any determination, Colonel Boucher opened his mouth to laugh, but before any sound could come out, a gunshot rang out in the darkness from behind Aaron, the bullet passing through the back and out the front of his singed pants near his member and embedding itself into the heart of the vampire, opening up both lungs with the kinetic force. At first, he didn’t know what to think, believing that he had misheard, but the welling of warm blood from within his robes put to rest any notions that it was but a trick of the ear. With a grim smile, Aaron sidestepped away, revealing a corpse that had never been dead to begin with. Mio held a bolt action rifle, the barrel opening still emanating smoke from the discharge, her face a mask of clotted crimson, her expression one of triumph. Dupe and dying, the reality set in rapidly for the vampire and he fell backwards onto the concrete with a thud, his breathing a loud grating spasmatic wheeze. Amelie looked down at the monster and saw him change dramatically, like a funhouse mirror being swung around just so as to present a true reflection, the near now far, and the shorter now longer. The head lost its ghoulish pale and the tatoos disappeared in a hiss of steam as if extracted by a hot iron, brown hair, short and cropped emerging from the roots once more. Soon, Colonel Maurice Boucher became what he once was, young, handsome, the true embodiment of a gentleman soldier, now experiencing his last moments on earth in pain.
All the while, Aaron walked towards the fallen officer, stepping over the ritual markings. He crouched next to him and placed his right hand on his chest in a sign of respect, eyes strangely full of sorrow for what he had to do. “I keep my promises Colonel Boucher and I meant it when I said that I would find a way to cure you permanently. However, the way to heaven for you required me to break your heart. There was no other way. I couldn’t save you even if I tried.” Divale ruefully said.

Blood welled up from Boucher’s throat as he tried to say something. Aaron leaned in, allowing the vampire’s last testament to be heard. “You already have Saint of Calais.” he croaked, the death rattle now starting to manifest. He jerked for a few traumatic seconds before laying still, the eyes glazing over. With his right hand, Aaron closed them with reverence. Done with the deed, Divale stood up and motioned for Mio to come forwards, the blood making a sound akin to rubber glue being pulled apart before it had fully set as she got up fro the saturated concrete floor.

“Just so we’re clear major,” Aaron began, looking down at the hole in his crotch line, “if you had been an eighth inch further to the right, I’d be singing in tenor. Damn good shot regardless though.”

“It would probably serve you right having me wallow in that mess.” Mio retorted gruffly, trying to wipe the blood from her face with the clean part of her right sleeve with little success. “It’s not like you’d really need them anyway.”

Aaron turned his attention to the ropes binding the witches and yanked them down in quick succession, snapping the bonds like twigs, sending them to the concrete without ceremony in amazement and thankfulness at being alive. “Sorry for the long song and dance back there sargeant.” he apologized after Planchard was freed. “I had to distract him long enough for Mio to line up the shot. Was a bit touch and go as without her third eyes she was shooting blind. Had to put a lot of faith and my literal balls on the line to take him down.”

Planchard got up and embraced him in a bear hug, pushing her face into his stomach. “You fooled all of us.” she said. “I honestly thought that you were going to make a deal with that psycho.”

“I don’t deal with psychos,” Aaron replied, gently pushing her away, “I put them away. Speaking of which, we need to start being away from here. We have about an hour and a half to get to the rendezvous.” He turned and pointed to the left side of the blown out door. “Off there is a large cache of weapons that the defenders won’t be needing anymore. Gather them up and pass them out to your friends. Distribute the ammo as best you can. Move.”

Planchard moved out on the double while Mio helped the other French witches to their feet, leading them out of the circle. Aaron was about ready to do so whenhe paused and took one last look at the dead colonel. That could’ve been me, obsessed with power and letting my emotions rule my life, causing pain and suffering wherever I went. Thank God I’m made of sterner stuff that that. “Are any of them hurt Mio?” Aaron asked as he walked to where he had stood talking with the vampire and picked up his own weapons from the ground with haste.

“They are in need of a few filling meals and a weeks worth of sleep, but they’re fine by me.” Sakamoto reported, giving each on a quick cursory examination. Amelie soon made her way back, holding two bloody shirts that acted as makeshift bags, containing rifles and submachine guns, the ammo jutting out of bullet holes like copper worms from an apple. “Lets arm up ladies, we still have a lot of fighting to do before we get out of here.” she commanded. Her comrades understood the situation and gathered up a weapon, shoving ammo into pockets. Suddenly, as they were just on the cusp of getting everything settled, a cacophony of yelling and gunshots came from beyond the barred door, sounding like the symphony of the damned.

“Did they turn feral?” Amelie breathed, pulling the bolt of her MP40 back.
“Yes they did.” Aaron answered. “And there seems to be a lot of them still between us and safety.” He turned to the group and addressed them, “I know it goes without saying, but everyone in this room right now is your friend. Anyone past that door is not. Some of these men you may have known at one point during your careers. Some might even be friends of yours, neighbors, even lovers. All these things are insignificant now, for they are not who you think they are. They are thralls, slaves who have now been released from their masters grasp, but who are now deranged lunatics who will kill whoever is in sight with extreme prejudice. React in kind and show them no mercy, for you will receive none in return.” Divale then turned around and walked towards the door, hearing the slapping of hands on steel and the peephole slide shake and rattle. “Make your shots count and move at the quick time.” he commanded, throwing back his foot, making ready to kick it in. With a grunt of force, Aaron unleashed his large boot, connecting deadcenter, the iron door caving in and flying backwards. He stepped past the threshold first and took a quick tactical assessment. The way looked to be a vehicle ramp, with them on the lowest level, the way up at a gentle incline, the white and yellow painted lines chipped and faded. Light came from a long string of white bulbs along the walls, like the ones found on a Christmas tree during the holidays, illuminating a scene of utter chaos. A large group of thralls were fighting hand to hand, their limbs bloody and broken from savage impacts and blows, drooling and bellowing with unrestrained aggression. One of them turned and shouted a challenge, causing his fellows to stop what they were doing and regard them with malice in their eyes.

“Wipe them out.” Aaron declared, taking aim with his STG 44, “all of them.” The firing line opened up into the thralls, aimed shots connecting with skulls, chests, and stomachs, sending most of the front ranks down. Undeterred, the rest of the enemy charged with reckless abandon, yelling bloodcurdling shrieks of vile hate. Knowing that the rest of his companions were too close to the witchbane to use their powers, Divale waded into the fray and unfurled his wings, eschewing his rifle and instead brandishing his hands. “Unguis.” he uttered and his hands became coated in a swirling ice blue aura that caused his fingers and palms to increase dramatically in size, the digits easily three feet long and thinned at the ends like knives, the meat of the hands as big around dinner plates. “Bring it on!” he called out, smiling. Obliging, the first thrall leapt at him, hands open and teeth bared. He didn’t even get within spitting distance as Aaron flicked his left wing up and bifurcated the enemy soldier in half, the symmetrical pieces falling away from him an explosion of blood, coating him and a fair amount of those behind him. Keeping the momentum on his side, he swung his right hand out, catching a trio of enemies with his fingers, chests and throats being reduced to ribbons of flesh. Out of the corner of his eye, a group of four tried to flank around him. Having none of it, Aaron planted his feet and jumped forcibly backwards, colliding with one of the thralls and pancaking him to the wall, the bones shattering on impact with the concrete. Sensing an opportunity, the remaining three swooped in for the kill. Divale sent out his wings and impaled the far left and right attackers, lifting their bodies into the air, letting their mass do the cutting for him as they slid down his edged limbs. As for the last one, he punched it in the stomach, the hand going into and through the diaphragm, and drove up. The thralls screams became gargles as Aaron fished his way through the liver, lungs, and neck muscles until he felt his hands clasp around the fatty brain. With a tug, the organ was brought into the light, the wrinkles glistening for the briefest of seconds before Divale crushed it into a pulp.

He looked over at his companions and ignored the stares of horror and cried out, “The clock is ticking ladies! Let’s go!” His words helped them overcome their shock and they fell in behind them.

Mio looked at Planchard while they advanced, Aaron’s pace difficult to match stride for stride, and whispered, “Be on the lookout for combat shock. We can’t afford to stall here.”

“I am.” Amelie replied softly, taking a gander behind her. Her comrades walked at the quick step behind Aaron, though they took great pains to keep their distance from him, as if he was tainted somehow, diseased to the point that just by being near him would infect them with some malady.
Their faces were tired and worn from their imprisonment, but there was a fire in their eyes, the light of hope, of salvation and they held their weapons and heads high. “They have seen a lot of bad things so I guess that’s insulating them.”

“And they’ll see worse things before this day is finished.” Aaron quipped without looking behind him. “The moment you and Mio get your powers back, I want you two to take up my left and right flank. I may be good at what I do, but I’m still one man.”

“Understood.” Mio replied. It was then she caught the sight of something dripping from somewhere on the front of Aaron’s uniform. As the drops hit the ground, falling into the light, Sakamoto realized what they were and where they were coming from. Blood. “You hurt sargeant?” she asked with concern, bounding up and placing a hand on his right arm.

Without breaking step, Aaron turned around, revealing a face that was awash with crimson. Blood trickled out his nose and the furthest corners of his eyes, like a faucet on the lowest stream setting. “Just another day at the office.” he answered calmly, as if such an occurrence was the most natural thing in the world.

“You’re losing a lot of blood from your magic use.” Mio determined, pulling him backwards into the center mass. “Let me and Amelie do the heavy lifting for you while you recoup.”

Aaron was about to say that he was fine, but decided that the major was right. “Take the center with Amelie to the left.” he ordered, getting to his new position. He regarded the rest of the French witches behind him and stated, “There needs to be another volunteer for the point team. Who’s the best suited for that here?”

“I am.” a voice called out. Divale gazed at the volunteer and felt the wind get knocked out of his sails. She was probably as tall as Gertrude, maybe a half inch off, with long flowing dark brown hair that she had in two long French braids. The double brass lines of a corporal were shining dimly in the low light, pitted by some sort of abrasive impact. Her green eyes, a shade of verdant grass, took him back many months ago when he saw orbs akin to those for the first time. Mother of God. If the hair was a shade darker and the uniform that of a nurse, she’d be Lucretia.

“What’s your name corporal?” Aaron asked, recovering quickly from his moment of indecision.

“Corporal Juliette Deveraux, company medic and the next best shot behind Saregant Planchard at your service.” Deveraux proudly stated while giving a salute.

Divale returned it and gave a quick gesture to the vacant spot up ahead. “Move out.” he commanded and the whole group began their journey again. Mio, now in the center, felt a tingling sensation in her eye, the one that acted as her third. It’s coming back. She smiled and was about to report this to Aaron until her eye rested on the exit door, another heavy iron construct. Smoke and red light billowed through minuscule cracks along the frame and the peephole slit. Though faint, she could pick up the sounds of gunshots, yelling, explosions, and raging fires, the smell of some acrid accelerant plain to sense even from where she was standing,. It looks like that path to heaven lies through the doorway to Hell.

“After we get through the door,” Mio inquired, turning around and addressing Aaron, who was wiping the blood from his mouth and cheeks with the back side of his still enlarged hands, “what then?

“According to the major’s memories, there should be an armored transport somewhere in the right lower corner of the room, keys are already in the glove box.” Aaron recollected, eyeing the door and gauging the optimum breach point. “The way out will be on the other side of the room. It will take us
through a tunnel and past a ramshackle barricade that looks like the side of a building into the actual streets of Namur itself. Proceed down the street until you come to the very end. You’ll come to a stop at a river side dock with a trio of patrol boats moored there. We commandeer one and ride out of here like there’s no tomorrow.”

“You sure that’s wise?” Deveraux replied with a large dose of fear in her voice. “This racket will cause the Neuroi to investigate and then we’ll be in for it.”

“The Belgian military from what I’ve gleaned constructed that tunnel in a way that deadened sound. It would be highly improbable that the enemy would hear it.” Divale countered, locating the breach point and walking towards the door. “Of course,” he added while readying for another mighty kick, “once we smash through that clever disguise, they’ll know somethings up, so we have to move fast. Stand back.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

With the last grains of sand running out, our heroes must give it everything they got, lest they become Belgium's newest permanent residents.

Chapter XXII: No Easy Way Out

Getting into this literal shithole was the easiest thing in the world to do, yet it was also the dumbest thing in the world to do. Our intelligence, what little we could glean in our preliminary scout work before the Neuroi attacked, proved to be wholly inadequate to help us in navigating the underdark of Warsaw. That I made it out of that labyrinth in mostly one piece was a surprise. Add into it the fact that everyone who followed me down there made it out alive, it becomes nothing short of a miracle. Not bad for someone who doesn’t walk on water, at least not when he isn’t showing off.

Diary Entry July 10th 1941

Another thrall jumped over the burning debris, howling like a wolf for only a short time before Juliette gunned it down, firing only one shot from her Kar98k, taking it square in the chest. The impact caused the enemy to go backwards just enough to land into the pyre, going up like kindling. Again, she racked another stripper clip into the reciever and pulled the bolt back, taking a quick look at her immediate surroundings. After Aaron busted the door off its hinges, the trio of her, Mio, and Amelie ran through the opening, only to find themselves in a room full of violence that could rival Dante’s seventh circle of Hell. The area past the threshold was a vehicle depot, one that was mostly empty save for a few rundown town cars and troop transports. Spare parts hung on chains suspended from the ceiling, swinging like pendulums on a grandfather clock, the restraints clinking like wind chimes, acting as makeshift chandeliers, reflecting the light of chaos on every surface. Overturned tool benches, their contents spilled everywhere with reckless abandon, littered the ground, creating hazards that took time to navigate, time they couldn’t afford to waste. Baleful red flames and black fumes from gasoline fires raged in veritable lakes, some of the jerry cans holding more of the combustible liquid cooking off when the heat got too much, sending flaming shrapnel everywhere, spreading the blaze. In the midst of this disorder were thralls, dozens of them, hooting and hollering, firing guns until they were empty at anything that moved and wasn’t them and bashing in brains when they ran out of ammunition. Everywhere was loud, red, hot, and a mess, like Hephaestus’s workshop had been ransacked by Ares.

However, the point team was more than up to the task at hand, dishing out lead in all directions while hugging the right side wall, wiping out any resistance that came their way or looked like it could be a problem for the follow up team led by Aaron, his STG 44 gone, it’s rounds fully spent, instead holding one of his Colt’s, panning to and fro looking for snakes in the grass. Progress was quick, but the room was large and every time they stopped to take down another batch of enemy soldiers, it caused them to lose time. Divale looked down at his timepiece and frowned mightily. Only an hour
and ten minutes left! We need to move faster! Where the fucking hell is this god damn transport!?

No sooner did the thought cross his mind than all was made known to him. Past a toppled quartet of wooden ammo crates, was not just any transport, it was a Hanomag, one of the best transport/armored halftrack vehicles that Germany ever produced. It had clearly been a labor of love for someone with its thick angled steel plates free of rust and the tires fully inflated with air. Not a single rivet or bolt was out of place or missing, nor was the forward top mounted MG42. That presents a problem for me. The driver’s cabin is too damn cramped for me which means Mio’s driving. From what I hear she’s damn good at it, but not as gung-ho as Shirley. That will have to change. “We’re in business ladies!” he called out in earnest. “Mio drives, Amelie rides shotgun, and I bring up the rear. Move, move, move!” With the end in sight, everyone sprinted to the transport, feet slamming into the concrete with force. Aaron got there first by virtue of his stride and leaned left, right, and backwards, seeing if there were any uninvited guests lurking about. What about inside? Unfurling his wings, he flew up just a tad to get a glimpse into the interior and saw a lone thrall inside, looking up at him with a pair of monkey wrenches. Wasting no time, Aaron aimed quick and fired two shots, both nailing the brain pan, the enemy falling to the metal bedding like a stone.

He landed inside and grabbed the dead body by the left foot, slinging it over the side like trash into a dumpster. Moving fast, Aaron took several steps to the back loading door and pulled the slide, pushing it open briskly. Knowing that his bulk would impede movement, Divale jumped out, holding his pistol in front of him, just as Mio and Amelie sped past him and climbed inside, scrambling for the driver and passenger side front. The rest of the 114th caught up seconds later, Aaron covering their sixes as they piled in, being smart and situating themselves far in the back instead of clustering in the front. Juliette was soon the last one to get on, but before she could do so, the contents of one of the wooden ammo crates finally had enough of the heat and went up. Bullets flew out and one managed to clip Deveraux in the upper right leg, grazing her at an inside angle right near where the thigh became the posterior. She screamed and fell forwards, clutching her wound. Seeing her go down, Aaron sprinted up and aligned his wings in a V, protecting her and him. “Grab onto me!” he commanded gesturing with his head to his back. Juliette wrapped her hands around his neck and looped her left good leg around his waist, wincing in pain. Without turning around, Divale backtracked at the quick step towards the open Hanomag door, feeling the blood from the witches wound stream down his lower back. The flow isn’t positively gushing so nothing major was hit. Hopefully just a flesh wound. It didn’t take him long to get to the rear of the transport and bark, “Scoot down more folks, we have wounded!” Complying, the French witches rapidly shifted away from the pair as Aaron gently bent his knees, angling his wings just so in that they cradled Deveraux as she released her grip and sat down, yelping as she laid down on the metal, her head resting on the leg of one of her comrades who uttered words of encouragement in her native tongue.

“Time to go major!” Aaron yelled from the back.

Mio didn’t answer, inserting the keys that Amelie had recovered from the glove box and turning them. The engine sputtered and then came to life, revving with gusto, a metallic thankfulness at being unleashed. Shifting gears, she slammed her foot on the accelerator and the halftrack sped forward, running over and through all manner of obstacles as easily as a tank runs over a car.

“There’s the exit!” Amelie shouted, pointing forwards. Sure enough, the way out was there, just as Aaron said it would be, yet he had neglected to mention that the area was sectioned off by a chain link fence. Mio lowered her chin a tad and focused, gathering more speed and momentum, triggering Planchard to wheel her head back and yell, “We’re ramming through a fence! Brace!” In case of ricocheting topside debris getting into the open topped transport, Aaron unfurled his wings, positioning them flush against metal above the heads of the witches and bending his knees. Sakamoto leaned back away from the gun plate window slit and waited until the chain links went from the size of pinheads to nickels then the diameter of the top of a mug before the front of the
Halomag crashed through the mesh metal and went through clean, the bars of the fence clanking and ripping apart in protest. Divale felt little to no impacts from above and waited for a few more seconds before retracting his wings, turning his attention to Juliette who was using her healing magic to try to stem the bleeding wound on her upper right leg. Sweat beaded her forehead as she strained to focus her abilities, but her time in captivity and the hardships of living without real support for six months had taken their toll.

“Don’t.” Aaron cautioned, walking briskly towards her. “You’ll just hurt yourself even more.” Deveraux shot him an acid glare, but it soon softened as she realized that he was right. “Let me see.” he advised as he hunched down. Reluctantly, and justifiably so giving the wound site, she removed her hands, canceling the magic and Aaron could see the gash that the bullet made when it grazed her flesh, a quarter inch deep red trench that ran about the length of his index finger. Right over a sensitive area given the nerve placement. Still just a flesh wound though so there’s that. Having an idea, he took off his belt and wrapped it around Juliette’s leg, moving it up to the wound, looking like the removal of a leather garter belt in reverse. “It may not be completely sanitary, but it will solve the bleeding issue.” Aaron simply said, looping the end inside the buckle and pulling tight, aligning the metal clasp over the wound, drawing a sharp intake of breath from Juliette. He then turned to her friend who had graciously donated her leg as a pillow and remarked, “If she can’t do it herself, loosen it up in about five minutes.”

After the French witch nodded in understanding, Aaron stood up and peered over the lip of the compartment and saw the inside of a wide concrete tunnel go rushing by, the overhead lights casting a dim glow that further dulled as they neared their inevitable exit, one that was blocked by what looked to be a solid wall of brick with black graffiti that stated in big bold letters DO NOT PROGRESS PAST THIS POINT. Oh this is going to be grand blitzing through. He was about to duck back down when a wave of nausea rocked him hard, taking his legs out from under him. Divale collapsed hard, his knees denting the metal bedding with a hard thump that was so loud that Amelie heard it, and she turned around to see him on his haunches drying heaving. Can’t hold it back. It’s got to come out. Aaron opened his mouth and he vomited a plume of crimson, all of the spent vitae he paid over the course of just little more than half a day, erupting violently from his stomach and throat. Thankfully, he was near the end of the halftrack and the bedding was slanted towards the exit door, sending the ejected blood downwards. Some of the Witches cried out in horror and pulled their feet up, avoiding the splash. It lasted less than a few seconds and Aaron staggered back up, using his left hand to steady himself, the intense throes knocking him for a loop. “Good Christ!” Juliette exclaimed, looking at the lake of blood travel to the door and escape out of the seams in the frame. “Are you okay?!?”

Aaron got up and turned around, wiping his mouth with the upper part of his left arm, coating the bicep with a red shiny streak. It wasn’t enough to remove the most of it, bits and pieces now cooled and clotted, clinging to his chin and cheeks like moles, some saliva infused rivulets cascading down his laugh lines. “Never better.” he replied. He then looked at his watch and nearly puked again as he saw the time continue to dwindle. An hour and five minutes left. He projected his wings again and held them aloft, creating a cover for all inside and yelled, “ETA?”

“Twenty seconds!” Amelie answered back, her voice betraying the fact that she was visibly shaken from seeing him vomit blood. She turned to Mio who was so intensely concentrated on what she was doing that Planchard felt fear just by looking at her. “Is he okay?” she uttered as politely and softly as she could.

“Immaterial sergeant.” Mio retorted curtly. The wall got closer and closer and she breathed in deep, her knuckles clenched white as she gripped the wheel that much tighter. “Brace!” she screamed before leaning forward again. The impact was immense as brick struck the front of the Halomag, sending shockwaves of vibrations down the length of the transport that could rival the destruction of
Fort Vaux. The wall gave away hard and the edges of the halftrack ground against the dried clay, creating nails against chalkboard sounds as they grazed the outer metal plating. Recovering from the collision, Mio aligned her feet so that her left was over the brake and her right over the accelerator, right hand over the gear. Just like when I had to take Miyafuji and her cousin to her family clinic back in Japan. However, even Sakamoto had to admit that the road over there was more clear than the one that she now saw through the gun slit. Now fully out into the late afternoon urban world that was the city of Namur, it was just as densely packed with debris as Calais was, slagged vehicles, toppled buildings, craters of glassed asphalt, but thankfully no enemy units. At least we have that going for us, but for how long? Putting that from her mind, Mio took little time in navigating the obstacles in her way, swerving this way and that, drifting around piles of brick and metal with inches to spare, the indentations in the ground causing them to go airborne for a few seconds before slamming down again.

Amelie merely braced herself and went white as a sheet, hunkering down in her seat as if it was the only place of refuge in a world gone mad. “Where did you learn to drive?” she squeaked as the Halomag vaulted over a crater and a slew of upended concrete sidewalk slabs.

Mio answered only after the transport made earth fall, the vibration aiding her next feat, having the halftrack go on one wheel and the left side of the tracked section while drifting around the ruins of an artillery emplacement, the pitted barrel of the cannon taking out a section of the plating in the upper left corner of Mio’s seat. Without so much as batting an eye at the now basketball sized hole she replied, “The Autobahn.” Suddenly, she saw the end of the street and the dock. “Get ready to disembark in twenty five!” she bellowed tilting her neck towards the rear.

“Rodger that!” Aaron replied, walking up to where the MG42 mount was and grabbed the machine gun with both hands. With a sharp pull, the weapon was taken forcibly from it’s gimbaled ring, along with a belt of bullets. Waste not want not. At best maybe two hundred and fifty rounds. Directing his attention to his erstwhile crewmates he declared, “Get ready for a quick disembark! Go up and over if you have to! I’ll help Deveraux out, the rest of you will take orders from Major Sakamoto until I get there!” Nods and voices in the affirmative answered as Aaron walked briskly down the way and came to a stop near Juliette, who was looking a bit better as the pain in her leg started to subside. He held out his right hand and said, “Votre noble coursier attend (Your noble steed awaits).” She took his hand and sat up, shifting a tad over the side so her left foot could help her upright first. Though substantially taller than her, Divale used his wings to provide additional support, holding her hand firmly and letting her lean on him like a crutch so she could put as little weight on her right as possible. Everyone waited, counting down the seconds before the Halomag came to a screeching halt. With another kick, Aaron knocked the rear compartment door open and announced with the authority of a cavalry commander, “Dismount and mind the mess!” Those behind him waited as he took Deveraux out back while others simply hiked themselves up and over the sides.

While this was going on, Mio and Amelie followed suit, taking a gander at the boats moored to the dock, one that was remarkably intact, save for the main dockmaster’s house that was a gigantic hole with scorched edges instead of a structure. Each one was a river patrol boat used by law enforcement and was similar to the ones used by navies to run reconnaissance and nighttime torpedo runs, sleek metal hulls and armored driver compartments, but these had high metal plates around the sides, protecting the passengers from incoming fire and MG 42’s top mounted and clad in a protective plastic cover to shield it from rain. “That one.” Mio pointed, her right hand indicating the closest to the left, the hull well maintained and the seats looking less rusty. Nodding, Amelie directed the rest of the 114th to the vessel as Aaron followed closely behind, holding Juliette close with one hand and the Halomag’s MG 42 in the other.

“How much time have we got?” he asked, taking his charge gingerly down the wooden stairs. Mio looked at her watch and put up her index finger, the sign for one. One hour. “Not bad driving there
major. You might be able to give Shirley a run for her money.”

“If you think that was impressive,” Mio replied smiling a tad with pride and walking fast to the boat, her boots clunking on the weathered wood, “just wait until I get behind the wheel of that thing.” She was at the main entrance for the boat when she commanded, “Get everything off this tub that isn’t necessary, anchor, side buoys, tarps, fire extinguishers, everything’s got to go to lessen the weight. Amelie, take a few down below to clean out that engine room if you please.” Immediately, the witches went about their business like trained seamen, casting off all manner of bric-a-brac, the objects splashing into the river like a school of fish trying to escape a drawn net. Planchard quickly disappeared below into the engine room with a duo of her comrades while Aaron sat Deveraux down near the front, making sure that she was secured before entering the cabin, making a beeline for the driver’s side. Sakamoto walked in right after him into the small enclosed space, the forward windows just like the ones in the halftrack, metal gun slits with part of the top open in the middle between that and the passenger seat, the only means for the gunner to access the top mounted machine gun. Divale took up a lot of room as he panned to and fro, running his hands all over the place in a frantic search for the keys, like a blind man with a cane seeking the way across a street.

“There’s no keys.” Aaron moaned after having no success.

“I have them right here.” Mio announced reaching into the folds of her hair along the bangs, extracting a pair of bobby pins.

A girls second best friend behind diamonds. Aaron climbed up and out of the gunners hole, stating, “I’m getting those other two guns. Could come in handy.”

“Make it quick.” Mio commented as she broke both the pins apart and fished them carefully inside the ignition. Now, if I remember correctly its up twice, down twice, left, right, left, right, clutch, and turn. Reciting the steps from memory, Sakamoto copied the movements and turned the pin halves hard. The engine roared to life and Mio clenched her fist in victory. Works every time. Getting up, she heard footsteps entering the cabin. Turning around, she saw Amelie chuck a dial of some sort over the side of the boat.

“The top and bottom are cleaned out.” Planchard reported. “I also removed the speed governor. That should get us some extra kph.”

“And this will get us some extra firepower.” Aaron commented, sticking his head out downwards through the gunner’s hatch and depositing the trio of MG 42’s that he wrenched from the other craft and the Halomag. “I’ve got front, take one and give the another to Juilette. Watch her six from the opposite side.” Planchard gathered up the weapons and Aaron’s head disappeared for a brief second as he inverted himself, planting his feet down onto the cabin floor and pulled up the other MG 42. “Okay Mio,” he called down and over to the right, recollecting his geography lessons, “this river is the Maas, the Belgium designation for the Meuse. We follow this until we come to a junction leading into the Albert Canal that will eventually take us into the Schelde once we pass a trio of locks. After that’s it’s a winding straight shot to Flushing.”

“Understood.” Mio replied, revving the engine and placing her limbs where she had them in the halftrack. I may be no slouch in a car, but any sea going craft is my element. “Hold onto your hats folks, this is going to be bumpy ride.” Without even giving the command to brace, Aaron could see everyone hang onto the metal guard rails, loop their legs around ropes, and hunker down. Amelie and Juilette racked the bolts to their machine guns and gave a thumbs up. Aaron readied his machine guns and called out, “Bring it on.” Even from his position atop, Divale could hear Sakamoto thrust the throttle full flush against the metal and felt the craft lift up into the air like a plane at takeoff from such a violent increase in speed, the propellers in back roaring like warring lions, the river behind
them turning into a roiling foam of white bubbles. Gravity soon caught up with the boat and set it
down hard, the splash hitting Aaron smack dab in the face, cleaning off the blood, but not all of it.
Bereft of a mirror, he could only imagine his face looking as if he had just participated in a
watermelon eating contest. Christ, it’s like being taken across the Channel all over again. Wiping his
eyes free of the water, the wind picked up as Mio navigated the waterways of the Maas, drifting
around the corners as she did in the streets, but this time taking extra precautions considering the
amount of riverside debris and blind spots, areas that were Aaron’s responsibility in checking out. He
scanned the upper streets, the tops of buildings, and the sky for targets, straining his ears to pick up
any sounds of fighters.

For the first few minutes all was quiet, too quiet, until Aaron picked up the telltale keening of a
fighter coming in at low altitude off to the right, near a block of tall buildings. Panning his MG42
over in that direction, he called out, “We have company! It’s a single bogey towards the right! It’s
mine!” He took aim, using his intuition to guess at where the Neuroi would appear. It would loop up
and over that mess and peel left, possibly barrel rolling. A brief second went by and, sure enough, a
single Neuroi fighter came screaming over the ruined structures, doing a wild aerial spin towards the
left, right in the gun sights of the machine gun. Gotcha. Aaron pulled the trigger and the bullets
ripped through the air and struck the enemy flush, erasing half the left wing, sending it into a vicious
Frisbee like spin into a side street, plowing up concrete like dried sod, scattering vehicles and rubble
before dissolving into white shards. With luck, it wouldn’t have had time to alert any one else to our
whereabouts. He lurched hard right as Mio took another turn at breakneck speed, coming to a
narrow straightaway with a bridge halfway down, a steel passage that contained two Cataphracts
who looked to be on patrol. The loud boat engine and the death of their air support had obviously
alerted them and they were aligning themselves to take full advantage of the their position, lowering
their twin cannons at the craft. Mio saw them and waited patiently for them to charge their shots,
readying her feet over the rudder pedals to swerve around them. Soon the whine of the cannons
being primed reached everyone’s ears and Aaron let the moment escalate, putting his faith in the
major and issued a silent prayer to himself. Lord, if you get me out of this in one piece, I’ll promise to
go to church.

At long last, the Neuroi units fired, long lances of red energy leaving the weapons on their backs and
arching towards the boat. Mio lowered the throttle a tad and alternated the pedals, jinking the craft
hard left and right, narrowly avoiding the shots, but still getting caught in the massive swells that
erupted from the impacts, steaming hot water showering them all. Some of the witches cried out in
terror, but Aaron remained calm as the major got them through the gauntlet, racing underneath the
bridge, Juliette and Amelie opening up from the rear now, and looping around a center docking ring,
using the brick mooring as cover. Divale added his fire to the fray, causing the Cataphracts to dodge
the fusillade by jumping up and over the river, going side to side and vaulting roof to roof before
leaping up and over the river, moving forwards at all times with speed, like fighters strafing a
armored column, readying their guns again to fire. Amelie managed to clip the leg of one of them,
causing it to twirl and careen into the side of a hollowed out building, the impact of the landing
sending both walls tumbling down on it like a Venus flytrap. “I got one!” she exclaimed.

“Great shot.” Aaron commented, letting another burst fly downwind, the casings falling over the side
and into the river. “Don’t get cocky.” Suddenly, his peripheral caught another pair of Cataphracts
advancing down a side alley, preparing to fire. “Get right, hard!” Aaron yelled, ducking down to
avoid the beams. He barely got below before his newly acquired targets opened up. Mio maneuvered
the craft near flush with a dock, the faintest tips of the steel plates visible. The shots sailed in, taking
out a section of the street in front of the speeding boat, the undercarriage of a nearby car sailing
through the air and grazing the top of the watercraft, the other shots slamming into the brick river
way siding, sending sandbag sized rocks and red dust as fine as sand grains into and over the
protective gun shields, pitting and in some cases coring the thick metal. The new pair then joined
their companion and attempted a pursuit, but Juliette shaved that number to two as her last few shots obliterated the head of a Cataphract, the body going limp and falling into the river. With the immediate danger dealt with, Aaron popped his head out and saw much to his dismay that the MG42 had been taken out completely, leaving him with one machine gun left, and only two hundred and fifty rounds to spare.

“Aaron!” Amelie cried out. Divale turned and saw her throw her empty weapon over the side, Deveraux copying the gesture. “We’re out!” Thinking fast, Aaron reached down and slid the last MG42 towards Planchard with a flick of his wrist. Amelie saw the weapon fly down towards her and made a move to grab it, but Mio veered around a corner at the worst time, going over a swell that caused the gun to jump up in the air like a scared cat, going up and over her fingers, the grazing impact looping it towards the side of the boat. Not wanting to give up the ghost, Planchard turned around fully in her seat and lunged towards it, her body going partially over the metal plates, arms outstretched. With a tremendous effort, she caught the MG42 by the end of the butt, but the excess weight caused her to continue to go over the side. She would’ve fallen right into the water had it not been for the quick thinking of Juliette, who, despite her wound, got up on both feet, ran over, and grabbed Amelie by the boot straps, pulling her back into the boat. Planchard hit the metal deck hard, causing her to lose her grip on the gun.

“Come on sergeant!” Deveraux encouraged from her position, grimacing in pain as her hands went near her wound, pressing down on the belt that Aaron put there. “We need you!” Sergeant Planchard scrambled forwards and took the MG42 in her hands, propping herself against the nearby seats. The Cataphracts were crisscrossing the river repeatedly, firing with wild and reckless abandon. She waited until they executed another run and fired at full auto. The remaining rounds of the machine were fired in less time that it took for schoolboy to recite his ABC’s as fast as he could, and the Neuroi couldn’t react fast enough to avoid the incoming fire. The shells connected with the head of one of them, causing it to spasm, jerking it’s legs forward and out, clipping it’s companion and sending it downwards. Aaron was about to shout in triumph, but his face darkened as he calculated the trajectory of the falling Cataphract. It’s going to land right on top of us! Fuck me! In the rearview mirror, Mio saw the impending doom and frantically looked for an easy escape route. Nothing presented itself, except two curved pieces of slagged rebar from a small retractable bridge that jutted outwards like a corkscrew on its side.

“Everyone get down and hold on!” Sakamoto bellowed, gunning the engine as the Neuroi came crashing down behind them, the wave of water from the impact propelling them forward that much faster. Aaron hunkered down and took a gander out of the passenger side window and blanched, realizing what Mio was intending to do. Lord if you get me out of this, not only will I go to church, but I’ll also receive Communion. Angling the boat just so, Mio prepared for the worst as best as she could. The craft hit the makeshift ramp and took off into the air, spiraling fully clockwise twice, the g-force that of a hard nose dive. Screaming could be heard from everyone, including Divale himself who sounded more like a frightened schoolgirl than the battle hardened warrior he was. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the boat landed back into the water, smashing through a long wooden bar that went from one end of the river to the other. Sucker.

Aaron felt and heard the snap of the obstacle and remarked with disbelief, surprise, and general shock at surviving such a crazy stunt, “That was the junction into the Albert Canal.” he squeaked, still recovering from the bumpy ride. He regarded Mio and shook his head, “Fuck me major, you seem to want to get home more than I do.” All Mio did was smile and nod, keeping her eyes forward. “Is everyone alright and accounted for?” Aaron barked, turning around in his seat. From his position, he could see Amelie and Juliette give a thumbs up, the rest of the French witches too shell shocked to respond. And we still have a full complement.

“If the locks are still closed,” Mio asked, drawing Aaron’s attention to her, “how will we deal with
them?"

“Leave that to me.” Aaron simply replied, looking down at his time piece. “For now, just drive.” Forty five minutes left. We just might make it. “Got any rounds left in that MG42 Amelie?” he inquired without looking at her.

“Thirty rounds at the most.” Planchard replied gloomily.

If we get spotted again, we’ll have no means of dealing with them. The sub won’t surface if there’s enemy units nearby, and if it doesn’t come topside, we don’t get home. Then, as Mio rounded a corner, Aaron saw the river congested with all sorts of debris from an overturned lumber barge that had deposited the logs all over the place, turning a flowing canal into a beaver dam, just in front of one of the locks, one that was thankfully open. “Blow through!” Aaron commanded going up and over the gunners hatch, crawling to the bow of the boat and aligning himself flat on his stomach, planting his feet near the edges of the guard rails, unfurling his wings into a point, becoming an angelic prow. “Vi muros hoste.” he intoned. All aboard watched as an invisible barrier struck all the objects that Sakamoto ran into, debris that almost certainly should’ve gored the ship like a bull’s horns impaling a matador, but were strangely and violently sent flying outwards and away like a flock of seagulls avoiding an unexpected wave of water. Divale kept his eyes open, ignoring the sting of the water droplets, and sighed with relief, despite his urge to vomit again. His position was very much out of sight and out of mind, hiding his profuse bleeding from view, his eyes, nose, and mouth gushing vitae.

A large puddle of blood pooled under his chin and started to cloud over. Great. What does she want now? Aaron groaned loudly. “Do you have to be here at this point and time? I’m a little busy right now.”

Ismenoth’s face soon appeared, her black eyes full of fear and her yellow face contorted. “You’re losing too much too fast.” she warned. “Tone it down and get rid of the vitae you’ve spent or you’re going to pass out.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.” Divale answered dismissively.

“Damn you, you stubborn bastard, you listen to me!” the demon screamed concernedly. “You’re not the only one at risk of dying due to your sense of self sacrifice Aaron! Knock it off!”

Aaron’s only answer was smearing the splotch of blood away with the point of his chin, severing the connection. Another lock came and went and he thought about getting up and returning to his position until he saw the last lock, this one fully closed, the metal barrier thick and well maintained. Glancing to the left and right, he fought against the wave of despair as he saw the main facility that would’ve contained the means to open the waterway fully leveled, wiped out by some enemy explosion judging from the glassed craters nearby. “Prepare for impact!” Mio called out to him, her voice barely above a whisper over the rushing water and roaring engines. Aaron said nothing, instead devoting all his energy into preparing for the collision. At this speed and angle, this will hurt. A lot. But it needs to be done. It’s for the greater good Aaron. You’ve sacrificed more for less.

Larger and larger the canal locks grew, from the size of dominoes, to doors, and finally the side of a barn until the outer edges of Aaron’s magic slammed into the metal, the sheering of steel loud and furious, like one thousand tin cans being opened up all at once. Clenching his jaw tighter than a workman’s vise, Aaron stayed the course, maintaining his magic as the boat punched through the metal barriers. However, the thickness of the locks proved too much for Divale’s foothold, the metal bending and giving away like overdone spaghetti noodles. He flew backwards into and through the passenger side, his wings cutting a man sized hole through the plates and tumbled down the engine room stairs, the steel steps gouging against his sternum, opening up the old scarred wound he took at
Kharkov.

A bright light and a fireball of red erupted before a pair of eyes, shrapnel weaving within the blaze like black flies over a corpse. The wall of death strikes hard, yet a body withstands the blows, standing tall and proud. Yet for all of this virtuous resistance, the flames and projectiles win out, burrowing into the chest, multiple impacts registering within a frightened mind, knowing full well that such a wound could be lethal. Legs give out due to shock and the body falls to the ground. The retinal glare of the fire dissipates, revealing a battlefield that is anything but. What had once been a feat of defensive warfare had now turned into an exercise in butchery, enemy units from above and on the ground bombarding and charging headlong into fortified positions, killing any defenders still left standing. “He’s wounded! Aaron is down! Get a medic!” a voice calls out, the shape blurry due to the traumatic state. “Medic is on scene.” a strained voice replies. “Get me into cover and cordon off the area as best you can. I’ll join you momentarily.” Two pairs of hands, strong and firm, take hold of the shoulders, pulling the body away from the front. Within seconds they let go, the nerves in the back registering a smooth surface. Realization sets in; it is a crater. Heat is also felt, the residual beam impact causing clouds of steam to rise from the ground with an evil hiss.

All jars back to reality as Aaron’s ears picked up the noise of evaporating liquid. His head looked up from the floor of the engine room, blood all over his face that reeked of stomach acid dribbling down, and saw the blocky engine shuttering and vibrating, clouds of steam coming off it that carried the aroma of molten iron. Through the haze, Divale could make out faint cracks in the upper right, fissures that were opening ever so much more with every piston fire. Oh no! I must’ve puked and got it all over the engine. The coolness of my vomit probably caused the metal to fracture. I need to stop it from destroying itself! “Aaron!” Mio called from up above. “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay!” Aaron yelled back. “But the engine is all sorts of fucked. The block is cracking. Bring it down to half full and I’ll try to work on it. Keep us going major.”

Sakamoto heard the word cracking and put on a hurt expression. Damn! That will cause us to lose valuable time. She looked at her time piece and saw that there was only half an hour left before the sub, their sole means of escaping the continent, left them in Belgium to rot. Reluctantly, she pulled the throttle down and bit her lip. “Fuck.” she muttered as Amelie moved into the cabin, followed by Juliette, trying to get some news as to how Aaron was doing. Catching their questions before they asked them, she reported, “He’s alright but there’s a problem with the engine that he’s trying to sort out as we speak.”

Suddenly, all three women, and most if not all of the remaining members of the 114th, could hear Aaron’s voice as it started engaging in some rather curious dialogue with the machine. “Now its just you and me and I’m not the kind of guy that’s going to play nice you filthy greasy cracked cunt. I’m in charge down here and for however long I wish, you are my bitch. So let’s get acquainted shall we?” Several brief seconds go by as they heard metal being ripped apart and slammed against another object hard, the clanging registering hard and loud. “Don’t act like you don’t like it, I know you do. The mind says no but the body says yes, and if you could only tell me what you were feeling right now, you’d be begging me to continue, to go even harder.” More grinding could be heard as well as some deep hissing as metal and some sort of liquid vaporized violently. “Oops. Look like someone got a little excited there. Can’t say I blame you. Probably the most action you’ve seen in years. You’re welcome by the way. Now let’s feel that little gap of yours and see where we stand. Oh my my, tis tight as a vacuum seal, just the way I like them, makes me feel good going forward.”

Had it not been for the context of the current situation, Mio’s mind would’ve ventured down some dark streets. And he kisses Lucretia with that mouth? Oh well, different strokes for different folks. Then, she, Planchard, and Deveraux heard the hard footfalls of lead lined shoes on metal steps and
within moments, Aaron emerged from the recesses of the engine room, his chest still a grated mess and his face glistening with blood infused sweat. “Alright,” he proclaimed as he carefully maneuvered around the witches and situated himself as the furthest edge of the passenger side window, “I’m done pussyfooting around. How much time have we got?”

Deveraux looked at her watch and stated, “Fifteen minutes left.”

Aaron nodded in understanding and regarded Mio, fire in his eyes, “Give it everything you’ve got. I’ve done all that I can. The rest is up to luck and God.” Without, hesitation, the major punched the accelerator and the boat leaned backwards and forwards as the engine resumed its full potential. *But for how long?* As she maneuvered around the corners and navigated the various river obstacles that she encountered, she chanced a look at Aaron who had directed his attention to Amelie and Juliette and placed his hands on their shoulders in a reassuring manner, doing his best to calm them down. If he felt anything akin to nervousness, his face and eyes showed nothing. The minutes ticked by fast, every second feeling like it was being pushed out a door far too soon. From time to time, Divale looked down at his watch. *It’s all slipping away, but we haven’t lost yet. As long as I draw breath, this mission will not fail.* Then, as Mio swerved around another bend, Aaron saw for the first time something akin to a sight for sore eyes, a wide mouth of a river delta opening up to the sea with a monstrous bar of built up silt and sand about one hundred feet from it, a veritable blockage of neglect. His body hunched down as if preparing for a frantic sprint across a defended street and he exclaimed, “The end is near. Keep her steady and do not hold back Mio. Balls to the wall major.”

Sakamoto didn’t acknowledge any of what Aaron was saying with any gesture or word, instead breathing rhythmically in and out, concentrating on getting to the mouth of the river and extraction. Her eye patch was flipped up, both eyes giving each other the information needed. The way forwards was a narrow straightaway that was clogged like a fat man’s arteries with earth, trees, and small fishing boats. She didn’t need to look down at the watch on her right wrist to know that there was less than three minutes, one hundred and eighty seconds to travel down one and a half miles worth of river that would take most river boat captains half an hour. *I have come too far to lose now, not after all that we have endured. We will win, we will make it!* Roaring a high pitched war cry, Mio propelled the boat forward, her feet moving a million miles a second, the pedals rocking like a manual potters wheel as the craft rocked to and fro. Aaron couldn’t help but join in the din, adding his voice to the paean. The world flew by in a blur of forgetfulness, the land going by like the chapters of a children’s fairy tale. The distance closed as did the time, forty seconds, thirty seconds, twenty seconds. Then, the boat engine, the very thing keeping their hopes and dreams of rescue alive, ruptured into pieces, the horsepower and speed bleeding off within a heavy breath. Wasting no time, Aaron opened up his communicator as the boat sailed through the delta mouth, gracefully exiting the river proper and colliding with the sand bar, the keel grinding into the mass of built up effluent. “Office to driver! Office to driver! This is Sergeant Divale calling the Nautilus! We have reached the rendezvous point and are requesting immediate extraction! Do you read me over?!” he shouted into his ear piece, panning his vision to and fro, looking for any sign of a submarine periscope. The seconds went by and Aaron could see nothing by rolling waves. *Please don’t tell me that we’re too late.* “Office to driver, I say again, this is Sergeant Divale calling the Nautilus! We have reached the rendezvous point and are requesting immediate extraction! Do you read me over?!” Nothing came over the airwaves and Aaron looked at Mio, Amelie, and Juliette, seeing the same despair in their eyes that he felt in his heart. It made him angry and he screamed in an inhuman voice, “God damn you office-”

His tirade was interrupted by a cockney accent who calmly stated, “Driver this is office, we have you in our sights, please be patient as we climb up topside to extract you over.” Aaron leapt out of the massive hole in the front of the boat and fell on the sand bar, nearly rolling over the side of it, peering out into the waves of the sea. A grinding sound drew his attention to the end of the sand bar and a chunk of the natural reef soon revealed itself to be anything but. A mound of grainy silt flew up into
the air as a hatch was swung open and out popped the head of a sailor, dressed in the livery of a British submariner who turned to the throng of bewildered witches and their warlock guardian, and announced, “Welcome to the Nautilus ladies and gentleman, Please mind your steps, and calmly enter the submarine at your leisure. Watch your step as you near the bottom as the manufacturer had the deck gradient a degree too high.” As one, everyone on the now useless river patrol boat cheered and whooped as one. As to be expected, Aaron had the most profuse showing of triumph, his legs collapsing like they had been clipped by a bouncing betty mine that only got halfway up, falling on his back and pumping his arms into the air, screaming, “We’re going home!” making a sand angel as he let his arms go limp at his side, swinging them with reckless abandon.

During his exuberant display of victory, the rest of the 114th hastily departed the boat and one by one went down the hatch into the submarine proper. Mio, the last one still on the cleverly disguised hull, walked up to Aaron and asked with a somewhat mocking tone, “Has anyone told you that you are the strangest man that they’ve ever known sergeant?”

“Yes,” Aaron quipped, tears of joy in his eyes,” but I don’t care. We’re going home. All of us.” He watched Mio extend her right arm and open her hand. Divale took it and helped himself up, pulling the major closer to him in the process. “Damn fine job Major Sakamoto.” he uttered in her ear. “You can be my right hand any day.”

Mio stood there, her mind digesting what he had just said in silence. It took her a good few seconds before she ventured, “Does this mean that I’m part of your circle of trust now?”

“Part and parcel.” Aaron confirmed with a smile, clapping a hand on her shoulder and leading her to the open sub hatch. When the pair got there, he took a look down and was about to loop his right leg into the portal, but had a change of heart. “You go down first, these things have a bad reputation of being cramped.” Understanding, Sakamoto went down first and Aaron took one last look at the now empty river boat, the hole in the front looking like some vacant cavity in a mouth after a tooth had been pulled. Take care France, until I see you again. The wind picked up a tad, the gust carrying through the low trees near the shore and curling over the waves. He almost thought for a second that he heard words within the wind, saying, “Bon chance Aaron (Good luck Aaron).” Putting it out of his mind, he assumed the position and got onto the ladder, the metal rungs cold and slightly wet, his boot making a clonging sound as he descended, the journey taking a few seconds before he touched the deck of the submarine.

The actual deck of the sub was thin metal, the edges grooved and sloping away into drains that carried excess water to a storage tank that could be ventsed into the sea. Low hanging ceilings, these much worse than the ones in the elevator that lead down into the weapon depot at Dover, grazed his head and shoulders, making him stoop over so bad that he looked like Quasimodo. The sides of the walls were the same undecorated metal, some parts of it scratched with witty and crass one liners by crewmates past and present, most of it rubbish cock and bull that one could easily find in the bathroom tile of a dive bar. Up ahead, Aaron could see a long corridor, dimly lit, hazy with smoke, smelling of grease, sweat, ocean salt, and heat, with two open hatch doors, each one guarded by a single sailor, standing straight backed. One of them came out of a room that Divale couldn’t see and walked briskly towards him, navigating the cramped passageway as if it was the most natural thing in the world. When the man came up to him, he gave a brisk salute and reported, “Sergeant, your friends have been billeted successfully in the second chamber. You’ll know you’re at the right place once you see the white privacy curtain with the number 114 on it in black grease. It isn’t exactly the Ritz, but it will do given the circumstances. Cookie will have some hot tea and food ready for them all in a little bit and the captain has already done the honors of restoring your communications so you can radio 501st HQ.”

“Tell him thank you from me.” Aaron answered with a smile, returning the salute. He made his way
to go, but the crewman didn’t budge. Puzzled, he gave him a look and asked, “Is there something else?”

“The captain would like to speak with you sir.” the sailor replied.

Aaron cocked an eyebrow and put on a cross face, intending to frighten the man into compliance. “Good man, if you could’ve seen what I’ve had to do to get these witches and myself out of hell today, your asshole would pucker purple. Stand aside. I’m tired and I would very much like a bit of shut eye if possible.”

“I understand that sir, but the captain was very insistent on this point. Please do not mess with him, he’s got a violent temper.” the man explained as politely as he could, feeling a bit scared knowing who was standing in front of him, but more fearful of the one far behind him.

Aaron leaned in, his frame towering over the now fully frightened crewman. “Now you listen here swabbie, I’ll mess with who I want, when I want, how I want, when I want.” His ploy, though giving the man plenty of shivers failed to move him.

“Where is he?”

“Down the way, past the second hatch, and last room to the left. It’s the only one with a door. Can’t miss it.” the sailor blurted in relief and stood aside, allowing Aaron a clear path through. Divale answered with a curt nod and walked, or in this case shambled, down the corridor, his mind fuming. Who the fuck does this salty seaweed jerk off think he is to order me to see him? When I get there, I’ll give him a piece of my mind.

He made his way down the passage as best he could, passing hazy clouds reeking of all manner of smells, some pleasant, most not. Hushed whispers could be heard past veiled and unveiled room, the curtains dirty tan with splotches of brown, black, and red, made by what Aaron could only guess at. Swarthy sweaty faces looked up at him as he passed, expressions of indifference, awe, and fear evident. Take a picture, it’ll last longer. Passing by the second hatch, the crewman guarding it, who had apparently seen and heard what happened further up, getting out of the way with haste. Without even giving him a look, Aaron trudged onwards, noting the white curtain where his charges were by now relaxing in, and focused his attention further past that, seeing the dull shine of a wooden door near the last hatch which would ideally lead to the main forward hold.

When he got there, the crewman guarding the third hatch reached across and gently knocked on the wood, stating loudly, “Visitor present captain.” A lock clicked to the open position and the sailor reverted to his post, allowing Aaron room to slide open the door, which he did briskly, yet carefully lest he break it. The room was small, yet not cramped to the point where you couldn’t turn around, with a floor that was covered by a thick perforated green rubber mat, its presence meant to muffle footsteps during clandestine operations. A bunk bed was on the left side, the sheets ruffled and messy with the right hand wall containing a wooden board with charts and instruments in the grooved mantle. Facing forwards was a large wooden desk, stacked with papers. It couldn’t be seen well as the revolving chair in front of it was occupied by a stocky man, his frame easily 5’7” with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. His tan uniform was immaculate, medals on his chest shining from the sole overhead light, the bars of a captain on his collar. The captain was a ginger, a shade of red that reminded one of an over ripened strawberry, his hair cropped short and mostly hidden by a small beret, and the bushy beard that looped from his sideburns and connected at the lips, the strong chin bare.

Aaron’s eyes bugged out as he recognized the man before him instantly. “Edmund Fucking Peterborough?!” he exclaimed, mouth agape.

“It’s Fitzgerald actually.” Edmund clarified with a sly smile. “Of course I’m not surprised that you’ve
forgotten that. You had a lot to drink that night after all.” He got up from his seat and extended his right hand, one which Aaron took with gusto.

“How have you been you soulless ginger S.O.B?” Divale asked, happy that he was in the presence of someone he liked.

“Pretty good, just got back from a job over around Gotland.” He paused and added with a pointed finger, “That’s now two you owe me.”

“You might have to take a rain check on that Edmund.” Aaron admitted, releasing his grip. He saw that Peterborough was about to politely protest, but he quelled that with a quick, “You know I’m good for it.”

“True.” the captain admitted. “Speaking of good, it’s about good damn time you got inside, his majesty the king isn’t paying to heat the outside.” Edmund walked into the interior and sat down, gesturing to the bunk. Aaron simply leaned against it and slouched, his rump resting on the wood of the cot. The crewman outside politely closed the door. “So you look to be doing well for yourself.” Edmund quipped as he opened a rolling drawer on his desktop. “I’ve heard through the vine that you’re a sergeant now, and have been assigned to the 501st. Lucky man if I’d say so myself.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” Aaron admitted, knowing exactly where Peterborough was going with that statement. “Plus, the ladies are my comrades now, and I don’t mix work with pleasure.”

“You did in France from what I remember you telling me and the boys.” Edmund retorted, pulling out a pair of rolled cigars, a lighter, and a clipper.

“That was before my enlistment.” Aaron pointed out, the click of the metal shearing off tips sounding like the rattling keys of a typewriter. “It was open season then.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Edmund chuckled, handing one of the cigars to Aaron and graciously lighting it. Divale puffed the stogy, savoring the flavor. He took it out of his mouth, smoke billowing from his nose like a pair of chimneys and commented, “Fuck me, this is the genuine leaf.”

“Direct from the fields of the British Raj itself.” Edmund illumimated as he finished puffing his cigar and placing the clipper and lighter on his desk. “Only the best for loyal servants of the king.”

*That reminds me.* Aaron held up his hand for quiet as he queued up the line to Perrine. “Divale to Closterrman. The Nautilus has picked us up. All ten bodies fully accounted for and stowed successfully. We’re coming home.”

A dull flopping like the sound of a child flicking a dogs ear up and down was heard along with Perrine shouting at full blast, “They made it!” A bevy of cheers could be heard as well as the applause of many hands. *Apparently the whole unit was awaiting news.*

“When we didn’t hear from you we thought the worst.” Closterrmann stated, relieved to hear Aaron’s voice, as shocking as that sounded to him. “What’s the expected ETA?”

Aaron gave Edmund a look and the captain put up his index finger and crooked it, the sign for about half a day. “The captain said at least twelve hours, maybe sixteen at the latest given the enemy patrols. See you all then. Divale out.” As he severed the link, he took a deep drag from the cigar and exhaled, the smoke swirling around the room. “So what the blazes were you doing over in Gotland for Christ’s sake?”

“About a month ago, command gave the green light for a construction project on that rock, making a
hidden base for one of the other JFWs. Norwegian work details were sent in on a small destroyer, the
HMS Ramses, working day and night on it, protected by some Yanks from the 3rd/15th Infantry
Regiment. Everything went well, up until three days ago when they got sniffed out by the enemy.
An entire Neuroi fighter group descended down on them, least a hundred of them, blasting that place
to bits. Most of them got evacuated under cover of darkness, save for this one poor bastard who
decided to stay behind to cover the retreat, manning a Bofors. Good thing he did, because the boats
had some engine troubles that required time to work out, time that the enemy used to strafe them.
Took out quite a score of them, before he was driven to ground. When his friends got to the
destroyer, they had the captain radio HQ, telling them to get their man out.” Edmund answered,
taking periodic puffs from his cigar.

“And they pegged you to do it.” Aaron deduced.

“We had a devil of a time getting there. The patrols were thicker than polar ice. Very touch and go
for a few moments, but we managed to find a way through and send up a search party.” Edmund
continued. He paused and shook his head in recollection. “If you could’ve only seen that island
Aaron. It was as if a chuck of the moon landed on earth and turned to glass. Didn’t expect to find
him, or anything that could be considered life, but we did. Found him near a river side, hiding under
a small overhang. Bloke was freezing, swaddled in so many layers that he looked like an onion.
Smelled like one too. Had this thousand yard stare and looked like he hadn’t slept since the whole
ordeal started. He was eating a fish raw, heating some choice bits with a lighter. Was very young and
very short, so much so that it took me aback for a second, thinking that it was a kid. When he saw us,
the cheeky fucker grabbed his chest and fell over. At first we thought he had a heart attack, but it was
just exhaustion. We took him to the boat, mumbling all sorts of rot as his mind wandered in his
dreams. Some bits of it were useful. Learned that he had a queer accent, a drawling of sorts, like
General Eisenhower, but it was more rough as if the fellow didn’t get past high school.”

“Did you get a name or rank?” Aaron asked, intrigued more by the rescued man then the tale.

“Shoulders carried the mark of a staff sergeant. The tags were pitted over from debris smacking into
it, but we managed to decipher MURPHY and his service number 18083707. He’s in medical, doc
gave him something to help him sleep. Bloody Yank is lucky to be alive. Better be worth all the
trouble we went through to get him. Wanker interrupted my honeymoon.”

Aaron’s eyes immediately darted to Edmund’s hand, his left hand to be precise, and saw in the glare
of the overhead light, a gold unadorned wedding band, the lustrous color almost disappearing into
the pale skin. He smiled and inquired, “And you didn’t bother to invite me to the ceremony?”

Edmund grinned back. “You were indisposed, plus we couldn’t have you seducing the bridesmaids
now would we?” The two laughed for a good bit before Peterborough went on. “Been courting her
for a good year, daughter of a respectable family and an ex military witch to boot believe it or not.
Still can’t believe she said yes when I asked her after I got back from France with your sorry ass.”

“So who’s the lucky lady who’s now waking up next to a soulless ginger cunt?” Aaron joked.

“She’s one of those B-” Edmund began went a knock was heard at the door, drawing his attention
away from his train of thought. “Yes?” he called out, taking another puff from his cigar.

“We’re about to go under and command wants a full update on the situation captain.” the guard
outside reported.

“Ah bloody hell.” Edmund grumbled, taking one last puff and rubbing the tip of the cigar, dousing
the flame to save it for later. He got up from his seat and Aaron angled himself to allow him a path
through. “We’ll catch up on this later when we have time.” he stated to Divale, clapping a hand on
his shoulder. “For now, get some sleep and some hot food in you.” With that, he opened the door and walked out of the quarters, stopping in front of the hatch door, waiting for the crewman to open it. Aaron followed him out and walked down the way he came, hearing the portal behind him shut with a clang, followed closely by the sliding of wood, not looking back at all. Good for you Edmund. You may be a ginger, but you’re a good man. Whoever it is you have now, keep her close. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Again, he thought about that night in Greece and shook his head violently, knocking the memory out of his mind.

It didn’t take him long to get back to where the major and the rest of the 114th were billeted, the white sheet practically glowing like a lighthouse fire in the foggy air. Erring on the side of caution, Aaron gently rapped on the side of the frame with his right hand, the knuckles making a tinny rap. “Everyone decent?” he asked.

“Enter.” Mio’s voice called from behind the veil, the telltale grinding sound of a whetstone being applied to a blade reaching his ears. Aaron ducked down, opened a corner flap and went in, taking care not to set a fire with the ashes of his still lit cigar. The room was small, very small with a pitifully small number of cots, only six in total projecting from the metal walls. A vent system was whirring up above, nestled snug against the overhead light that occasionally winked in and out. A lone steel rubbish bin acted as the only means for disposing trash. On the floor, all sitting down were all ten witches, their uniforms long gone, taken by the crew for cleaning or disposal, and replaced with green T-shirts two sizes too large, making everyone look like they were wearing evening onesies. Major Sakamoto was sitting at the head of the gathering, a whetstone in her right hand, running it all up and down the blade slowly, flanked by Amelie on the left and Juliette on the right, the corporal’s leg wound properly bandaged now. Mio looked up from her work and commented with a smile, “The man of the hour has returned. What kept you?”

“Got lost.” Aaron joked. “Apparently they brought the London fog with them.” He looked around and added, “Are we a little old to be having slumber parties there major?”

The sharpening stopped immediately and Mio gave him a glare. “Say that to my face.” she dared.

Without hesitation, Aaron walked into the room slowly, the flap of the curtain falling back into place behind him, the cherry on his stogy glowing dull in the light, smoke surrounding his head like a ghostly halo that was stripped as soon as it appeared by the vent suction. Everyone watched him advance towards the major and sit down in front of her. He took one more puff, erasing the cigar fully and exhaled through his nose, before reiterating. “You’re too old to be having these sorts of gatherings Mio.” The two stared at each other for a few seconds, the tension in the room palpable, before they both exploded into peals of good natured laughter.

“You’re something else you know that?” Mio mentioned while scooting over to allow him a place to sit next to her.

“I’ve had that said to me, and worse.” Aaron admitted. He looked over at Deveraux and asked, “How’s the leg?”

“The doc said that there’s no sign of infection and that I should be good to go in about three days with proper maintenance.” She nodded and looked up at Aaron before adding sincerely, “No thanks to you.”

“Anytime.” Aaron replied.

“Speaking of which,” Amelie interjected, “how long until we get to England?”

“According to the captain himself, probably between twelve and sixteen hours.” Aaron reported,
stamping out the spent stogy on the floor and casting the end into the garbage pail with pinpoint accuracy. He took a gander at his chest and saw the wound there, now all clotted and healing from his passive healing factor, and sighed. “I also radioed HQ. They’re glad that we’re coming home in one piece.”

“You both will probably get a commendation for this.” Juliette pointed out.

“I will, but he won’t.” Mio quipped. Aaron was about to ask why when Sakamoto hastily butted in with, “When I make my full report, I will make mention of the rather choice words you said during the trip up the Schelde. A good officer must always remember that he’s not just a soldier, but a gentleman, and conduct himself accordingly.” She looked at him and added, “Though you’re not on base grounds, that’s still an infraction on your record.” Aaron put his hands on his face and groaned loudly. *First the uniform violation, then the additional one when Minna decided that Perrine and I weren’t making good progress, and now this happy horse shit. “If I recall correctly, that is your third and a trip to the laundry room as punishment.”* She watched him shudder at the thought, smiling inwards at watching him squirm.

“And I assume that there is no way I can change your mind on this matter?” Aaron inquired with a defeated tone, taking his hands away and looking at her.

“Well,” Mio offered, taking a hold of Aaron’s arm with her own, looping it through the crook, and looking up at him with a look that seemed to suggest something rather amorous, “as you said during the coven, everyone has a price.”

Aaron froze stiff, eyes locked to hers. *There’s no way in hell she’s doing what I think she’s doing is she?! She knows I’m a taken man.* “And the price I want you to pay is a kiss.” she added with a sly wink. The whole room gasped at such a blatant display of blackmail and rather crude fraternization. Everyone was horrified, except for Aaron who at that point realized what Mio was doing. *Well played major, well played.* Deciding to ham it up, Divale winked back at her and placed a single finger from his right hand under her chin, tilting her head up. With his other, he reached up into a pouch of his backpack, one that he still miraculously kept on his person despite the hell he put himself through, and pulled out the plastic bag of chocolate kisses. Without even breaking his stare, Aaron opened the bag, took out a single candy, opened up the foil wrapper, and slowly and rather seductively if the truth be told, placed it first around her lips before popping it in her mouth. She smiled as the taste of milk chocolate filled her mouth and the major let go of Aaron, his tithe paid in full, and remarked to the still confused gathering, “Not all kisses involve lips ladies.”

The room then roundly chuckled at the joke which then turned into a chorus ooohs when Aaron stated, “Fancy you asking for that major. I thought after you didn’t complain from our awkward landing in the covered trench at Fort Vaux that you’d be craving something else.”

Mio turned bright red with embarrassment at the memory and retorted, “I have my sword sergeant.”

“That you do.” Aaron answered, ignoring the feeble attempt at a threat. “And you have something else that I need right now.” he added, tapping his right back pocket, a small tinny jingle coming from the pouch. Immediately, Mio understood and fished out the dog tags she helped Aaron recover from the dead, handing them over as Aaron fished out his complement. All the remaining members of the 114th looked at the identification markers and the room was filled with a somber mood. Taking Mio’s stack, Divale turned to Amelie and said, “As the CO now, it falls to you to notify their families and friends. They deserve to know what happened.”

Amelie was speechless and couldn’t move, looking at the tags of her dead comrades and then at him. “You recovered them?” she squeaked, tears in her eyes close to falling at such an act of respect.
“Why? It wasn’t your responsibility.”

“Any who serve and fall in the line of duty deserve to be given their just dues. Regardless of who you are or what you do, a soldier is a member of a fraternity, one that looks out for its own, a membership that, like being a friend, has no price or reward. I expect anyone here to do the same for me.” Aaron intoned.

Planchard’s dams burst and she started crying, leaning over and taking a hold of Aaron, burying her face into his arm. Divale took her in an embrace and rocked her, letting her weep. “I don’t care what anyone says about you.” she sobbed “In my eyes, you’ll always be a good man.” If only others could share in that mentality. After a few more seconds, Amelie withdrew and took the tags in her hands. “I will.” she simply said, placing them next to her.

It was then that another knock was heard at the door frame, followed by a throaty English voice that politely called out, “Dinner service.”

“Enter.” Aaron replied, and the flap of the curtain was opened, revealing a crewman in a white apron, holding a tray of food, steaming hot and entered the room with three steps.

“We have hot tea for all, a fine seafood chowder from today’s catch, and a bit of brandy for those who still have that chill in your bones.” the chef rattled off, setting the tray down in the middle of the throng, the clatter of bowls and spoons minimal. He gave a polite nod and hastily left the room. Aaron took a deep sniff and his stomach growled. God that smells divine. Eager hands reached for the bowls which prompted Aaron to raise his right hand. All movement stopped as he reached for the bottle of brandy, pulling out the cork, and ran his right pinky finger around the rim, collecting a tiny drop of the distilled wine on the digit.

“Pour ceux qui ne peuvent pas être ici (For those that can’t be here),” he explained solemnly as the alcohol droplet fell from his finger and hit the metal deck. “However, he seemed to have forgotten dessert.” he added and placed the bag of chocolates right on the tray. “Kisses for everyone.” he announced to raucous cheers. Waiting until everyone took their share, Aaron scooped a helping of thick chowder into a bowl and took it and the now three quarter empty bottle of brandy to his location. Divale poured a quick dash of alcohol into the soup and stoppered the bottle with his right hand and swirled the chowder around with a spoon with the left. Placing the spoon back on the tray near the used empties, he took the bowl with both hands and gulped it down like he did at Lucille’s. It’s good and hearty. Not as good as Lucille’s, but a damn good chowder nonetheless. Maybe the next time I’m in France, I’ll do her a favor and give her the recipe. Speaking of… He politely excused himself from the group and went over the right hand corner, thumbing the communicator dial to Minna’s frequency. “You there commander?” Aaron asked, taking another swallow of soup.

“That I am sergeant.” Minna replied over the airwaves, the voice a touch heavy with static. “Everything alright?”

“Perfectly fine.” Aaron stated. “I was wondering a few things. Do I have to do double duty today in regards to the depot?”

“I had Gertrude take over your duties while you were away. Have no fear.”

Aaron sighed with relief. “Tell her I owe her one.” he sincerely replied. “I was also wondering if I could speak quickly with General de Gaulle. Is he still there?”

“He’s right in front of me. Hold on.” Minna instructed.

A few seconds went by and Aaron soon heard the distinctive French voice of de Gaulle. “Excellent
travail mon ami. Vous êtes certain de recevoir des éloges pour cela (Excellent work my friend. You are certain to get a commendation for this).”

“Une recommandation est en règle (A commendation is indeed in order).” Aaron quipped. “Tu te souviens de ce que tu m’as dit après cette petite mêlée à Falaise (Do you remember what you told me after that little scrum in Falaise)?”

“C’est ce que j’ai fait, j’ai dit que je vous devais une faveur (That I do, I said that I owed you a favor).” de Gaulle recollected.

“Tu vois (You see),” Aaron grinned as he thought about what he was about to do, “J’appelle cette faveur (I’m calling that favor in).”

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The jeep’s suspension jarred the occupants as they went over a speed bump on their merry way to Dover. Hajikata manned the wheel, having dispatched himself without orders to pick up his superior. Mio sat in the front passenger side seat, her white uniform that Keisuke took with him rustling in the breeze. Aaron sat in the back towards the drivers side door, still in his rags that passed for his pants, with Amelie and Juliette in the middle and right passenger side respectively, also wearing their green GI’s. The Nautilus had docked at Dover at seven o clock in the morning to a small fanfare of townsfolk and an honor guard that was dispatched from the 45th. General de Gaulle received them all, giving the survivors of the 114th Purple Hearts, and as a unit, the Croix de Guerre. Mio and Aaron had stood alongside them and applauded as the general presented the decoration to Amelie Planchard, who wept as she saluted.

Mio took a look in the rearview mirror, eying the small wooden box with the symbol of the fleur de lis branded on the top that Aaron received from the general after the rest of the 114th was dismissed and whisked away to a nearby hospital for rehabilitation. Must contain an award of some sort. That’s good. You’ve earned it Aaron. She also looked at Amelie and Juliette who on the edges of their seats in anticipation of being guests of honor at Dover Castle, courtesy of Commander Wilcke herself, their braided cords pinned to their left shoulders shining as bright as the sun. It will do Perrine good to see her friend and countrymen again. Soon, the tall walls of the castle came into view. “Wow.” Amelie breathed.

“If you think the outside is impressive,” Aaron commented, “wait until you get inside. The whole interior is spacious and gorgeous.”

“Are the beds at least modern?” Juliette asked. “I would like to actually set my head on an honest to goodness pillow.”

Aaron chuckled. “They are.” he replied nodding. Except when you get to mine. The damn thing will probably give me back problems in the future. Hajikata sped through the outer wall gate and began the loop around to the second.

“So many defenses.” Amelie observed, taking note of the weapons emplacements. “Why do you all need so much protection if the unit is one of the best?”

“It never hurts to be prepared for the worst.” Mio replied from the front.

Aaron lost himself in his thoughts as the jeep continued to roll forward. What worst major? The Blitz is over and the enemy rarely ventures out here anymore. What are you really protecting yourselves from? It wasn’t long before the main courtyard was reached, the doors to the castle wide open, and Perrine standing at the threshold. Amelie spotted her immediately, and as soon as the jeep came to a
full stop, leapt out of the vehicle, vaulting over the side and ran at a full sprint towards her countryman, her friend, embracing her. As the pair hugged and began talking Juliette looked up at Aaron who simply sat there spellbound as if under the effects of some enchantment. “What’s on you mind?” she asked, giving him a nudge with her elbow.

It jarred Divale’s thoughts to the here and now and he replied, “This is the first time I’ve seen her smile like that. It’s shocking to me.” Spurred to action, he got out of the jeep with a generous leap, opening the door to let Deveraux out, ready to take her by the hand in case she needed it. When she politely refused, wishing to walk on her own power, Aaron walked over to the jovial pair at the threshold, linking up with Mio and Hajikata and waited as Juilette came up.

Perrine noticed him approach and her beaming smile died, turning into an expression of indifference. “You’re back.” she commented. “I’m glad.”

“It’s good to be back. Thank you.” Aaron replied, knowing full well that Clostermann was less than thrilled at him being here. “I want you to take a look at this.” he added brandishing the box that de Gaulle gave him.

Perrine looked at it and her eyes bugged out, recognizing the fleur de lis. “Did you come here to brag at the award you got?” she demanded gruffly, crossing her arms.

“I may have got it, but I didn’t receive it.” Aaron illuminated. He opened the container and added with a smile, “You did.” Inside of the box, resting on blue velvet was the Croix de Guerre, one of the highest decorations that a French soldier could receive for bravery in battle. It was a bronze square cross medal with two crossed swords over a symbol of the republic, hanging from a green and red ribbon with two degree pins, a bronze palm and silver gilt gold palm. Perrine was speechless and put her hands to her mouth in shock. “We couldn’t have done this without you.” Aaron stated with authority. “Without your scout work, this mission wouldn’t have succeeded. Congradulations.” He then presented the open box to her. Clostermann reached out with trembling hands and received it. “And never say that I never give back to those that helped me.” Divale mentioned, and he then sidestepped the group and walked into the castle.

Overhead, watching all this from a window, was Minna, holding Aaron’s diary in her hands. She had been reading the events of the day unfold before her very eyes, the magic contained within the tome etching all that Aaron did, said, and thought during the mission. Wilcke was impressed and proud of him, for he had conducted himself well in getting everyone out of France in one piece. You fulfilled your promise sargeant and whether you think you deserve it or not, I’m putting you in for a commendation. It was then that her eyes saw the next few lines manifest and her mood instantly darkened as she read the words: As I walked away, not looking back once, I caught the reflection of Clostermann in one of the display cases, the glass depicting her taking the medal out of the box and having Mio affix it to her chest, her friend applauding enthusiastically. If only Amelie knew how much that bitch hates me, even after I rescued her from a fate worse than death itself. The feeling is mutual, and I have not forgotten what she said yesterday morning when Mio and I went below to the depot. All I have to say is thank God that Minna and the general were there. If she was alone and mentioned Larissa in that way, that medal would’ve been awarded to her posthumously.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

After some constructive therapy, and a not so constructive conversation with an old friend, Aaron finds out that he is being sent out on a routine patrol with Erica. Hartmann reveals a secret to him and they both talk about the finer things in life, and in the process help save one.

Chapter XXIII: Reach A Little Longer

Though I still feel responsible for what happened to her, David helped me understand that, though tragic, I cannot dwell on it, that I have to move on. Looking back on it, I know now that my mind wasn’t as steeled against the harsh realities of war, that there can come situations that can just fester within, filling me with doubt. From that doubt later came obsession, constantly looking at what I could’ve done differently to prevent Larissa’s death. It clouded my judgment and turned me into something and someone that I didn’t like and I was too blind with grief to see it then. David, if you ever get your hands on this and read this passage, know now that you have my eternal thanks for helping me get past this. It still hurts, oh dear God it hurts, but you opened a door for me and gave me the courage to walk through it. I only hope that one day I can return the favor somehow.

Diary Entry June 18th 1941

The water of the bathhouse felt warm and soothing as Minna sat herself down in the shallow end next to Mio, who was leaning against the side of pool. Though she tried not to show it, Wilcke could not help but feel uncomfortable. I never could get used to this type of bathing style. While it’s great for building up rapport between squadron members, I miss the privacy, especially on certain days when I’m in certain moods. Sakamoto gave her a look and nodded, as if understanding what she was thinking and asked, “Do you think he will make any progress today?”

Minna gave it a thought and replied with a shrug, “I see no reason why not. All the other options have proven fruitless so far.” After reading the after action reports and conferring with both Mio and Aaron on the matter, she had decided that the situation that happened in the transit station in Calais couldn’t happen again, that Aaron had to face his fears. Though at first he protested, he relented after seeing the merit in it, that if something were to occur that required him to go underwater to save a life, that he needed to do so with no doubts in his mind. Over the last three days now, Mio and Minna took turns taking him to places that would best serve to try to break his phobia and all had met mixed results. At first they tried the waters of the Channel, having him wade out into the sea until he could go no further, but the weather played hell with his senses, triggering the flashbacks of Pripet and his body refused to venture to depths that went above his chin. Next, they asked Shirley if they could use her personal bathtub, thinking that the water temperature would help alleviate the stressors, an idea that she agreed to as long as he cleaned it afterwards to her exacting specifications. All that served to do was give Aaron an acute attack of anxiety from being essentially trapped in a small
enclosed space, just like when he had tried to fall asleep in the Nautilus. Other options like having him go to the garrison barracks or Lucretia’s were right out, leaving the 501st bathhouse the only means left. Both of them decided that for this attempt that both of them would be here. They both wore swim suits, long black one pieces, the kind that one would take to the beach.

Suddenly, the door to the interior secondary changing room opened just a crack, followed by the voice of Aaron. “With all due respect commander, I think we should sack that crack pot tailor at the garrison barracks. Seriously, he can’t tell an overcast from a buttonhole.” he declared.

Though out of sight, Minna could almost hear the major roll her eyes. Out of the interests of decency, they had the tailor at the garrison barracks knit Aaron a pair of swimming trunks, giving him some measurements that they gauged from his pants. “To be honest sergeant, I believe that he did a good job with what he was working with.”

“Which was jack and shit, and jack had left for the day.” Aaron retorted. “I think I should just go in with my pants on.”

“Absolutely not.” Minna countered emphatically. “I don’t care if they’re clean, you’re not wearing them in here.”

“Minna,” Aaron implored, “they got some measurements wrong.”

“Which kind?” Minna asked, her patience drawing thin.

“The front.” Aaron answered with finality. Not believing him for a second, she turned to Mio and gestured to the door. Mio flipped up her eye patch and used her magic. Less than a split second later, she hastily put it back over her eye and whispered, “They leave nothing to the imagination.” She regarded Aaron and inquired, “Why so self conscious sergeant?”

“This part of me I show only in my most private moments, not in front of my superiors.” Aaron replied. “Please let me wear my pants. I’ll even clean the entire pool by hand if you so will it, just let me wear them.”

Minna furrowed her brow and thought about it. Having him be agitated like this could jeopardize the therapy. He needs to be relaxed for this to work. “You have ten seconds to get them on and your ass in here Sergeant Divale.” she relented, softening her voice.

“Danke (Thank you).” Aaron quipped, and the rustling of clothing was heard, followed by the looping of a belt and fastening of a buckle. In seven seconds, Aaron emerged from behind the threshold, closing the door behind him. The wound he suffered in France had healed over completely, adding another thin layer of scar tissue, and walked to the edge of the shallow end where the pair had sat down. He looked around the white tiled room in wonder. It looked like a gymnasium pool with the metal rungs and steps at certain intervals and the ceiling mounted humidifiers whirring in the background, the vents not so much as rattling. The warmth of the water cast up a small fog above the surface, lending some modicum of privacy for self conscious bathers. “This place is amazing.” he remarked as he lowered himself into the water. Warmth spread up his feet, legs, and lower chest as he sat down, his form almost halfway out the water like an offshore buoy. He couldn’t resist closing his eyes and leaning back against the stone edge, letting the sensation relax him.

“This is no time to fall asleep sergeant.” Mio sternly pointed out. “Remember why you’re here.”

Aaron shook himself out of his ease and nodded. “Of course. Do we do this here or at the deep end?”
“Follow me.” Minna commanded, and she proceeded to wade further out, the elevation dipping by several degrees. Mio and Aaron went after her. She stopped in the middle of the bath and turned around. *Not too deep and not too shallow. This spot will do.* “We’re going to try something different today.” she began. “I want you to stand up straight while the major and I get to either side of you. At my word, I want you to slowly lean back and we’ll take hold of you as we gently put you on your back. Don’t worry about going under as we’ll have a firm hold of you. Understand?”

Aaron listened to the grand scheme and shuddered a tad, his anxiety growing. Mio noticed it and offered, “Just keep what I told you then in mind Aaron and all will be ok. We’re not going to leave you.”

Divale closed his eyes, trying to put his mind at ease, doing his best to take solace in her words. *She’s part of the circle Aaron. She didn’t leave you then and she won’t now. You can trust her.*

“Bring it on.” he stated through gritted teeth, crossing his arms over his chest like an Egyptian pharaoh being prepared for mummification. Both officers maneuvered around Aaron’s bulk and took up their positions. Slowly, Aaron bent his knees, dipping into the water and started to lean back. Two pairs of hands took him by the arms before moving under his back as the descent continued. Divale could feel goosebumps forming on his skin, the icy fingers of fear and doubt running up and down his spine. *Courage Aaron. Don’t lose it. Stay in the here and now. Breathe. Relax.* He could feel the water go up his back, moving from lower to upper and then over the tips of his shoulders. Try as he might Aaron’s jaw started to tremble like the lips of a child about to cry as the warmth of the water met his neck and moved towards the back of his skull. The tremors spread to the hands and he clenched them hard, the knuckles going white.

“You’ve made it Aaron,” Minna informed, keeping her hold on him with Mio doing the same. “You’re doing great.”

Aaron’s reply was ragged, as if he just came out of a freezer after being in it for too long. “Whatever you say.”

“If it helps, close your eyes.” Mio suggested. “Try it.”

Following her advice, Aaron closed his eyes and again tried to find an anchor, some foundation with which he could stand on and assuage his fears. *Courage. Discipline. Concentrate.* He was surprised as he thought those words for the person who said them wasn’t a person at all. *It’s strange how things like this pop into my head, especially those that involve Ismenoth.* At the mention of her name, the tension seemed to relax from his body, the tremors in his mouth and hands ceased, and his breathing slowed. Aaron grew less anxious and more wary. *That’s not my doing. What the hell is that bitch doing? I need to get to the bottom of this.*

Standing over him, like pallbearers moving a coffin, Minna and Mio watched Aaron go from frightened to sedate, seeing his eye dart this way and that under his eyelids. Minna looked at Mio and smiled at the progress being made. *Finally a real break.* “Minna.” Aaron stated without opening his eyes.

“What is it?” she asked calmly.

“If you’ll allow me, I’d like to cast a spell that will help me breathe underwater.” Aaron answered.

Minna grew cautious and ventured, “Why would you want to do that?”

“I can’t hide from this anymore. I want to be a valuable asset to this unit, but I can’t if I clam up over a puddle.” Aaron explained. “This ends today.”
Taken aback by the initiative Minna almost stammered her authorization. “Permission granted. Let us know when you want us to let go.”

“Lamellae piscium.” Aaron intoned and the two witches watched as three slits opened up just under Divale’s ears, flapping rhythmically up and down as air moved in and out, like the gills of a fish. “You may let go.” Aaron said softly, almost as if he was dreaming. As one, Minna and Mio released their grips and watched Aaron float on the surface for the briefest of moments before sinking with the grace of a crocodile under the water.

A bright light and water is all around, but the mind doesn’t concentrate on that, instead, both mind and body feel out of place, like one sitting in a chair that wasn’t meant for them. Realization kicks in; the body was upside down, suspended underwater and held fast, fishing around in the liquid for an object that the blindfolded eyes couldn’t see, the ears bombarded by the concussive dull booms of explosions going off all around. The noise is grating and the ears ring and pop with the overpressure. Lungs start to burn with the lack of fresh air. Moving fast, the right arm reaches down again and sweeps side to side in a wide arc, a direction that should’ve been inverted but wasn’t. Convulsions start up, the body going into panic mode in a last desperate attempt to get oxygen. The movements become spasmodic and the feeling in the extremities start to fade as asphyxiation starts to creep into the picture. Suddenly, the tips of the rapidly dulling fingertips graze and clasp around a rectangular piece of metal with a empty cavity on the top. With speed, the left darts out and picks up another object, this one bigger and more awkward to hold and lift. The missing piece is pressed into another cavity and the right hand pulls back a metal bolt and shoves it back into the starting position. Just before the body begins to fade and brain death settles in, the water disappears and a throat gasps, swallowing the air like a famished beggar. A voice is heard from beyond the shroud…”

“I remember it as if it were yesterday.” Ismenoth recollected, “You had that Kar98k stripped and put back together in less than forty one seconds, a record that none of your friends matched, at least the ones that survived that portion of the training.” Aaron opened his eyes underwater and the world became a blur as liquid coated his orbs briefly before his nictitating membranes shunted most of it out. At first, he could see nothing of the demon at all until the moisture that still remained in the membrane pockets started to cloud. A personal flecting surface. Clever girl. This one is much larger though. What does she have in store for me? Soon, Ismenoth made her appearance in full, completely naked, her sallow complexion resembling anthropomorphic mustard gas, her venom green hair wisping this way and that, the black orbs regarding Aaron with an emotion that could be described as admiration or lust. “It was at that point that I knew that I had made the right choice in becoming yours.” she added, reaching out with her tattooed arms and embracing him, her touch warmer than the water, her fingernails scratching his skin.

“Oh really now?” Aaron asked in a mocking tone.

“But of course,” Ismenoth assured, stroking his hair lovingly, “for you showed me that you could adapt, that you had the will to survive, to pull through regardless of odds. It was as if you were made for me.”

“What’s your game? Why did you calm me?” Aaron demanded flatly.

“What game?” Ismenoth playfully asked, “Is there something wrong about praising someone I hold dear, or to help them become better?”

“How long have we known each other?” Aaron asked, intent on getting to the bottom of this.

“A little over eighteen wonderful years.” Ismenoth replied. “And boy have they been great for us both.”
Yeah I’ll bet. “And in all those wonderful eighteen years, you have, save for once, never been this nice to me. What is going on?” Aaron pressed.

Ismenoth looked away for a moment, collecting her thoughts, and breathed in deep before answering, “Things aren’t working out for you here Aaron. While yes, you have done some good, it seems that you are just being used as a situational plug in when things get too serious for them to handle.”

“As they should.” Aaron countered emphatically. “This world is full of things that they have no knowledge of, things that are far worse than the Neuroi, and they need someone who knows how to combat them. France was just one example. It’s far from the first I’ve dealt with, and I’m sure that it won’t be last.” Ismenoth’s hands moved further up to his shoulders and she closed her eyes, shaking her head. He then furrowed his brow as a thought crept in. “You’re concerned about me aren’t you?”

“France nearly cost you,” the fiend pointed out. “If there was a more vigorous pursuit by the enemy, that mission would’ve ended differently. You know as well as I that you’re powerful and at your best when your back’s to the wall, but there’s only so much your body can handle. You never finished the entirety of the training and that makes what they’re doing and how they’re using you dangerous.”

“Minna knows what she’s doing.” Aaron retorted.

“She certainly does.” the demoness replied with distain. “She’s placing the lives and welfare of her own over yours, using you to take the bullet meant for someone else.”

“That is what I was made to do.” Aaron explained.

“That German cunt is deceiving you, stroking your ego to the point where you’re becoming blind as to what’s really going on. Don’t fall for it or you’re going to find yourself in worse trouble than you’re in right now.” Ismenoth adviser.

“If this is the sum total of your argument than I’m just going to ignore you.” Aaron stated.

“There is also one other thing as well,” Ismenoth added, “the Frenchie.”

“What about her?” Aaron asked, not caring in the slightest.

“She’s proven to be a very persistent thorn in your side, a barb that must be dealt with.” Ismenoth observed.

“She can’t do a damn thing to me.” Aaron defended. “Even on my worst day ever, she wouldn’t come close to touching me.”

“And like your commander so eloquently put it at their little coven; I don’t have to touch you to hurt you.” Ismenoth drove home. “All she has to do is blab a few words to the wrong people and that woman of yours is gone.”

Aaron’s eyes briefly glowed orange as the implications of what she was saying triggered his ire. “She wouldn’t dare.” he said.

“The lieutenant has threatened your life, denigrated you in front of the squadron, intentionally sought you out to attack the validity of everything you do, and, most egregiously, has lashed out at you due to that Japanese girl’s apparent inability to get her back into flying shape, their little spat spilling over and dousing you with the flames when she sees you defend her.” Ismenoth illuminated. “You’re not a punching bag, you’re a soldier, a damn good one too, and this environment is not conducive to that.” Aaron looked away from her, his mind wandering to the memories of the recent past. For all
that she’s trying to do, the bitch is right. Perrine has been hostile to me since I got here. Even after I
saved her life, saved her best friend’s life, and gave up the Croix de Guerre that would’ve been
awarded to me, she still is aligned against me. As for that feud with Yoshika, I’m sure that will blow
over in time. She knows damn well that Miyafuji is new, unused to war and what it brings. Of course
there will be an adjustment period, that her focus will need to be tempered and changed to better suit
the needs of the unit. I may have interfered a few times when things looked bad, but I tune her out
when she screams at me to go away and stay out of it. She’s the one that needs to stay out of it, to let
it go. An officer of her rank should behave and know better. “As far as I’m concerned,” Ismenoth
continued in a worried tone after letting his mind stray from the here and now, “she’s capable of just
about any design if it involves harming you.”

A strange feeling swept over Aaron as he let her words sink in. It was one of the oldest ones that he
could ever recall experiencing, a sensation that would probably never leave him for as long as he
lived, doubt, that sobering cold awareness that your conclusions and assumptions, not matter how
steeped in logical fact could be fallible. He suddenly felt afraid, scared about losing Lucretia to such
a foul act. *Would she honestly jeopardize her career over me?* “What are you suggesting?” he asked,
allowing himself to fall deeper into whatever ploy the demonness had laid for him.

“You still have that transfer order all signed by Eisenhower.” Ismenoth expounded. “Use it and get
out of here. Go somewhere else where you can be rid of this bullshit going on around here for good.
He might just let you take Lucretia with you if you asked him.”

“She’d never leave Great Britain,” Aaron pointed out, “and she’d never forgive me for such a deed.
I’d lose her regardless.”

Ismenoth placed her right hand on Aaron’s right cheek. “Though I’m not particularly fond of the
Italian mistress you’ve picked up, I can’t deny that her feelings for you are strong. She does love you
deeply and fully Aaron. That kind of affection doesn’t come around very often and it’s power
overcomes incredible odds. All those little doubts you’re having will not break that bond, I assure
you.” she implored, placing her head onto his chest. Aaron held onto the loathsome wretch that was
the demoness within him, wishing that she was gone.

“I love her just as deeply and fully. I’d
move heaven and earth, fly into and through hell and back for that woman. Can love overcome such
a thing if I do this? Lucretia, what do I do?

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Mio and Minna watched the bubbles come up from underneath the surface, making almost indistinct
blub sounds as they exploded. They both had been standing there for a good five minutes, keeping a
close eye on Aaron as he reposed peacefully at the bottom of the bath. Minna with her magic
however knew that all was not well given the way his face twitched and his brow furrowed, the
mouth opening by the faintest of degrees. *What’s going on in that head of yours Aaron? Are you
really okay?* Mio looked at this situation and her anxiety grew. *He’s seems to be talking to himself.
Then a thought raced across her psyche. He’s not talking to-.* Suddenly, Aaron’s body rose up from
the deep and his head, shoulders, and chest burst through, waves spraying both the witches. They
saw him breathe a few deep breaths, the gills vanishing from sight as the magic ceased, water falling
down his form. Opening his eyes, he turned and saw that he had nearly drenched his superiors. “I’m
sorry.” he apologized. “For that and taking up your time.”

“You’re fine.” Minna replied, meaning it. “I have to say, this was a monumental breakthrough for
you. Great job. Another few sessions of this and I think you’ll be as sound as a pound, as the Brits
say.”

“Thank you.” Aaron said. “So what now?”
“You have two hours to burn as you see fit before going up for a daytime patrol run.” Minna informed.

“Perrine has been cleared?” Aaron asked, at once anxious and relieved that his wingman was now back in action.

Wilcke then crossed her arms over her chest and answered, “She has, but I want to hold her out for another day just to be on the safe side.”

_I can’t imagine why commander. You know about the problems those two have been having and you won’t send Perrine out with me because you think that Yoshika cleared her just to shut her up. “So what’s going to happen then?”_ Divale queried.

“You’ll have a temporary reassignment.” Minna explained. “Since Yoshika is still new, I’m pairing her with Gertrude for the first run patrol and Erica will be your wingman on the second.” Aaron’s shoulders sagged. _Oh this is just fantastic. You pair me with the black devil herself. I can only imagine how Hartmann feels about this turn of events. Probably scheming up a storm. “It could be worse,”_ she went on with a slight grin, _“you could be paired with me.”_

“To be honest,” Aaron admitted, “I’d rather that were the case. At least with you, I’m not in danger of being flirted with to death.”

Wilcke chuckled. “If it will put your mind at ease, I’ll give you a bug that you can plant on her, letting me know what is going on. Things get to the point where I find it to be detrimental, I’ll go up and take her place. Fair?” Aaron cocked his eyebrow. _And I thought it was me that you’d reserve that for._

“Well, I can see why you’d say that. But one thing to keep in mind, I don’t think Gertrude is going to try and small talk with you. She’s just going to be doing her best to keep things as non-social as possible.”

“Okay.” Divale agreed, and proceeded to make his way to one of the ramps, intending to get out of his wet clothes.

Before reaching for one of the iron bars, Mio quipped, “We saw a lot of bubbles coming from your mouth there sergeant. Care to explain why?”

Aaron slowly turned, knowing full well what the major was implying. “Just having a conversation with myself,” he answered. “Helps sometimes.” With that, he took a hold of the bar and hoisted himself out of the water, his wet feet flapping like a ducks on the tile as he made his way to the changing room he came out of. As he made his round, Minna looked at Mio with a puzzled expression, one that Mio returned with a stern glare. It was then that Wilcke understood why Sakamoto asked that question. _Talking with yourself in certain situations is fine, but when it comes to him, he’s not the only one that listens and responds._

Aaron placed the now wet towel back over the rung and sat down on the wooden waterproofed bench, his damp trousers making a dull squishing sound as water was pressed out of them. The secondary changing room, from what he could guess, was smaller than the main one, with only a quartet of steel lockers with black dial locks that could hold maybe a two piece suit if you could angle the coat hooks right. The ceiling was low, almost to the point where Aaron had to hunch over to prevent his head from grazing the tile above him and the walls were waterproofed wood, same as the bench. A drawer full of towels was built into the right hand side of the wall with a half length mirror over it. He looked at it absentmindedly, seeing his reflection, his eyes becoming lost in the harsh glare of the overhead lights that made the room look brighter than the outside world. _So many questions and so little time to answer them. Maybe I should tell Minna or even Mio about this, since she’s probably the most concerned given what she asked. But if I do, there’s no guarantee that this_
It was then that he noticed something a tad odd. From the reflection in the mirror, the closest locker to him, one that he knew was closed and locked when he came in to undress beforehand, was still closed, but the position of key components was slightly altered. He took a quick passing glance at the dial lock and saw that it was positioned over a different number. You were over 33, but now you’re under 18. Which leaves only one explanation as to why that is. Deciding to have a little bit of fun, he got up and stretched his arms, making his way to the errant looking receptacle. “That was a good therapy session.” he quipped to no one in particular. “But I have many things to do today and not a lot of time to do them.” Slowly, he unbuckled his belt, letting the leather grind against his belt loops as he took hold of it and pulled. “Still, I need to conserve energy. Keep my strength up for what lies ahead.” Aaron added, coiling the belt in his right hand like a lion tamer does his whip and sat it down on the bench behind him. Then, he unzipped his fly, saying with a sly grin, “Enjoying yourself in there?” Silence was his only answer as Aaron locked his eyes to the dial and moved his hand to it, the cold metal emboldening him to press his advantage over whoever was inside. “All I have to do is move this dial and you’re good as done you little peeping tom, or in this case tam. So be a dear and come out, or am I going to have to come in after you?”

After he uttered that last syllable of the statement, the door to the locker opened, a release latch from within, and inside the locker, a pair of white towels hung, barely shielding Aaron’s eyes from the grinning face of one Erica Hartmann, her small form fitting close to perfect within the cramped confines. “Oh don’t mind little old me.” she cooed taking a gander at his now open zipper. “Please continue.”

“How did you get in here?” Aaron asked, turning his attention to his locker and twirling the dial.

Hartmann got out of the locker and stretched her arms. “Through the front door obviously.” she explained. “It wasn’t exactly guarded.”

Aaron opened his locker and pulled out his uniform and another towel. “If the major or commander catch you in here with me like this, you will get it good.” he pointed out, looping the towel around his waist.

“They’ll do nothing of the sort to me.” Erica replied obstinately. “It’s only innocent fun.”

“Then I’ll have to be the one to give you your just desserts.” Aaron remarked, taking off his pants and quickly putting on his other pair, all the while moving to the furthest edge of the bench, out of reach of the black devil before him.

“With whipped cream on top?” Erica shot back.

“You wish.” Aaron answered, rolling his eyes after undoing his makeshift privacy curtain and folding it. “So did you just come in here to shed some light on a few mysteries or did you have something else in mind?” he asked.

It was then that Erica put on a rather nervous face and looked around as if she were convinced that someone was listening. “I need your help with something, something that I’ve been trying to get going for the past month or so.” she explained. Divale looked up at her while tying the last of his shoes and knew within a second that this wasn’t some trick or prank, that this was a serious call of aid.

“What’s wrong?” Aaron asked with concern, standing up to his full height after he was done. “You okay?”
“Yes,” Erica answered, “but not here. I need to get something from my room and then we need to get alone, just you and I. Let’s go.” She then, walked to the exit and opened the door slowly, checking her corners, first right then left. After a few seconds of judgment, she bade him to follow her. The pair walked down the hallway and took a quick left, going done another corridor lined with framed banners on either side of the walls. “How are you liking it here?” she asked, making light conversation.

“Not the most exciting posting, but I do like the change of pace.” He paused and added sincerely, “The company isn’t bad either.”

“Good to hear,” Erica nodded. “You’ve definitely proved to us that you belong here after what you did in France.”

_That may be true Erica, but I just wish that everyone thought that._ “Did Gertrude get the thank you from me?” he inquired.

Hartmann turned around and said, “That she did.” she recollected, walking backwards, remembering the bag of chocolate that Aaron handed to her the day after he got back. “Though I’ll admit that I’m a little jealous.”

Aaron stopped on a dime and furrowed his brow. “Why?” he queried.

Erica too came to a halt and shrugged. “Just wish that she would do the same for me sometimes.”

“What do you do?” Divale asked.

“Sweep the hanger.” Erica groaned out, resuming her trek. “And it’s not as simple as you think. The take off portal doesn’t shield us from dust or pollen that trickles in during the day. Most of the time, it’s not too bad, but there are days that a veritable ocean of the stuff billows in and coats everything with a fine dust. It’s an absolute bitch to clean. Takes hours.” She then had a moment of introspection and quipped, “Speaking of not as simple, how did you know I was in the locker? My hiding spot was perfect.”

“You didn’t reposition the dial.” Aaron informed, watching Erica sag her shoulder’s in defeat. “It was a rookie mistake on your part. Still, by virtue of me walking forward those few steps, you have the notable honor of being the closest that anyone has gotten to me without me knowing by two inches.”

Erica looked at him and furrowed her brow as she came to a stop near a large brown door with her name stenciled on hit. “Really?” she inquired.

“The closest anyone ever got to sneaking up on me undetected was Michael Loganberry, the leader of the Fifth Coterie, the Hammers. They were the speedsters of the unit, the ones we sent in to do flanking movements and charges. Given the speed that they were going, very few if any got hit, much less killed.” _At least not until later when we were pushed into the more developed sections of Europe like Austria, Germany, and France. Couldn’t use them the way they should’ve been._ “To keep up our edge in battle and our ability to remain hidden and unseen, we all played a game called Regicide, where the objective was to sneak up on a target without being found out and touch them. I always played the part of the target, letting my men do the sneaking. One day while we had nothing to do during those months that the Carpathian Line still stood in ‘41, Michael decided to play the game. He actually stayed in his tent during his off time, digging a hole that traveled, I kid you not, sixty feet from his tent to mine, a process that took the greater part of nine days to accomplish.”

Erica’s eyes bugged out, “How did you snuff him out?” she asked.
“The night that he finished up the tunnel, he took off his shoes and placed them outside of his tent, going in barefoot to better muffle his movements. I saw them when I walked to my tent. Put two and two together and the result was obvious. Whisked my tent away with magic when I came close to the threshold and there he was, hunched near the entrance like a gargoyle on a church roof. He was three feet and three inches away from victory, a company record.” He looked at her and acknowledged with a nod, “Until now.”

Erica pumped her fist in the air in triumph. “Maybe one day I’ll get closer.” she dared. “Any suggestions?”

“You can start by getting whatever it is you need. I only have-” Aaron started but paused as he looked at his timepiece. “One hundred and ten minutes to spare until we get airborne.”

Shaking her head, Erica opened the door Aaron’s eyes then looked upon a room that looked so disheveled and unkempt that he immediately thought for a second that the architectural insides of his effects crate had somehow been transferred almost exactly. Books, clothes, empty tins of chocolates and candies, papers, pillows, and bed sheets were strewn about in a pattern that made no sense to anyone save for the occupant. Every square inch of furniture and most of the floor, if one could actually see the faintest glimpse of wood or metal, was covered end to end and top to bottom, save for a path as this as ticker tape winding through the veritable hazards. A sole window was in the center, the rays of the early morning sun coming through in droves. Strangely enough, the domicile had no odor, which puzzled him to no end, until he managed to spy a trio of opened baking soda boxes. Hartmann entered her quarters with speed, navigating in, over, and around her belongings and going to her dresser. “Did someone call the coast guard?” Aaron mockingly joked as she fished around for whatever it was that she needed. “Because we have some storm damage that needs to be cleaned up.”

“Very funny.” Erica retorted, giving him a glare. A second went by and she pulled out a blank manila envelope, secured by a duo of paperclips. She walked to the window of her room and opened it, the rush of air feeling cold and crisp. “Come on, this way.” she stated, waving him forward.

“You’re fucking joking.” Aaron breathed incredulously.

“I never joke when this is involved.” Erica replied, shaking the folder in her hand. “Now, move you ass.”

Divale gingerly moved past the threshold and closed the door behind him, taking great pains to not mar or damage any of Erica’s belongings. What in the hell is so damn important to her that she doesn’t want anyone else to see her with me? Did she witness something that she shouldn’t have, get on someone’s bad side, or does she want me to know something that I haven’t been told about? As soon as he got close enough to the window, Erica hopped out and landed on her own two feet in the middle of a flower bed, three feet below the window. Aaron followed her, his footfalls muffled by the damp sod and closed the window behind him. “So where to next?” he asked, intrigued. Erica looked around and found the exit to the secondary ring, but her mood darkened as she saw that the gate was closed. *Fuck.* “We need to get to the hanger.” she answered, turning to him. “It’s the only place where I can tell you this in confidence.”

Noting her anxiety, Aaron walked forward out of the flower bed and hunched down, unfurling his wings. “Hop on and hold tight.” he instructed. Erica placed the envelope inside her uniform and embraced Aaron from behind, her arms looping around the base of his ribs and hands clasped together. “Mind you,” Aaron advised as he stood up, the excess weight of a passenger not troubling him one bit, “if those hands go anywhere else or do any sort of funny business, you’ll be doing some major backstrokes. Understand?”
“What kind of woman do you think I am?” Erica asked with a hint of joviality to her voice.

Do you really want me to answer that question? Instead of answering, Aaron leapt into the air and soared up, beyond the height of the walls and shot forwards, making a beeline for the hanger, a square target that looked like the size of a die for this distance. The moment he past the tips of the outer wall did he feel something graze the middle of his back. He took a gander, turning his head and saw Erica nuzzling her face into his spine and muscle. “Yoshika was right.” she murmured dreamily. “You are warm, like laundry straight from the ironing board warm. I could almost fall asleep right here.”

“Please don’t.” Aaron replied with humor. “I already have one woman who sleeps next to me, I don’t want another.”

“Didn’t stop you in Bordeaux you hypocrite.” Erica quipped, giving Aaron a small tap on the back with her nose.

Aaron let that comment slide as he began his descent, going through the top, the magical barrier letting him pass through without fuss. He held Erica’s hands with his right, making doubly sure that her grip didn’t slip as he set down in the middle of the launch dais. Divale let Erica go and she immediately scampered off towards Minna’s office, opening the door without ceremony. Satisfied that no one was there, Erica hurried back, sitting down and sighing with relief. “This really is serious isn’t it?” Aaron asked, sitting down and placing a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s something that I don’t want the others to know about, something that I really want to keep secret from them until I get it right.” Erica explained, taking the envelope from her interior uniform pocket and handing it to him. Curious and a bit afraid at what he could be seeing inside, Aaron took his grip off Hartmann’s shoulder and removed the paperclips, pulling out a stack of stapled papers so thick that London fog would be considered thin. The first page comprised of a simple title called Gebrochener Gelübde (Broken Vow) with Erica’s name underneath it. It was then he understood what it was.

“A book?” he asked, looking at her with a queer expression to his face. “You snuck into the changing room, took me to and through your room, and had me ferry you here all because you are a writer?” Erica immediately looked down and Aaron changed his tone and tact. “I didn’t mean it like that.” he assured, not wishing to make her feel guilty. “It’s just that why would you want to keep something like this a secret? There’s nothing wrong with being a writer. I mean, look at me, I paint and no one gives me any guff about it.”

“Yes, but you’re good at it.” Erica retorted a bit gruffly. “I’m still learning the ropes and it’s been a great struggle. Even with my education, this has been the hardest thing I’ve ever decided to embark on.”

“Do you want me to critique it?” Aaron asked.

Erica nodded enthusiastically. “Please do,” she anxiously blurted out. “When I heard about your love for books at the coven, I thought to myself, this is the person I’ve been looking for, someone with the knowledge of the classics and who appreciates the written word. Don’t hold back.”

Aaron flipped up the title page and began to read, his knowledge of German causing him to speed read with a rate that would put most researchers to shame. The story was set during the high Renaissance, and focused on a nun who saw a priest alone in a confessional booth, on the penitent side, wracked with some sort of emotional pain. Wishing to assuage his grief, she went into the side reserved for the priest and inquired what was wrong. The grief stricken priest then explained that his faith was shaken, that he had suffered such great hardship in life, an existence that was unraveling at
the seams. To save him, the nun said to him that his suffering, though great, wasn’t the worst that could befall him, and asked of him to go amongst the people in disguise, to learn and see what true pain and distress was like. Taking the nun’s advice, the priest went out and discovered that his plight was nothing compared to his fellows and later rushed back to the nun, thanking her profusely for her insight, that he owed her a debt that he could never hope to repay. It was then, that the nun told the priest her story, and that she too had her faith shaken, through the temptations of the flesh, something that she had never experienced but deeply wished to. Erica saw Aaron breeze through her manuscript until the last page remained and timidly asked, “So what do you think?”

Aaron placed the sheaf of papers off to the side and looked up through the hole in the hanger roof, watching the clouds dance about the blue skies, collecting his thoughts. “You had me at the first sentence and you kept my attention riveted to the spot. It wanted me to continue and that’s the hallmark of a good introduction. The high Renaissance scene suits the story your telling well, and I find it very refreshing, for you don’t find many modern texts regarding this timeframe. As for the main characters, their personalities and feelings are highly developed to the point where I think you based them off of real people, they’re that believable. As for the narrative with the priest and later the nun, it’s ridiculously masterful. Well paced and written, save for two incidences of misplacing a comma, it’s perfect in every way.” he expounded. “Personally, if you keep this up to the conclusion you’ll have a best seller.”

Erica’s eyes brightened. “Your really think so?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t say it if I felt otherwise.” Aaron answered with a smile. “So where does this lead to?”

Hartmann then blushed profusely and added with a bit of a stammer, “T-That was something that I h- hoped you could help me w-with.”

Aaron inwardly chuckled and threw his hands up in the air and laid down on the cold concrete of the launch dais. “You’ve never had sex have you?” he asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

Erica started to pout her face. “I’m not that dense. I know what part goes where.” she pointed out.

“Just because you know that part A goes into slot B doesn’t mean that you understand the intricacies of intimacy.” Aaron countered. “There’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Would you like to elaborate on that?” Hartmann inquired, crossing her arms over her chest.

Aaron sat up and wheeled himself into a position that he could face her and began, “Imagine lovemaking as an iceberg. Everything above the surface is the physical, the part that everyone sees, but the underbelly, the emotional part that few if any see, is larger and wider than the point. From what I gather, the two main characters are virgins am I right?” After Erica nodded, Divale continued, “Take it from me that, when two virgins have sex, it is anything but smooth. You have notions about what it is and what it would feel like and you imagine yourself boldly going forth and doing everything right, but all that crumbles to dust when you find yourself in the moment. Given that the two seem to know each other a fair deal, that could eliminate some of the jitters and awkwardness, but not completely.”

“Is that what you felt when you lost your innocence?” Erica inquired with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh hell yes.” Aaron answered without doubt in his voice. “Even my most lucid dreams about such a thing happening were insignificant next what was transpiring before my eyes. I was incredibly nervous Erica, almost scared to death, because here I was in front of a woman who wished to be with me for the night and I was next to clueless as to how to handle it. It was soul crushing pressure
to be sure, because you don’t want to fail and you also want to make sure that she would get some enjoyment out of it.”

“How did you deal with it?” Erica asked, taking mental notes.

“First thing I did was breathe, trying to relax myself. That’s the key. If one person feels that it’s too much to handle, it’s not going to happen. Next, you have to have foreplay, to gauge what it is you’re up against. Whether it’s through kissing, touching, or rubbing, every little bit helps as it alleviates the stress, gets you both calm to the point where you naturally progress to the next step.” Aaron illuminated, going through his memories of his past encounters with the fairer sex. “The action of penetration is one that is fraught with peril. Resistance to entrance is the main killer of erections so you can’t just ram it down, you have to stay the engine at the gates, letting time pass until both sides feel comfortable with going past the point of no return. What I did was insert a small bit inside before moving back out, to lessen the pain of my partner. Then I go back in and go a bit further in, gradually enlarging the gap I was creating until I went fully in, cracking the hymen.”

“What does it feel like entering a woman?” Erica inquired.

Aaron thought about it and stated, “It’s like taking a warm loaf of bread from the oven and applying it to your regions. The sensation is really unlike anything that I can describe. As you move within, it feels odd at the beginning, like your opposite hand taking hold of your member, but as you settle in and get past that, you feel like someone is scratching an really bothersome itch, but the itch doesn’t go away, it gets more and more persistent, like a mosquito bite, until you experience this feeling that something is building up inside you, like a dam that’s getting ready to burst. The pressure gets greater and greater until something within gives up the ghost and a great shuddering calm comes over you, silencing all except for your heavy breathing.”

“And after that, what do you feel?” Erica asked.

“Peace.” Aaron simply stated. “You collapse from the aftereffects of exertion and you look into your partner’s eyes, seeing the same look that you have, and you can’t help but smile, know that you did something so incredible, so meaningful to someone else that it just takes your breath away and neither can speak of it, the words that they would say doing no justice to what transpired then or now.” He paused and added after nodding his head in understanding, tears welling up as he remembered his ill fated first, “It’s one of the greatest feelings in the world Erica.”

Erica was about to say something else when Minna’s voice came across the airwaves. “Lieutenant Hartmann and Sergeant Divale, take off at once! Captain Barkhorn is wounded and Sergeant Miyafuji needs immediate assistance! Grid number B7 in the double! This is not a drill!”

The Striker rotors whined in protest as the excess weight taxed it’s load bearing ceilings to the limit, forcing Yoshika to give more of her magic in order to prevent an engine stall, and a six mile plummet into the Channel to certain death. Her hands were near rictus locked around Barkhorn’s right wrist, the knuckles white from exertion, sweat beading on her brow, breathing heavy. She had recently sent the mayday and was determined to try to get Gertrude as close to safety as possible, but the strain was slowly getting to her, the effects of not being experienced enough in such matters. Why did she suddenly veer off towards the Neuroi? It wasn’t going anywhere near Dover and she should’ve waited for me to help her. Though she took it down, it fired a parting shot and caught her square in the lower body. I can’t get a look at the wound to treat her without compromising my grip. Oh God please get someone here to help. I can’t do this on my own. As soon as she thought that, did the sweaty hands start to slip, Barkhorn’s unconscious body dipping down by several degrees.
“Yoshika!” she heard over the communicator, Erica’s voice ringing loud and clear over the airwaves. “Me and Sergeant Divale are coming in now! Hold on and watch for pursuers!”

“I will.” Yoshika called back over the ear piece and took a glance behind her. The dark haze of the continent loomed over the distant landscape, an ebon black fog that cloaked the country of France. She squinted her eyes to pick up an sign of Neuroi interceptors. Remember what Major Sakamoto taught you: They like to come in groups of two or three, two flankers and a decoy in the center. Nothing out of the ordinary registered and Miyafuji breathed a sign of relief. Maybe they can’t do anything about it. It was as sudden to me as it was to them probably. Again, her charge slipped her grip again, forcing her attention to the front. Her fingers were now around the middle part of Barkhorn’s hand and it wouldn’t be long before there would be nothing that Yoshika could do. Then, something caught her eye, coming towards her at such a high speed that the foreign object became clear within seconds. Moving with a speed that could give Shirley a run for her money was Erica and Aaron, the lieutenant firmly holding onto the left side of the sergeant’s belt, her Strikers on full throttle, adding more acceleration. Aaron’s metallic white wings were surrounded by a golden aura and his face was full of intense concentration and purpose. Erica disengaged, letting go from her hold like a bomb from a cargo bay and made a beeline for the distressed pair while Aaron looped around, his magic disappearing as he made his round.

Erica put her Strikers into hover mode and took a hold of Gertrude’s legs, taking both into the crooks of her arms. The weight was substantially lessened and Yoshika’s arm ached with the residual effects. “Lay her as flat as you can.” Aaron ordered, linking up with them. “We need to see the wound.” The two witches did as they were told and Divale took a quick survey of the situation. The wound was centered in the region of the stomach, the crimson stain large and sopping wet, long streams of blood running down from her belly to her panty line and halfway down her legs, vitae dripping down into the water, many miles below like a leaky faucet. Starting from the bottom, he opened up her uniform, undoing the brass buttons. It only took a few seconds and Aaron pulled the cloth away. Collective gasps emanated from the trio as they saw the wound exposed to the elements. It was deep, piercing the flesh and driving into and around the organ, the vein clearly visible, pulsing like a snake pushing it’s food down its throat. Without wasting anytime, he bit the side of his mouth and sucked on the cut, withdrawing a spoonful of blood and pooling it in his mouth. “Obnitor.” he muttered, and spat into the open cavity. Just like before with Perrine’s flesh wound, the damaged site cauterized and the bleeding stopped. “We need to get her back to base. The spell won’t last for very long given the severity of the injury. Let me hold her and hold onto me.” he advised.

Erica waited until Aaron, took her wingman, her best friend for many years into his arms like a baby before taking up a position on his left. “Be sure your grip is secure.” She cautioned as Yoshika copied the gesture, except on Aaron’s right side. “He’s going to go very fast. Use your Strikers to give us some more speed.” Miyafuji nodded and took a hold on his leather belt, her fingers going into his pants in order to find purchase.

Divale looked down at Yoshika and cocked his eyebrows. “Getting fresh?” Miyafuji blushed instantly and started to say something, but he beat her to the punch. “It’s just a joke.” He then turned his gaze to Dover and uttered, “Strenuitas.” The golden aura reappeared and Aaron sped forward, the momentum causing Yoshika to scream in surprise as such a violent maneuver. She watched the world go by and marveled at it.

“We’ll get there in no time. Hold on Gertrude, help is on the way.”

“HQ this is Hartmann,” Erica radioed, “Gertrude is seriously injured and needs treatment ASAP. Taking her to medical now. ETA two minutes over.”

“Hartmann this is HQ,” Minna relayed back, “I’ve sent Hajikata to fetch Doctor Domino from her supply pickup in the town, but traffic is hindering his progress. The rest of the squadron is lending whatever aid they can in getting the ward prepped for her arrival. It will be room three. HQ out.”
“Did you get that Aaron?” Erica anxiously asked, readjusting her grip.

“Affirmative.” Divale deadpanned. With Domino currently MIA, that means that Yoshika is the only medic that can get this under control. Hopefully she hasn’t expended too much magic in keeping her afloat or else I’ll have to take responsibility for this. He shook his head and drove his thoughts away, seeing the white cliffs coming closer and closer, and further on past them, Dover Castle. “Be prepared to disengage on my mark or else your Strikers will get caught in my wash and you’ll end up bug splatter. Let go in three, two, one, mark!” he barked. At the conclusion of the last letter in mark, Yoshika and Erica let go of Aaron’s belt as he pulled up hard, the witches killing their rotors for a few seconds before reactivating them.

“What happened?” Erica inquired, looking over at Yoshika in a demanding voice while making their way to medical. “How did Gertrude get hurt?”

“We did the patrol as directed and everything was fine, no intruders at all, until we saw a Neuroi fighter in B7 moving off towards Belgium.” Miyafuji explained. “Didn’t need to go after it at all, but Gertrude sped forward, leaving me in her wash, causing my Strikers to haywire. She duelied with it while I tried to get the problem taken care of with my engines. My adjustments only took maybe fifteen seconds at most, but by that time, Barkhorn had killed it, but the Neuroi fired off a shot that took her by surprise, hitting her in the stomach.”

Erica listened to this and formed her own conclusions in her head. A possible theory got cooked up and she queried, “Yoshika, did Gertrude act strangely towards you during the flight? Anyway at all?”

Miyafuji thought about and nodded, “She was acting a bit odd. Every time she looked at me, her face would get this weird look, like she thought I was someone else. After several instances of that, Gertrude merely looked forward and didn’t look back once, or even talk to me.

The field hospital was now in clear view, a metal gurney right outside the door on the concrete threshold, the door wide open. As one, both witches descended, as ground fall got closer and closer with every passing second. Hartmann nodded to herself as her theory began to gain traction in her mind. She did it again, her pride superseding her judgment. God damn you Trude! Why didn’t you tell me that Yoshika reminded you of Christiane? I would’ve brought this up to Minna and this would never have happened. Stupid stupid stupid bitch. Why do you do this to yourself? Why do you bottle up all that grief and anger? I told you there would be a reckoning and here it is. Rotors died as they landed, Aaron coming in hot on their heels, hovering right over the gurney like a hummingbird does near a flower, and laid Gertrude down carefully on the white padding. Erica and Yoshika raced to them, each one with outstretched hands, eager to push the gurney. Despite being around the longest, it was Yoshika and not Erica that won the honors, as dubious as it appeared to be, and rocketed inside the hospital, swerving right then left down the hallway, Erica right behind her. Aaron tucked in his wings and speed walked after them, his long strides closing the distance between them with ease.

Don’t go too crazy there Yoshika. Don’t make the same mistake with her like you did your cousin or else there will be a devil to pay. There’s a difference between working fast and working fast with purpose. Quickly, he came to the third room and walked in, the door wide open, and paused at the threshold. The area was clogged like a congested artery with people, everyone in the squadron standing at attention, some with instruments and bandages and others simply standing off to the side. Barkhorn was lying there, an IV and a blood pack already jammed into her veins, keeping the effects of extreme blood loss at bay, her unconscious face contorted with pain. Minna stood away from the group, gazing intently at Gertrude’s wound, her face wracked with fear and guilt, like somehow someway she was responsible for this happening. Erica was hovering over the gurney like a vulture
waiting for a prime specimen to suddenly give up the ghost in near hysterics, shouting, “The bleeding has started again! Yoshika do something! You have to save her!” Yoshika was already hard at work, her magic glowing from her hands as they sought to stem the bleeding, trying to concentrate. “Come on, come on!” Erica pleaded, “Please save her sergeant! She’s almost the only friend I’ve got!”

Aaron looked upon all this and frowned. She’s distracting her. He walked in and made his way to the gurney. Placing his right hand on Erica’s shoulder he politely said, “You might want to stand off to the side and let-

Hartmann rounded on him, glaring at him viciously, tears in her eyes, and screamed, “She is my friend God damn it!”

“I know that.” Aaron retorted calmly. “Yoshika needs space to work and you’re not helping with distracting her. Move aside.”

“But-” Erica started to protest, but Aaron would have none of it.

“Do you trust Yoshika to save her?” Divale posited forcefully. Erica said nothing and merely nodded, her tears still falling down her cheeks in sadness and fear. “Then do so now. Please.”

Defeated, Hartmann moved over to Minna and embraced her, weeping silently into her chest. He turned to Yoshika and saw her continuing her ministrations, but her focus was off, disjointed, and nothing was being done to get the hemorrhaging under control. Recognizing the moment, Aaron sat next to her and intoned, “You have this under control.”

“No I don’t.” she whispered back to him, her strength fading. “I can’t concentrate. I’m too nervous.”

“Then let me help.” Aaron suggested, placing both his hands on her shoulders. After doing so, he closed his eyes and stated, “Foderunt.” Yoshika then felt an almost overbearing warmth spread from her back to her eyes and opened her mouth in awe. Her world of color was restricted to a palette of blues, detailing all of Gertrude’s blood vessels in the color of the sky, her heart included in painstaking detail. The ruptured ones, glowed a dull navy, the blood still leaking out of them. I can see all of the injury. Amazing. “Focus Yoshika.” Aaron’s voice remarked, his tone making him appear far more distant than he actually was. “Courage. Discipline. Concentrate. You have this under control.”

Miyafuji listened to the words and felt emboldened. I do have this. Redoubling her efforts, Yoshika breathed rhythmically in and out, weaving her fingers over the wound, just like her mother and grandmother before her, deftly closing the ruptures quickly, staring with the small ones as they would cause the most damage. I can feel them heal. All is going well, but my magic is fading. I need to work fast. Eschewing her current strategy, Miyafuji then tackled the really bad ones and her finger bones cracked as she balled her fists, like a boxer before getting his hands taped. The rest of the squadron watched spellbound as Aaron maintained his connection with Yoshika, kneeling behind her, his eyes darting this way and that behind his eyelids. A small stream of blood began to come out of his left nostril, but if it bothered him, he showed no sign of it. She’s going to pass out. He severed the connection just in time as Miyafuji expended the last of her energy into her treatment and fell backwards into his arms, exhausted and unconscious.

Erica wailed in despair. “No!” She broke free from Minna’s embrace and ran to Aaron. “Is she okay?! Is Trude okay?!”

Divale looked over the wound and nodded with emphasis, pointing to the work that Yoshika had done. “The wound is fully cauterized from the worst of it. There is some small instances of bleeding, but those will stop in time and the blood pack will more than make up for the loss. She’ll be fine once Domino gets here to finish up. As for Yoshika, she’s just unconscious, spent from the exertion. I’ll get her to another room and make sure she gets some rest.” he reported, looking at Minna at the
last part, getting a relieved nod yes in return. Then she suddenly tilted her head, a message coming through her communicator.

“Warrant Officer Hajikata reports that he is ninety seconds away folks. Everyone, get back to your posts. The danger is over. The captain will be alright.” Wilcke ordered.

Aaron got up, holding Yoshika’s body in his arms carefully and looked over at Erica, who smiled right back at him. “Get me a bowl of water, a compress, and a vial of smelling salts and meet me in the next two rooms down.” he ordered. Eagerly, Hartmann went off to collect the items and Aaron left the room and turned left, taking measured steps lest he disturb the sleeping woman in his arms. *That’s twice you’ve saved a life here Yoshika. In my eyes, you’ve earned a place here, regardless of what Perrine says.* He came to the door to the room he wanted and waited. It didn’t take long for Erica to come on down, carrying a compress that was fully immersed in a bowl of water, the vial of smelling salts undoubtedly in her front pocket. She politely opened the door and the duo walked right in, having a face that could curdle milk.

The room was a standard holding room for recovering patients that were nearing full discharge. A bed was in the center, the head flush against the wall, the clean white linens crisp and ironed out. A small nightstand lay off to the immediate right with a lamp and alarm clock and a sink was along the left hand wall. The ceiling fan was dormant, shadows from the five arms stretching across the white tile above and below. “What did I miss?” Aaron asked, knowing something was up while tucking Yoshika into the bed.

“Your wingman thankfully.” Erica replied with no love lost clearly evident, placing the bowl on the nightstand and fishing out the vial of smelling salts. After put that next to the other two items, she added, “She had the gall to say that since Yoshika couldn’t concentrate under duress effectively, that it was proof positive that she didn’t belong here and that she should be sent back home. I wheeled around and reminded her that that was the same attitude we had towards you not too long ago after what happened the last time.” Hartmann grinned as she also recollected, “Also added that it was so very French of her to say nothing to her opponent while they’re strong, but to pounce when they’re weak and defenseless. Makes for an easier battle, one that illustrates just how weak the attacker is. So much for French honor eh?”

*Man I wish I could’ve seen her face when you said that.* “I’ll make sure she doesn’t get any ideas about retaliation.” Aaron offered, placing the comforter sheet over Yoshika.

Erica shrugged as she wrung out the compress and handed it off to him. “I honestly don’t care. Perrine may be spiteful at times, but she doesn’t have the drive to see things to the conclusion, like she’s never angry enough to truly get into a position to throw her weight around. Takes it up to the high command, Mio and Minna mostly, but they’ve learned to tune it out.”

Aaron placed the cloth over Yoshika’s forehead and opened the smelling salts, aligning it just askew of her nose. He silently counted down five seconds. By the time he reached three, Miyafuji’s face contorted as she came back to the realm of the here and now. Slowly, her eyes opened and she looked around the room. “Where am I?” she asked weakly. Noticing Aaron first, she inquired, “What happened?”

“You fainted during the operation.” Erica explained sitting down next to her on the left, Aaron doing the same on the right. “The sergeant took you here to rest.”

“Oper-” Yoshika began, but stopped as she remembered with awful clarity what occurred earlier that day and tried to sit up fast, exclaiming, “Gertrude!” Quick as greased lightning, Aaron put his right hand forward, arresting her ascent with a gentle palm to the lower neck.
“She’s alright, no thanks to you.” Aaron assured, keeping his hand in the position. “You managed to fully stop the worst of the bleeding. Doctor Domino from what I understand should be here now dealing with the rest. Barkhorn will be fine.” With care, he put pressure on the site and pushed her back down urging, “You need to recuperate. Please rest Yoshika.” He smiled at her as he added, “You did real good today. That’s twice you’ve save a life that would otherwise have been lost. If I was in command, I’d have you cited for a commendation.”

Yoshika relented and laid back down, sighing with relief. “When she got hit, I feared the worst.” she murmured. She turned and looked at Aaron, asking, “What was that you did, the spell that allowed me to see all the ruptures?”

“It’s one of my simpler magics, akin to what Mio can do, but on a limited basis and only close up. Very useful in doing complex surgeries.” Divale answered with humility.

“Thank you for that.” Yoshika replied. “Speaking of complex,” she added while regarding Erica, “do you have any idea what caused Getrude to do that?”

Erica breathed in deep and closed her eyes. *Forgive me Trude, but this is for your own good.*

“Trude has a younger sister named Christiane whom she’s very attached too. With her father and mother gone, she’s all Barkhorn has left. One day while on a mission, she got word that the convoy that Christiane was a part of got attacked, wiped out. She was the only survivor. How she got to the evacuation point at Bruges is still a mystery, but her sister was ferried out. Unfortunately, Christiane didn’t get out of that situation unscathed. She’s been in a coma for six months now and it’s been eating Gertrude alive, though she doesn’t know it. Deep down, even though it wasn’t her fault at all, she’s feels responsible for what happened, that she failed to protect her sister. You reminded her of Christiane. Neglect the ethnic differences between you two, you could pass for a virtual duplicate of her Yoshika. It drove her over the edge.”

Yoshika listened to all of this and her face darkened. *She put herself in harms way because of me.* Aaron interjected, “Don’t think that this is your fault Miyafuji. You had no way of knowing.”

The sound of footsteps drew his attention away as well as the aroma of freshly baked bread and hot black tea with a hint of mint. He turned to the door, expecting Lynette to come over the threshold, but instead it was Lucretia, holding a tray of rolls and a kettle of tea.

“That cancels me out.” Aaron quipped getting up and stretching his arms. “I just did my job.”

Lucretia shook her head and sighed, “Tu e il tuo umile io (You and your humble self).” Aaron just smiled and walked out of the room. His steps were soft and discreet as he came up to one of the windows. The early morning sun was still shining, bathing him in it’s light.

“I was never a hero.”

He picked up the sound of footfalls behind him, the distinctive clacking of non slip heels giving away who it was in an instant. “Come sta il capitano (How is the captain)?” he asked without turning around.

“Yoshika si è preso cura del sanguinamento molto bene. Tutto quello che dovevo fare era pulire e vestire (Yoshika took care of the bleeding very well. All I had to do was clean and dress).” Domino replied, standing next to him and taking his right arm with her left, leaning her head against it. “È un ottimo medico e farà un bel dottore un giorno (She’s a very good medic and will make a fine doctor one day).” she added.

Aaron turned his head and look down at Domino, her green eyes making him smile as if on
command, the scent of her perfume bringing back fond memories. “Certo che lo farà, perché ha un buon insegnante (Of course she will, for she has a good teacher).” he stated, giving her a tender kiss on the forehead and embracing her.

Lucretia chuckled and looked into Aaron’s eyes, his true eyes as he had neglected to put on his glasses during the emergency rescue. Her laughter died as she saw that there was something amiss, that there was trouble lurking behind them. “Stai bene (You okay)?” she asked with concern.

“Solo un sacco nella mia mente il mio amore, ma non è niente che non posso gestir (Just a lot on my mind my love, but it’s nothing that I can’t handle).” Aaron answered, doing his best to reassure her that everything was fine, but Domino saw through the smoke and mirrors in an instant, even without a wierding stone. He sighed and explained, “Perrine e io non abbiamo ancora ingranato bene. È come tutto quello che cerco di fare per farci parlare, di legare in modo costruttivo, solo la spinge via. Anche dopo aver salvato la sua migliore amica e le diede la Croix de guerre, un onore che era mio, si rifiuta ancora di muoversi su quel pregiudizio dannato di lei. (Perrine and I still haven’t meshed well. It’s like everything I try to do to get us to talk, to bond in a constructive way, just pushes her away. Even after I saved her best friend and gave her the Croix de Guerre, an honor that was mine, she still refuses to budge on that damned prejudice of hers).”

Lucretia placed her right hand on Aaron’s face, stroking the edge of his cheekbone with her thumb. “Lei si piegherà e vederti in una luce diversa nel tempo. Resta il corso il mio amore e tutto andrà bene. Si ha la pena qui (She will bend and see you in a different light in time. Stay the course my love and everything will be alright. You have worth here).”

“Vale come costa (Worth as what)?” Aaron queried. “La maggior parte del tempo, sono solo inesorabilmente foratura e manovre di volo. Non c’è quasi nessun combattimento. Sono un soldato, non un membro di una fanfara glorificata (Most of the time, I’m just relentlessly drilling and flying maneuvers. There’s hardly any fighting at all. I’m a soldier, not a member of a glorified marching band).”

Domino’s eyes flashed with realization. “Non stai pensando di andartene, vero. (You’re not thinking about leaving are you)?” she asked, afraid of what the answer could very well be.

“Non conosco Lucrezia (I don’t know Lucretia).” Aaron honestly replied, his resolve melting under her glare. “Mi sento così abusato, è difficile per me affrontare (I just feel so misused, it’s hard for me to cope with).”

Lucretia then stood on the tips of her toes and gave him a kiss on the lips. “Ricordati che sono qui per te. Se mai vuoi parlare, conosci la mia frequenza. La mia porta è sempre aperta (Remember that I’m here for you. If ever you want to talk, you know my frequency. My door is always open).” she reminded.

“Va bene (I will).” Aaron replied, nodding in thanks.

Lucretia then started to back away. “Devo andare. Ti amo Aaron (I have to go. I love you Aaron).” she said with fondness in her voice.

“Ti amo anche Lucrezia (I love you too Lucretia).” Aaron answered. Domino smiled and turned around, walking down the hallway. Divale watched her go and went back into the room as she turned to corner towards the exit. He stopped on a dime as he saw Erica helping Yoshika out of bed, Miyafuji wincing with exertion as her feet touched the ground. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Aaron inquired in alarm, reaching out towards Erica. “She’s in no condition to be upright.”

“While you were talking with Doctor Domino, Yoshika and I had a conversation of our own.” Erica
expounded, placing herself in front of Yoshika. “This has got to end. Gertrude needs to face her
demons head on and put this behind her, or else this is going to happen again and again. She was
lucky this time, she might not be the next. I’ve already talked to Minna about this and we have the
green light to do it. All three of us present a united front and she will break, I’m sure of it.”

“The only person that can make Gertrude break is Gertrude. “ Aaron countered. “You can only
show her the door Erica, but you can’t push her through if she doesn’t want to go.”

“Well with that attitude that will certainly be the case.” Yoshika pointed out. She furrowed her brow
and then asked, “Are you going to help us?”

Aaron thought about it for a few seconds before answering, “I’ll go with you two, but only as
insurance for Yoshika in case she faints again. This isn’t my fight folks, but I will be there watching.
I won’t interfere unless I find it necessary.”

Better than nothing. “Help me lead her to the room.” Erica commanded, taking a hold of Yoshika’s
left arm. Aaron bent his knees and looped his limb under her right and together, they left the room,
gingerly moving at a snail’s pace to make sure that Miyafuji could keep up. Though the room that
Gertrude was in was right down the hall, no less than fifteen steps away, it took almost two minutes
to traverse the tiled floor. The door was wide open and the trio trudged in. Barkhorn was lying down
in a bed now, the gurney off in the corner. Her body was covered in a thin sheet, one that was
designed for doctors to take a cursory examination of wounds while being discreet, giving the patient
some modicum of privacy. The IV and blood pack were still hanging up, the feeder tubes snaking
under the cover. Minna sat in a chair near the bed, the leftmost of three, holding a vial of smelling
salts. Erica and Aaron set Yoshika down in the middle seat and Hartmann sat next to her. Devoid of
any place to sit, Aaron simply stood next to Erica, but positioned himself askew to catch her in case
she fainted backwards. “Let’s do this.” Erica stated, regarding Minna. Minna nodded and uncorked
the vial. Reaching out, she placed the vial under Gertrude’s nose and counted to five.

Soon, the captain started to stir, the smelling salts doing their work. She opened her eyes and blinked
three times before tilting her head towards them. Gertrude had a weak expression to her face at first
as she gauged her surroundings, but as soon as she regarded the figures sitting to her left, her facial
expression changed as she realized why they were there. It’s obvious. I’ve seen it before. Those
expressions, those postures. So many times. Gertrude’s vision single out Erica and she muttered
while turning away, “This is not happening Frau.”

Hartmann’s eyes flashed with anger and she grabbed her best friends chin, forcibly turning her back
around. “You look at me when I talk to you.” she seethed. “Because this is happening right now.”
Gertrude let her have her way, her muscles going limp, accepting the tongue lashing that she was
about to receive with an indifferent mien. “This has gone on for far too long Trude. I told you so
many God damn times that there would be consequences for such things and here we are, you in the
hospital and me right here feeling sorry for myself. We,” she stated, gesturing to Minna, Aaron, and
Yoshika, “don’t want this to go on any further than it already has. If it wasn’t for Yoshika, we’d be
sitting around a casket.” Tears began to well up in Erica’s eyes as she continued, “You need to stop
this. I’ve seen too many of my friends die because of such things. You’re one of the very few pieces
of my life that I look back on and cherish. You’re too precious to lose at this point. Don’t throw
yourself into harms way like that ever again. You promise me.”

“I promise.” Gertrude deadpanned, her face the epitome of John Locke’s tabula rasa. “This will not
happen again.”

Again, Erica’s anger returned. “Oh, bullshit! Don’t even try to fool me like you did those other
times!” she shouted. “I know your games. Look at yourself for Christ’s sake, like really look! You’re
ripping yourself apart because of what occurred those many months ago. You’ve done nothing to alleviate your suffering and it’s eating you alive. There’s practically nothing left of the woman I’ve known for years, and you don’t have that much left to give."

Gertrude then decided that she had enough and barked back, “I have more left to give than you or anyone else here realizes! I will come back stronger than ever! You’ll see!”

“Those words have a foundation of thin glass and you know it.” Erica countered. “I can see doubt and fear in your eyes, the same two things that I remembered seeing when you got the news about Christiane.”

Barkhorn forcibly broke Hartmann’s grip on her jaw and turned away fast. “Don’t you even dare.” she warned, her body stiffening with rage.

“I will!” Erica exclaimed. “This isn’t about fulfilling your so called duty to your country, erasing a stain on your pride! What happened today was you wanting to find forgiveness for your perceived failure, a shortcoming that wasn’t your fault, and you fucking know it! When are you going to learn that your pride means jack shit!?”

“Shut up and get out.” Getrude menacingly growled.

Erica would have none of it, her dander was up and she was going to ride out the storm to it’s conclusion. “All pride means nothing in the end!” she yelled. “None of that matters in the grand scheme of things anymore. It may have served our forefathers when they marched boldly into enemy fire, but those days are long gone now. Survival and resistance are the watchwords you need to ascribe to. You’ve been by my side as we walked and flew over the ashes of millions of dead men, women, and children. They had pride too, and look what happened to them. Ask them if pride really mattered and the silence will be your only answer, you stupid bitch! Christiane would never forgive you if you died like that today!”

With speed quite uncanny in someone with her condition, Gertrude whipped around and threw a nasty straight jab with her left hand right at Erica’s face. It happened so fast that Hartmann had no time to react. She closed her eyes, steeling herself. An impact was heard, but the pain from the strike didn’t register within her senses. Surprised, Erica opened her eyes and saw a large palm inches away from her face. Aaron had blocked the blow fully with the backside of his hand. He looked down at the wounded captain with a sad look to his face and stated, “I can tell from a mile away that you didn’t mean to do that Gertrude, but even if that blow connected, the pain you would cause would not equal a fraction of the agony you’re putting yourself through.” He flipped his hand around and took Barkhorn’s hand into his, leaning forward. “I did the same thing to David when he confronted me about Larissa. Then, I wasn’t ready to find absolution, instead perfectly willing to wallow in my own depression, condemning myself to forever look at what might’ve been. It took the combined effort of all of my unit to get me to see that there was a door that I could go through, a portal where I could find some sort of peace of mind. You have no idea how much courage it took on my part to not only accept their help, but to acknowledge that I was wrong, but I did it, because even though I felt fine in the state I was in, deep down inside my soul was screaming at me to get out, that it was killing me.” Divale paused and added, “I was right, we are so much alike you and I.” Releasing his grip, he stood up, ignoring the silent stares of everyone present, and walked towards the door. “In the words of a wise woman that I met at the coven,” he began, pausing before the threshold, taking a look back and locking his eyes with Gertrude’s, “we are here for you, but we, like my men before us, can only show you the door, you and you alone must decide whether to walk through it or not.” With that said, he turned his attention to Wilcke and informed, “I’ll be at the firing range, testing out a possible long range addition to my arsenal commander.” Minna nodded and Aaron left the room, taking a left and disappearing down the hallway.
Not a single person left in that room said a word until the bell to the front door to the hospital closed behind Divale, ringing gently. Erica looked down at Gertrude and inwardly gasped. Her best friend was crying, silent tears streaming down the sides of her face, making ever expanding wet spots near her ears. She was trembling in under the cover as if suffering from a palsy. Barkhorn moved her hands to her face, her shaking digits encapsulating her eyes, nose, and mouth as she began to audibly sob. No one interfered, letting the captain let out her emotions. After a long few minutes, Gertrude withdrew her hands and stared at the ceiling, her lips quivering as she remembered the last time she saw Christiane awake. It was in the spring of ‘42, on the outskirts of Berlin at an old cottage that Minna’s family had owned and graciously allowed her and her sister to stay during her leave. The sun was shining bright that day, with a light wind from the west, not a single cloud in the sky. Though their position was far from safe, being within easy long range bombing distance from the enemy, she didn’t put on her Strikers that day, instead walking with her natural legs into town, purchasing a bicycle for her sister. She smiled as she remembered how excited Christiane was when Gertrude came back, jumping up and down and laughing, grinning from ear to ear. Gertrude taught her how to ride it that very day. At first, Christiane was scared, this being her first time ever riding such a thing, but after a few tries with her sister right beside her, her confidence grew and grew until she turned and asked her if she could do this alone. Barkhorn had stepped aside and watched as her sister started the initial pedaling. As to be expected, she weaved back and forth wildly, but she quickly righted the ship and moved forward slowly. Getrude cried out in triumph and congratulated her sister from afar as she went down the road and circled back. Christiane came to a halt in front of her and smiled, her face so similar to her own and Yoshika’s, so full of joy and hope. Strangely enough, her sister then told her to be careful, that with mother and father gone, that she was the only one she had left.

My God. How could I have been so blind to this? Why did I spend so many nights pretending that what I saw and felt was anything but? I’ve been doing nothing but beating myself down while everyone- Gertrude turned her head and sat up, grimacing as the stitches grew tight around her wound. She regarded Yoshika and said, “I’m sorry.” Yoshika didn’t say a word, for none were needed, instead opening her arms up wide and giving Barkhorn a hug of support. “Fucking God am I sorry. I’ve been so stupid, having my head up my ass for so long, being beastly to myself and all of you. I’m so so sorry. Forgive me.” she continued. Erica and Minna threw their arms around the duo and gently rocked the pair back and forth.

“No more beating yourself down Trude.” Minna stated, smiling at such a momentous breakthrough occurring at long last. “From now on, you’ll be building yourself back up.”

Gertrude broke the hug and asked, “Can I go and see Christiane Minna? For the sake of closure?”

At first Minna wanted to say no, that she was in no condition to go anywhere, that she needed to take it easy, but as she thought about it, the suggestion would bring some sort of solace to Barkhorn. “Yes you may, but you and Erica need to be back before twenty hundred hours.”

“We will,” Gertrude replied, relieved that the commander had granted her request, “but we won’t be traveling alone.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Given leave to see her sister, Gertrude and Erica invite Aaron to go with them, and all three discover many secrets along the way.

Chapter XXIV: Slip Of The Lip

I never liked secrets, but I’d be a fool to dismiss their situational usefulness. After all, I wouldn’t be here without them. Back then, they kept me and my men alive, but now, times and circumstances have changed. As I looked at her, a complete stranger, I resolved to let them all end, to never again hide. The only question left now was not whether I could tell the truth, but if I could deal with the consequences.

Diary Entry October 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1943

A bright light and all seems to stick around, a swirling mass of white that blocks all attempts to pierce it’s veil, a howling chill that bombards an unseen naked body of a youth. Realization kicks in; we are in the middle of a snowstorm. The cold does not bother the young boy, his mind proof against it’s icy embrace, the flakes and balls of crystalline ice flash vaporizing upon contact with the flesh, the wispy smoke disappearing in the winds. Hands clasp a rifle, an old bolt action that was well maintained, the oak and pressed metal reassuring. Eyes close and ears open, reaching out beyond the realm of the present opaque and into what he knew lay beyond. Despite all odds, sounds that didn’t mesh with the environment were found and plucked out of the void, a low growl followed by two sets of paws treading snow, making a racket that reminded one of placing a finger on a table ever so gently. Right hand racks the bolt, chambering the lone bullet. Lips curl in a smile, for the boy knows that he had been hunted for some time, the predator knowing full well that there was only one shot left, circling him, trying to spook him into wasting his only means of defense. However, the scales have been rebalanced and now the hunter was the hunted. The sounds stop due west, the echoes causing a brain to estimate distance and lead. Slowly, without the gift of sight, arms point the gun at the last known location. Breathing slows and a right index finger squeezes the trigger until another sound reaches his ears, one of surprise from the wolf, for a wolf it was judging by the yelp. The animal’s stalking was perfect, down to the last placement of the hind legs, readying for the sprint, yet somehow, someway, a mistake was made. \textit{You stalked the wrong prey}. The smile doesn’t leave the face of the boy as he pulls the trigger.

A split second later, roughly four hundred feet away, the bottle cap of a Coke bottle shoots up into the air, knocked clean off by Aaron’s well aimed shot. Divale smiled. \textit{Nothing but metal}. Opening his eyes, the glare of the sun came in, temporarily blinding him. As his vision adjusted from the sudden reintroduction of light, he could make out the small brown twelve fluid ounce glass bottle winking back, far down the firing range, the foam from the carbonated liquid just beginning to bubble out. He racked the bolt, ejecting the spent casing, the brass shell falling onto the counter top and spinning to a stop. Aaron reached out with his left hand, he sole free hand and uttered, “Capio Bob.” The beverage flew towards him with speed, connecting with his hand like a baseball does a bat within seconds. Taking a cursory examination of his work, Aaron again nodded with approval.
Not so much as a stress fracture in the neck or rim. I still got it after all this time. Divale then took a long drink and let the sugary sweet Coke wash down his throat, the carbonation and acids burning like Russian vodka. Half the bottle was drained before Aaron took it away from his mouth, giving a long deep burp. *Note to self: Raid Shirley’s stash more often.*

Suddenly, his ear communicator crackled to life. “Well done.” Minna’s voice called from somewhere beyond. *I don’t hear any Striker engines overhead, which means…* Aaron looked behind him, his eyes scanning the low hill that lead up towards the outer castle walls, and sure enough, there stood the commander, waving. He returned the wave and watched her walk calmly towards him, the light breeze whistling through her loose hair. After almost a full minute, Wilcke asked as she came to a stop in front of him, “Do you practice shooting blind often?”

“Only if I’m bored.” Aaron admitted, offering her a drink from the bottle.

Minna shook her head no. “I can’t stand that stuff. Too sweet and makes you bloated.” she stated.

“More for me.” Aaron quipped, taking a quick sip. “So what’s up? Everything alright?”

“More than alright,” Minna explained beaming, “thanks to you, Gertrude is now well on her way to accepting what happened with her sister.”

“Don’t thank me.” Aaron politely retorted turning around and, placing the rifle, a Russian Mosin Nagant, on the counter. “I didn’t do a damn thing except stop her from doing something that she would regret. Erica deserves the plaudits, not me.”

“I don’t know about that.” Minna replied, crossing her arms. “You did help her see the way out.”

Aaron paused and thought about it. After a bit he cocked his head this way and that and shrugged his shoulders. “Meh.” he remarked.

“I’ve given her leave to see Christiane to help the process along.” Minna informed. “You and Erica are going with her.”

Divale cocked his eyebrows. “Why me?” he inquired.

“Well,” Minna began, “Gertrude requested your company.” She then took a step forward and looked up at Aaron, her eyes locked onto his and added. “And I’m also ordering you to.”

“Dare I refuse such a thing?” Aaron playfully mocked.

“Only if you want to be washing knickers by sundown.” Minna countered.

Aaron downed the rest of the Coke and handed it to Wilcke. “Wait just a second.” he said, while fishing something out of his back pants pocket with his right hand. He pulled out another bullet and picked up the rifle, chambering the round and pulling the bolt back. “Now to do something that won me quite a lot of money and vodka back in the day.”

“Namely?” Minna queried, growing a tad uneasy.

“A trick shot that I like to call ‘The Moneymaker.’” Aaron illuminated, turning around and facing the end of the range. “Just chuck that bottle as far as you can down the range whenever you’re ready.” It didn’t take Wilcke long to do what Aaron said, winding up and throwing the bottle like a knife into the air. By the time it crested over his head, Divale brought his right leg up and back down again, positioning the weapon between his legs, the barrel pointing up, with his right hand. Minna watched him lean back, bending his knees to aid in aiming, and pull the trigger. The empty bottle exploded
into shards and fell like rain onto the grass, becoming one with the brown earth and green grass. “Fuck I’m good!” Aaron shouted, pumping his left fist into the air in triumph.

Minna was shocked, mouthing the words, Heiliger fick (Holy fuck). “How on earth did you pull that off?” she added afterwards.

“Believe it or not,” Aaron answered, “Ismenoth. She wanted me to be able to pull off any shot regardless of circumstances in case I was in a tight spot. It saved my life on more than one occasion. During the first day of the Battle of Kharkov, I fell in with a group of Russian snipers who were having a contest to see who could do the most fantastical trick shot. I bet them one hundred rubles and a daily ration of vodka that I would win. Seeing that I was being serious, they upped the ante by making the fee five hundred rubles and a weeks worth of vodka. Took the terms, took the shot, took the money, but shared the booze. Didn’t want a bunch of pissed off snipers putting me in their gun sights. How long does she have to see her?”

“Until twenty hundred. They’re both in the vehicle depot. Don’t be late.” Minna ordered, crooking her finger at the now empty rifle.

“Understood commander.” Aaron replied, handing it over with care. After doing that, he unfurled his wings and flew up and off towards the castle, leaving Minna alone with a spent rifle and a mess to have the groundskeepers clean up. As he soared through the skies, Divale thought about what Minna had said, that he had helped Gertrude see the way out and shook his head. She knew there was a way out all the long, it’s just that when you’re that deep in guilt and depression, you lose sight of such things.

It didn’t take him long to get over the outer wall and loop around towards the front of the vehicle depot, the door wide open. Gertrude and Erica were there, Hartmann standing next to her friend who leaned against the wall. Aaron set himself down and tucked his wings away into his body. Walking towards them, he saw both witches regard him and smile. Divale smiled back and when he was close enough asked Gertrude, “How you feeling?”

“Not too shabby.” Barkhorn admitted. “Yoshika and Lucretia did a great job patching me up. Feel great, great enough to throw down on that rematch of ours and come out on top.” She extended her right hand, palm open. “Thank you Aaron.”

Divale took her hand into his right and shook it firmly. “Anytime. So where is Christiane at?”

“The London Metropolitan Hospital.” Erica piped up. “Minna gave us permission to use any vehicle in here.”

Aaron’s heart skipped a beat. “Even the Ferdinand?” he inquired, hoping against all hope that he could get a chance to drive it down the streets.

“Umm no.” Erica replied. The effect was immediate as Aaron threw up his hands in defeat and sighed.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, “I wanted to drive that beauty the moment I laid eyes on it. Whatever, we’ll still go in style. Follow me.” He walked inside the depot, Erica and Gertrude bringing up the rear, Barkhorn’s gait a tad slower than her partner. Aaron adjusted his stride accordingly, giving them the opportunity to catch up. They walked past the Ferdinand, the Flakpanzer, and the Panther, before coming to a stop right in front of his bike. Divale’s eyes narrowed in puzzlement as right on his machine, sitting on the seat with her arms crossed and with a face of impatience, was Shirley. “I paid you fifty bucks for that Coke you know, more than enough to buy twenty packs of it, and that includes the shipping costs.”

“That still doesn’t begin to pay back what you promised me at the coven.” Yeager replied, not caring
about the money at all.

Aaron hung his head and began to explain. “My motorcycle is a custom machine and therefore, the ignition kit needs to be custom made from the ground up. There’s no way around it, nor the wait time, given the war rationing of key materials. I ordered the part when the coven was concluded and from what I hear, it will be on site within the next few days. You have my word Shirley and you know I’m good for it.”

His words had an effect and Yeager’s face softened. “Just make sure you get me when you install it.” she warned. “Just in case you need help.”

“Perfectly fine.” Aaron replied and gave a quick gesture to the left.

Yeager slid off the seat and placed her hand on the bike. Soon my love. Soon. After a quick moment, she regarded Gertrude and Erica and grew puzzled. “This will be a tight fit if you all want to travel together.” she pointed out. “You might want to select a different vehicle.”

“Oh no.” Aaron countered. “This will do nicely.” He extended his right arm, pointing at the left side, and uttered, “Exsisto.” Suddenly, the lower left side of the motorcycle glowed with a purple light and particles of white appeared out of thin air, merging with each other. Within seconds, the awestruck witches soon saw a one person, three wheeled cab car, complete with a helmet and black leather seat materialize.

“You had a side car to this beast and you didn’t tell me?!” Shirley exclaimed, turning towards Aaron.

“You never asked.” Aaron retorted politely. He made a gesture with his hand, silently offering Gertrude the first choice. She nodded at the front seat and Erica immediately groaned. “Maybe on the way back.” Divale offered, trying to cheer her up.

Hartmann still grumbled as she climbed into the side car and put the helmet on, adjusting the straps so it fit snugly. Aaron then got on, the engine roaring to life. Barkhorn gingerly sat immediately behind him and looped her arms around his chest, pressing herself against him. “Do you have a fever Aaron? You seem to be unusually warm.” she commented.

“No,” Aaron answered, “it’s just me. Now before we depart, the usual boilerplate disclaimer. Emergency exits are located here, there, and over yon.” He pointed to the left, right, and rear of the motorcycle as he described where the exits were. “In case we encounter any unexpected turbulence, flight, or collision, please put you head between your knees and kiss your bums goodbye. Got it? Good. Let’s ride.” He was about to hit the accelerator when Yeager leapt in front of him.

“Hold on!” Shirley called out, clearly remembering something. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a white envelope. “This came in during Gertrude’s operation. Say’s it’s from the Proudmore Orphanage.” she explained.

Aaron’s left hand took the letter and placed it in his front pocket. Hopefully, it’s good news for them all. They don’t deserve to be there all alone with no one caring at all about their suffering. Every child needs parents to care for them.

The world went rushing by as Aaron gunned the engine even more while on the outskirts of a country road that lead into London proper. Wind blew all over his face and he couldn’t help but grin like a maniac. God I missed this. He took a quick look behind him and saw Gertrude peering up over the tip of his right shoulder, not fazed by the fact that he was going at least one hundred miles an
hour, deftly navigating speed bumps and potholes that, if he had hit them, would cause all three of them to go airborne. Convinced that she was fine, Aaron took a gander down to his left side and saw Erica practically gripping the edges of the side car rim for dear life, hunkering down so much that he could only see the beginning curve of the helmet. “It’s a side car not a foxhole.” Aaron quipped. “Come on out and see the world you little black devil. That’s why most people join up in the first place.”

The helmet tipped up and Erica frowned back up at him. “I’ll see the world the moment you slow down you speed demon.” she replied back. Aaron laughed as he rounded a lazy corner. His eyes caught the beginning urban sprawl of London, the green gradually receding and changing into tall buildings of stone and brick, the roads becoming more flatter and well maintained. Even the air transformed, a fragrance that went from a rich wood and verdant leaf mixture to a heavy earthy conglomeration of chimney smoke, clustered humanity, and the occasional fetid stench of refuse emerging like rabbits from a hole from the garbage cans that lined some of the curbs. Traffic became heavier and Aaron reduced speed as cars and people went about their daily business, the noise of civilization loud and clear.

“So where’s the hospital?” Aaron asked, regarding Gertrude, coming to a stop behind a line of four cars waiting to turn.

“Go down this street for a good mile until you come to Brownstone Avenue where you’ll take a right. Follow that until you see Featherton Lane on your left and go down that way. Keep going down for another mile and it will be on your right. Big brick building with white columns and steps. Can’t miss it.” Barkhorn informed.

Erica popped her head out and took off the helmet, placing it on her lap. She looked at the amount of activity and pouted. “This is thicker than the fog around here.” she muttered.

“It’s not that bad.” Aaron replied. “I’ve navigated worse. Besides, gives me a chance to see the city during the day and not have a pane of glass in front of me.”

“You really didn’t get out much when you got here, did you?” Gertrude asked.

Aaron took off his glasses, keeping his eyes firmly shut lest he start a panic, and wiped off some errant road dust from the journey. “When I got here in December, it was night and I was immediately placed in a covered troop transport and taken to Downing Street. From there, I was taken below and didn’t so much as pop my head up from that hole until I got leave to do so with Lucretia.” he answered, putting them back on and opening his eyes. “I hardly know where anything is around here, save for Downing Street and Lucretia’s flat. Pretty sad considering that I’ve been here for three months.” The traffic ahead of him started to move at a quicker pace and he moved forward down the street, the bike engine thrumming loudly, drawing the attention of various onlookers who gawked at him, the motorcycle, and the two witches traveling with him.

“Hopefully you’ll get to see more of it.” Erica stated, looking up at him. “It may not be Berlin, but London is a beautiful city in it’s own right. Trude and I could show you around any time you get some leave if you want.”

“I appreciate it.” Aaron replied, thankful at having such helpful friends. Lord knows, I know full well what happens when you start trespassing through some dark alleys, having no idea just what the hell you’re getting into. He saw the turn to Featherton Lane and made a left, going slow so as to allow a woman with her child cross at her leisure. She turned and graciously nodded, a gesture which Aaron reciprocated in kind as the motorcycle moved past her.

“Were you always such a gentleman?” Erica inquired as she adjusted herself in her seat.
“Oh hell no.” Aaron explained, raising his voice so as to eclipse that of the corner paper boy shouting to all who would care to hear his clarion call. “In the old days, I was very quiet, to the point where you’d think that I was a mute.”

“Why?” Gertrude queried with curiosity in her voice.

“Most of it was Ismenoth’s doing. She was a firm believer in the whole children being seen and not heard unless spoken to schtick. The bitch beat me into submission so much over the span of fourteen years that I’m amazed that I can interact with people this well at all.” Aaron expounded, his lips curling as he mentioned the demonness within him.

“How did you get better?” Erica pondered out loud.

“My friends.” Aaron replied with a smile, thinking back on happier times. “Though we were all born with the talent to pass off as human, there were a few bits and pieces that either didn’t work right or were missing, pieces that others had extras of and dished them out. David himself taught me to overcome my shyness and I in turn taught him a few hand to hand moves.”

“Probably came back to bite you in the ass when you two dueled huh?” Gertrude deduced.

Aaron turned around and put up a finger from his left hand, leaving his right secure on the handlebars. “Lesson number one: Teaching is an art that only gets you a half finished picture.” Barkhorn gave him a queer look and he added, “Getting knowledge is easy. Anyone can impart it to you. However, to comprehend and apply it to your daily life, you must use the ability of reason to activate it’s full potential. No one can teach that. You have to find that out for yourself. Now, I’m not saying that David or anyone else was incapable of doing that, far from it. It’s just that it took them longer for some reason to get the message, while I swallowed it down and absorbed every bit right then and there. Never understood why.” It was then that he saw the white columns and steps of the London Metropolitan Hospital, with nurses and doctors coming in and out, those who finished their shift and those who had yet to start theirs, the brick old and faded, but strong. Divale’s eyes found a place to park and he slid in between two cars and killed the engine by getting off the seat of the motorcycle. After placing his feet down on the concrete sidewalk, he extended his hand, allowing Gertrude to take it and helped her off the seat. Erica looked both ways, mindful that not all drivers were observant, and scampered out of the side car. Now fully disembarked, the trio walked up the steps, steps that Aaron surmised were limestone, and came to a brief stop near the doors, massive constructs of oak with wrought iron knockers. Aaron took hold of the right hand one and pulled the door open with no effort at all, letting Gertrude and Erica enter first.

When both had crossed the threshold, Divale went inside, closing the door behind him. Inside, the hospital was full of activity on the ground floor, one that had a white and black checkered pattern. Nurses carrying clipboards, aiding patients who were having trouble walking, and pushing carts loaded with medical supplies went to and fro down the two long hallways that ran left to right, weaving in and around tall support columns that held up the seven foot high ceilings, some getting into an elevator and others waiting patiently for their turn. Two large spiral staircases made of steel lead up to the next floor, one that he deduced was similarly constructed, for it was exposed, like the tiers of a theater, allowing one, if they wished it, to look down at the hustle and bustle many levels below. Looking up, Aaron could see another four floors. Despite the activity, the noise level was low and there was little in the way of idle conversation. The air was filled with disinfectant and the smell of clean sheets. A receptionist desk was in front of them, nestled about ten feet past the staircases, manned by a young woman who was busily arranging papers and filing them away as soon as the nurses and doctors that came by gave them to her.

Gertrude was the first to move, walking along the white and black checkered tile floor, Erica and
Aaron bringing up the rear. The lady saw them approach and put on a face that made it hard to
determine whether she was glad or annoyed at the possibility of being distracted from her present
task. “Welcome to the LMH. Visiting or seeking treatment?” she asked, regarding Barkhorn when
she got close enough.

“Visiting.” Gertrude answered politely. “I’m Captain Gertrude Barkhorn and I’m here to see my
sister, Christiane Barkhorn.”

“And the two behind you?” the receptionist inquired, gesturing behind her with a slight head nod.

“These are my friends, Lieutenant Erica Hartmann and Sergeant Aaron Divale. They are visiting her
too.” Barkhorn replied.

Nodding, the woman trotted to a large file cabinet and opened the second drawer, thumbing through
files, until coming to the one she needed and carefully pulling it out. Opening it, she took a cursory
glance and nodded. “Your sister is currently in room seven on the third floor. Her condition hasn’t
changed since her arrival here six months ago. She isn’t scheduled for any examinations by the good
doctor so you can see her anytime.” she reported.

“Thank you.” Gertrude stated and she meant it. Moving away from the receptionist desk, the trio
ascended the iron staircase steps, their shoes making a dull clong, reminding one of a hand slapping a
bell. Up and up they went, bypassing those that came down, or in the case of Aaron and his size,
waiting until all traffic ceased before continuing on his trek. The third floor was reached and Erica
located the way leading to Christiane’s room. It didn’t take long for Divale to see that this was a
children’s wing, with it’s brightly decorated walls and young girls and boys walking and playing all
along the length and breadth of the hallway, keeping to the walls for safety. So many here. So many
young lives being ravaged by this war.

Finally, the troupe stopped in front of the room, Barkhorn

"Me and Aaron will wait outside the door.” Erica offered. “Call us if you need us.” Gertrude nodded
silently in thanks and opened the door, not even looking behind her to acknowledge her wingman.
Inside, the room was small, with a white curtained window on the far wall, the sun shining down
over the tiled floor, the yellow wallpapered wall, and a small wooden bed with white sheets, a
wooden cross above the head of it. Sleeping soundly in her coma, was a young child, probably no
more than eight years old, her face, one that was a spitting image of Yoshika’s, at peace, chest gently
moving up and down. Her brown hair was short, almost a bowl cut and looked recently washed,
dressed in a standard white gown. Least they’re taking care of her.

“Hey.” Barkhorn croaked, her voice cracking with emotion upon seeing her sister for the first time in
months. She walked towards the bed and spied the prognosis charts at the foot of it, a clipboard with
a red line that went progressively up and up. “The doctor says you’re getting better.” Gertrude
pointed out, smiling at Christiane and sitting down next to her. “It won’t be long until you are up and
running around like you used to. How have you been? You look pretty good. Hope your eating your
vegetables, even your peas.” She took her sister’s hand right into hers, the digits limp, but still warm
with life, life that was hanging on and fighting to regain consciousness. “I’ve personally been having
some troubles recently.” Getrude admitted with a sense of shame. “I did something stupid and got
hurt pretty badly. Got it right in the stomach. Nearly died had it not been for my friends.” Tears
started to form yet refused to fall. “I’m sorry Christiane for doing that. It won’t ever happen again, I
promise. I know you want me to be okay, and that is what I’m going to do. From now on, I’m
changing for the better, to survive, for both our sakes.” She took her other hand and placed it against
her sister’s cheek. “You have no idea how much I miss you sis, how much I want you to be awake
and smiling again, riding that bike of yours up and down the road like we did back home.” Gertrude
looked up over the head of the bed and spied the cross, standing silent vigil over her sibling. She
closed her eyes and uttered a silent prayer. *I may not have been on the best of terms with you sometimes, but I need your help right now. Please give her the strength to pull through this, let her have happiness once again. Make her suffering this endless sleep cease. I’ll do whatever you ask of me, even giving up my life if you willed it.*

As if there was an answer, Gertude felt a strange sensation in her right hand. Opening her eyes in shock, she looked down and saw her sister’s hand grip hers, the fingers audibly creaking as stiff joints flexed for the first time in half a year. Christiane’s face started to stir as if waking from a deep sleep. Barkhorn gasped. “Come on Chris, you can do it! Don’t quit! Fight! Fight!” she pleaded, watching a miracle unfold before her. Another few seconds passed and her sister’s eyes opened, squinting in the sunlight from the window.

Christiane’s head turned and she gazed upon her older sister. “Gertrude?” she uttered, sitting up slowly.

It was then that the tears fell down Getrude’s face as she embraced her sister, holding her tight. “Danke Gott. Danke (Thank you God. Thank you.),” she cried into Christiane’s left shoulder. She turned to the still open door and called out, “Erica! Aaron! Get in here! She’s awake!” Immediately, Hartmann entered the room, smiling as she saw the two sisters sharing a tender moment. “You remember Auntie Erica right?” Getrude asked, drying her eyes with her uniform sleeve.

“Uh huh.” Christiane answered, nodding. She looked around and her brow furrowed. “Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital.” Erica explained sitting down on the other side of the pair. “You’ve been asleep for a good while you know that? What did you dream?”

“Lots of things I’m sure, but I can’t seem to remember them.” Christiane replied. She looked up at her sister and asked, “Who’s Aaron?”

It was then that Gertrude realized that Aaron hadn’t entered the room. *Probably not wishing to intrude on a private moment. Oh you and your humility.* “Come on in sergeant. It’s perfectly fine.”

At her command, Aaron walked into the room, a grin on his face, an expression that quickly disappeared once he laid eyes on Barkhorn’s sister, his eyes widening and his face going pale as if he saw a ghost. Christiane gasped and the two witches saw with clarity that the two recognized each other from somewhere. “You.” Aaron breathed. A bright light and black smoke swirls all around an unseen face, reeking of gasoline, slagged metal, and burnt flesh, all the remains of a refugee caravan that fell victim to the Neuroi onslaught. The evening air is cold and full of the crackling of flames and distant sounds of battle further yonder, the freems and booms echoing throughout the lowlands. Eyes strain through the acrid stinging haze, searching for any sign of life, yet keeping a close watch on the borders of the devastation, wary of enemy ambushes. Seconds turn to minutes, yet still nothing stirs or breathes that could be considered life. Sadness overtakes a soul and a head starts to turn away from the grisly scene. Suddenly, a small voice is heard, that of a young girl, groaning in pain, trapped in a ditch, pinned there by a spare tire from a car. Legs move quickly, sliding down the embankment, loose soil and rocks flying in all directions. Large hands grab the tread and cast the tire away further down. The girl, probably no more than eight years old, and dressed in a pink dress, now dirty and torn, lies there with her eyes closed. The little one is picked up with care and cradled. A masculine voice asks with tenderness, “Are you okay? Say something. Who are you?” Slowly, the eyes open and the girl’s mouth starts to move. Breath goes into lungs and out comes two words…

“The angel.” Christiane whispered. “Are you the angel?” Gertrude looked over at Aaron and saw him close the door behind him, the click of the bolt soft. Then, he took off his glasses and showed them all his true eyes. Her sister’s mouth opened, but nothing came out, so great was her joy. She
smiled and exclaimed, “It is you! You are the angel!”

“Angel?” Gertrude inquired out loud, bewildered beyond all belief. “What is she talking about Aaron?”

“When those bad things came and attacked the people I was with, he came along and saved me.” Christiane explained.

Both Barkhorn and Hartmann regarded Aaron in wonderment as he added his own insight into what happened. “I was around the vicinity of Brugges, getting my men past the no mans land that was the holding line to Berlin, when I saw the remains of a refugee caravan that got caught up in the fight. Didn’t find anyone living for the longest time until I heard a voice. She was in a ditch with a cut on her head, pinned by a tire. Got her out of there and took her to the port, smuggling her on a transport ship, taking great care to make sure that her identification papers were secured on her person.” Divale expounded. He looked at Christiane and remarked, “Ich bin überrascht, dass Sie sich an mich erinnern (I’m surprised that you remember me.)”

“Wie konnte ich nicht nach dem, was Sie für mich getan haben (How could I not after what you did for me.” Christiane replied. She then pointed at him and asked, “Wo sind Ihre Flügel? Haben Sie sie verloren? (Where are your wings? Did you lose them?)”

Aaron shrugged and started to answer, but the letter from Proudmore Orphanage fell out of his front pocket. He caught it before it hit the ground and made a move to put it back, but felt this strange desire to open it and read its contents. Divale opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper. For a good few seconds, Gertrude looked on as Aaron’s eyes darted back and forth, reading the words, his face going from puzzled to concerned in a blink of an eye. “Where is the Belhurst Orphanage from here?” he anxiously asked her.

“Just go down the street about two blocks and you’re there.” Gertrude answered. “Why? What’s w-” Her questions wouldn’t be answered as Divale turned and opened the door, practically running down the hallway towards the front exit, leaving them all in a state of shock. *Why are you going there Aaron? Was there something else that happened that night when you saved my sister?*

Wincing just a tad, Gertrude walked up the stone steps to the Belhurst Orphanage, a small one story building made of brick that was wedged almost painfully so between two others, a thrift shop and a bakery. Given the proximity of the two other structures, the air was filled with the smell of baking bread, old cloth, and something else that not many could identify, but she could. That is the smell of hope, of something greater than is now. Looking off to the side, Erica gestured to Aaron’s bike, parked in the sole empty spot reserved for visitors. So he’s still here, that’s good. Together, the German witches pushed through the doors of Belhurst, a pair of old walnut portals that were in bad need of re-framing. Inside, the warmth of several fireplaces, one to the left and right of the main entrance room, rushed over their faces and illuminated a hardwood floor that was so waxed, that the glare could cause a blind man to express dismay at the sight. Everywhere one looked, the architecture screamed Victorian Era, with its high ceilings, single long corridor leading deeper into the building, and subdued colors. It was mostly dark, despite the flames of the raging fires, casting long shadows along the floor, walls, and ceiling. A large oak desk took precedence over the scene, policed by a middle aged woman who glanced up at the pair who just entered. “Come in young ladies,” her old voice beckoned, the creases in her red dress shifting ever so slightly. “Welcome to Belhurst.” She looked down at her timepiece and said apologetically, moving away some errant strands of hair from her bun, “I’m afraid that visiting hours will end very shortly, so there will not be time to fully arrange anything in case you wish to adopt.”
Gertrude and Erica walked inside and came to a stop in front of the desk. “We’re not here to adopt.” Barkhorn explained. “We’re here to find someone, a man, very tall with dark hair and a scar on his face near his nose. Have you seen him?”

Nodding with recollection, the old woman got up from her seat. “You mean Mister Divale I presume? Who inquires?” She cocked an eyebrow and added, “Are you his significant other?”

Gertrude immediately blushed and Erica had a hard time stifling her laughter at such a bold assumption. “No. No. Not at all.” Barkhorn blurted out. “He’s part of our unit and we need to be getting back to base soon. Do you know where he is?”

The receptionist walked away from the desk and gestured with her head, giving them the tell tale sign for follow me. They followed the crone who proceeded to tell them more. “He’s currently visiting the Carpentiers, Jean-Luc and Alois, our recent transfers from our sister orphanage Proudmore.”

“Any reason why they got shipped over here?” Erica asked.

“Information came to light not too long ago confirming that the two are twins, brother and sister. Their mother died shortly after giving birth to them and their father, a French officer, fell in battle keeping the port of Calais open. Proudmore doesn’t specialize in orphans with familial ties to each other, but we do.” the woman answered. She paused and looked to and fro at the old walls. “It may not look like much, but this is a better place for them. More people around. More opportunities to find a home.”

“Why is Mister Divale here?” Gertrude queried.

“No possible idea.” the woman admitted, coming to a stop near an open door. “Though it may have something to do with the guardian clause that Proudmore still does.”

“What’s that?” Erica asked.

“You see,” the woman explained, “Proudmore has a tradition of whenever someone comes to give up their children to the state, a record of two signatures is needed. From my understanding a one Lucretia Domino did sign the record. My theory is that she applied his signature in absentia.” She looked at the open door and commented, “Sounds like he’s reading to them.”

Curious, Gertrude and Erica crept towards the door frame, muffling their footsteps by keeping close to the wall. When they got close enough, they peeked inside and saw a small hardwood floored room with a low ceiling and one bed, one that was occupied by the massive bulk of Aaron who had two small children sitting on both of his knees, an open book before him. Both siblings had brown hair and pale skin, the boy, Jean-Luc, dressed in a white shirt with brown pants and black shoes while the girl, Alois, wore a white gown with a black bow around her waist and black shoes. A single window was letting the outside sun in from behind them, bathing the trio in light, making them almost saintly in appearance. An old chest was at the foot of the bed, filled with toys to play with and a shelf was along the far wall. It was the definition of spartan, but no ill feelings held sway in that area as Aaron read to the toddlers from the book in their native French tongue, a fairy tale that they knew very well; Little Red Riding Hood.

“Grand-mere (Grandmother),” Aaron stated from the book, altering his voice to sound like the characters within the tome, “quelles grandes dents vous avez! À laquelle le loup a répondu, ‘Bien mieux de vous manger avec mon cher!’ Avec cela, le loup jeta son déguise ment et se précipita au petit chaperon rouge, des griffes acérées de rasoir. Petit chaperon rouge, n’avait aucune chance de fuir comme le loup l’a attrapée rapidement et léché ses lèvres. Sachant qu’elle allait bientôt subir le
mêmes sort que sa grand-mère bien-aimée, le petit chaperon rouge criait à l'aide au sommet de ses poumons. Le loup gloussa comme il ouvrit sa bouche large prêt à l'engloutir, ‘Personne ne va entendre votre enfant cris. Vous êtes à moi maintenant.’ Pourtant, le loup se trompait, car ce jour-là, pas trop loin de la maison que la grand-mère du petit chaperon rouge vivait, marchait un brave chasseur, qui traquait les bois depuis des jours, cherchant le loup. Ses oreilles ramassa ses cris et il courut avec la vitesse d'un cerf à la maison. Le chasseur a lancé la porte et a crié, ‘Maintenant, vous traitez avec moi et mon loup hache!’ Hargneux de colère, le loup jeta petit chaperon rouge rouge de côté et les deux ne bataille, acier contre griffe, l'homme contre la bête. Le loup a utilisé toutes ses ruses, toute sa vitesse, mais à la fin, la bonté et la force ont prévalu pour le chasseur enterré sa hache profondément dans le ventre du Loup, tuant la créature fétide. Sa coupe libère la grand-mère du petit chaperon rouge rouge de sa prison de chair et les trois dépouillent le loup, faisant un ensemble de couvertures à donner à la petite famille du Chaperon rouge. Et ils ont tous vécu heureux jamais après.

As he closed the book with a hearty thump, Jean-Luc exclaimed, “C'était une super histoire! Ce chasseur était courageux (That was a great story! That huntsman sure was brave).”

“Qu'il l'était (That he was).” Aaron agreed, setting the book down on the bed next to him. “Très courageux en effet (Very brave indeed).”

“Y at-il une morale à l'histoire (Is there a moral to the story)?” Alois asked, looking up at Aaron.

Divale chuckled as he thought about it. “La morale de l'histoire est deux fois: Ne jamais parler à des étrangers sur le côté de la route, et que les bonnes personnes vous aideront si vous demandez (The moral of the story is two fold: Never talk to strangers on the side of the road, and that good people will help you if you ask).” he added.

Alois looked down at the floor and replied sadly, sniffing, “J'aimerais qu'une bonne personne nous aide (I wish a good person would help us).”

Aaron immediately held her close to him, stifling her from crying, “Ne dis pas ça, Alois (Don’t you say that Alois).” he said, wagging a finger in front of her face. “Quelqu'un viendra pour vous tous les deux un jour. J'en suis sûr (Someone will come for you both one day. I’m sure of it).”

Jean-Luc then regarded Aaron and inquired, “Voulez-vous nous emmener loin d’ici si vous pouviez (Would you take us away from here if you could)?”

Alois also looked up at him and Aaron returned their gazes with his spectacled eyes. “Si je survis à cette guerre (If I survive this war),” he began with strength in his voice, “et vous deux êtes encore là,
“Tu me le promets (You promise)?” the pair asked simultaneously, holding up their pinky fingers, the universal children’s sign of an unbreakable oath.

Without pause, Aaron wrapped both of his pinky fingers around theirs and shook them like he would a hand. “C’est promis (I promise).” he intoned, hugging them both close.

All three women who stood by that doorway found it very hard not to weep tears at what was occurring inside that room. Getrude just shook her head. Perrine is wrong about him. Dead wrong. He does have a soul, and that soul is a good one.

The children nodded and went over to the toy chest, searching for a way to amuse themselves while Aaron walked out of room slowly, as if he didn’t want to leave. He paused near the threshold and tilted his head in the direction of the old caretaker. “Thank you madam for those extra few minutes. It means a lot.” he stated sincerely. The old woman merely nodded in reply and Divale turned down the hallway and started to walk towards the door, Gertrude and Erica following him in silence. It didn’t take long to exit the building and once Aaron got to the sidewalk, he turned around and regarded his companions. “So how long were you two standing there?” he asked.

“Long enough.” Gertrude simply answered, stepping down the last stone step, Erica right by her side. “Long enough.” She looked up at him for a split second before Aaron nodded and placed his arms off to his sides. Barkhorn went up to him and embraced him, burying her head into his chest. “Ich bin Ihnen eine solche Dankbarkeit für das, was Sie für mich und meine getan haben (I owe you such a debt of gratitude for what you’ve done for me and mine).” he said, her voice muffled by cotton and a few tears.

“Du schuldest mir nichts Gertrude und du weißt das (You don’t owe me a thing Gertrude and you know that).” Aaron politely countered.

“Seid nicht alle demütig mit mir, die du Bastard (Don’t be all humble with me you bastard).” Gertrude softly retorted, pulling her head away from Aaron’s body, looking up into his eyes. “Wenn es nicht für dich wäre, wäre Christiane tot und ich wäre es auch. Ich bin ernst, was immer du willst, was immer du brauchst, frage einfach, und es ist dein. (If it wasn’t for you, Christiane would be dead and I would be too. I’m serious, whatever you want, whatever you need, just ask and it’s yours).”

*I don’t want this to end up like Celeste so I should just make my demand and hope for the best. The question is what? Oh, I know. “All I want of you Gertrude is your trust, faith, and friendship, and in return I’ll give you mine.” Aaron requested, eschewing the German language for now.

“Gladly.” Barkhorn replied, wiping her tears away. “You’ll have it all in spades.”

“Welcome to the circle Trude.” Aaron announced with a smile. “Enjoy your stay.”

Erica watched from close by, letting the moment play out without interruption. She then looked at her watch and saw that it was almost five in the evening. “I don’t want to be that girl,” she interjected, shaking her wrist, “but, its getting late and I think we all need something to eat before we keel over.”
“Good call.” Gertrude commented, letting go of Aaron and giving the matter some thought. “I know of a good restaurant not too far from here.”

“As do I.” Aaron added. “And it’s probably much closer.”

“Where?” Erica asked.

Divale didn’t immediately answer her question and instead removed his ear communicator and opened it up with a tiny click, exposing the delicate mechanisms to the outside world. “Shirley taught me that there was a way to essentially reprogram these, rewriting the frequency codes that you could store on it.” he explained, gently maneuvering the dials and levers. “However, you have to know the frequency in order to access it. Kind of a downside, but not if you have the knowledge.” After another second or two of fiddling with the communicator, he closed it back up, placed it back to his ear, and thumbed the activation stud. “RiEsci a sentirmi bella signora (Can you hear me pretty lady)?” he cooed.

“Forte e chiaro il mio amore (Loud and clear my love).” Lucretia’s voice answered with hardly a pop of static. “Cosa devo all’occasione (What do I owe the occasion)?”

“Me, il capitano Barkhorn, e il tenente Hartmann hanno appena finito di visitare Christaine e sono un po’ affamati. Ti dispiace farci venire a mangiare un boccone (Me, Captain Barkhorn, and Lieutenant Hartmann have just got done visiting Christaine and are a little hungry. You mind letting us come over for a bite)?” Aaron asked.

“Ma naturalmente (But of course).” Lucretia answered. “Allora, cosa c’è sul menu (So what’s on the menu)?”

*If I didn’t have guests with me, it’d be you.* “Qualcosa di cordiale e caldo, il tipo di piatto che si attacca alle costole al posto dei denti. Qualcosa che non richiede di essere in cucina a tutti i miei cari, perché stasera, io sono quello che fa la cucina (Something hearty and warm, the kind of dish that sticks to your ribs instead of your teeth. Something that doesn't require you to be in the kitchen at all my dear, because tonight, I’m the one doing the cooking).” Divale answered.

The gentle plunks of cheap chinaware could be heard reverberating all around the dining room as Gertrude and Erica helped Lucretia set the table for dinner. It wasn’t very much to look at truth be told, given how small the flat was. The dining room almost doubled as the main greeting area for guests, the front door smack dab at the head of the old pine table that was covered with a white cloth. The chairs matched the color of the hardwood floors, the faded green wallpaper and the low white tiled ceilings lending some contrast. A china cabinet stood off in the left corner, wide open, and beyond that was a small hallway that lead to the kitchen, one where Aaron had been working in for the past half an hour cooking up whatever he had in mind for supper that night. The smell was divine and distracted the trio as they went about their duties. Erica went back to the cabinet and pointed with a questioning look at some wine glasses. “Is there going to be wine served Aaron?” Lucretia called out, catching the hint.

“You know it.” Aaron answered back from the kitchen, the faint scratching of a wooden spoon circling the bottom of a metal pot accompanying his voice. “Not having wine in this house is a travesty.”

Lucretia chuckled and nodded at Erica, who scooped up the glasses with care and set them down on the table. Gertrude looked up after placing the last fork down and looked around the room. “It’s very homely here.” she said, her mind drifting back to her youth. “Reminds me a lot of my mother’s house
back in Kaliningrad."

“It’s not much to look at.” Lucretia admitted, straightening out an errant fold in the cloth. “But it’s home for me.”

“Everybody ready?” Aaron asked, the sound of a platter being lifted of a counter top plain to hear. All three women quickly sat down, Lucretia at the head and Gertrude and Erica taking up the bottom and right side respectively, the chairs creaking. Taking that as an affirmative, Divale waltzed right in, holding a metal tray with tonight’s supper. “For your enjoyment this evening my dears we have beef stew with potatoes, carrots, pearl onions, and mushrooms all poured into a bowl of wheat bread, with a bottle of Chianti to wash it all down.” He took up each plate and served in turn, Lucretia, Gertrude, and Erica before placing the last one at his place at the table, the left, putting the tray in the center to act as a collector of dainties. Everyone looked down at their dishes and smiled with anticipation. The stew was steaming hot, the ingredients all held in suspension by a chowder thick brown broth. Aaron removed he cork stopper to the red wine and poured everyone a near full glass, going in the same order that he did with the plates. After pouring his glass, he stoppered the bottle, set it askew of the tray, and conducted his ritual. “I propose a toast.” he quipped, taking up his glass with three fingers. Everyone copied the gesture and Aaron declared, “To good day out and an even better tomorrow.” All around clinked their glasses and took a sip of the wine. “Now let’s eat.”

Erica was the first to sink her spoon into the stew and popped into her mouth. The second the food touched her taste buds, she closed her eyes and leaned back, moaning in joy. She withdrew the spoon, chewing and swallowing. “That’s amazing.” she commented dreamily.

Gertrude sampled hers next and had a similar reaction, looking down at the stew and then at Aaron, smiling and nodding in approval. “I’m speechless.” she uttered, taking another spoonful. “You may in fact have a shot at being the best cook in the squadron.”

Lucretia was the last to take a bite, but her reaction was more subdued and critical. “A good triumph.” she admitted, nodding her head. Domino then looked at Aaron and leaned forward with a pointed finger, adding, “But this still doesn’t beat my primavera.”

Divale also leaned in. “But of course.” he remarked with a wink. Lucretia then gave Aaron a small peck on the forehead and the group ate in earnest. “So Erica,” Aaron stated, taking a piece of the bread bowl and dipping it into the stew, “I heard through the grape vine that you actually had to sign a waiver saying that you didn’t need to cook anymore. Why did they do that?”

“As we started to get more people,” Erica explained, swirling red wine in her glass, “duties started to shift around. Minna wanted me up in the air most days, so she and Gertrude handed me this paper to sign. Didn’t want to do it because I actually enjoyed cooking, it was one of the easiest things in the world to do.”

“Considering that all you made was potato this and potato that for almost two full months.” Gertrude added while taking in a heaping spoonful of the stew.

Erica pouted. “If they got the Irish through some tough times, they were certainly good enough to get us out of some bad situations.” she retorted. “Besides, potatoes are a wonder food. You can do just about anything with them.”

“Anything except appeal to what we German’s need deep down and that’s meat.” Gertrude pointed out, holding the spoon like a dagger in front of her wingman’s face. “Man can’t live on starch alone. You need protein to gain muscle mass and feel full.”

“Oh don’t start this again.” Erica groaned, putting her hands over her ears. Watching all this drama
play out before them, Lucretia and Aaron sat in silence like a riveted audience just waiting for the crescendo.

Aaron started to laugh. “You both bicker like a married couple.” he commented.

“Speaking of which,” Lucretia spoke up, turning to face Aaron, “I think it is about time to discuss a few future plans.”

The German witches stopped what they were arguing about and Divale felt very small at that moment. I don’t like being put on the spot. Never have and never will. “Are we really going to talk about this right here and now?” he whispered.

“Yes here and yes now.” Domino proclaimed. “I would like a late summer wedding with a proper mass before the reception.”

“I’m actually of the opinion that we should get married in the late spring early summer and have it be a private affair with just close friends and such.” Aaron countered. “Would definitely be a more manageable affair guest-wise.”

Lucretia put on a stern face and said, “Don’t be all morbid Aaron. Besides, who’s wedding is this, yours or mine?”

“Our.” Aaron riposted. “That day belongs to us both.”

Lucretia’s face softened and she nodded in understanding. “You’re right,” she agreed. “Yet it’s never too early to plan for such things. I love you and I want us to be happy together.”

Aaron took her right hand into his left and held it. “So do I, and we will be happy. Let’s focus on the here and now. The future can wait for another day.” Please don’t make the same mistake that I did and take things for granted Lucretia. It only ends in tears.

“I would love to see you two discuss this more.” Erica jabbed playfully. “I just love seeing how Aaron would make a better businessman than a farmer.”

“Or be a good father.” Gertrude interjected.

Lucretia stiffened in her seat and gave Aaron a stare, the one that clearly stated without words what is she talking about. “I got a letter saying that Alois and Jean-Luc got transferred to Belhurst just a ways down the road from here. Paid them a visit and told them that I would get them out of there when the war’s over.” he answered. “I can’t just leave them there with nobody to really look after them. They deserve parents.”

Domino’s face lit up with happiness and she put her free hand to her face. “That’s great Aaron!” she exclaimed. “A wedding and an adoption on the same day!”

“That it is, but what’s not great is that your food’s getting cold love.” Aaron stated. Yes, it would be a great day. I just hope that I’ll get to see it.

The engine to the motorcycle purred to life as Aaron sat down on the seat, feeling Erica’s hands wrap around his chest just above his belly button. “Remember Hartman,” Gertrude piped up from the side car, adjusting the helmet to better fit her head, “keep it clean.”

“You never let me have any fun.” Erica playfully shot back. Aaron was about to start the journey
back to Dover Castle when Lucretia came out the door and into the evening March night, holding a basket.

“Some small things for you and your friends back at the base.” Domino explained, handing it over to Gertrude who placed it on her lap. She then leaned over and gave Aaron a deep kiss on the lips. “La prossima volta che vieni (Next time you come over),” she whispered seductively in his right ear, “Sto preparando una primavera, solo per te (I’m cooking up some primavera, just for you).” Aaron smiled and winked. Oh you’ll be whipping up something that starts with a P, but it certainly doesn’t end with an A.

“Non vedo l’ora (I look forward to that),” he replied. Satisfied, Lucretia turned around and walked up the steps to her flat, Aaron watching her go.

“Come on there lover boy.” Erica interjected with a squeeze from her hands. “The princess you need to see is in another castle.”

Sighing, Aaron waved goodbye to his love, and after she returned it with a wave of her own, he hit the accelerator and sped off into the near trafficless, pea soup thick, foggy London night. The trio whizzed through the streets, the lampposts emitting a dull glow, lighting their way out of the sprawling metropolis. For a good few minutes, no one said a word until Erica broke the silence.

“You really do love her don’t you?” she asked.

“I love her to the point where I seriously think about retiring and leaving this war behind.” Aaron answered, navigating a corner at high speeds. “I don’t like leaving her side, even if I’m just going up the road a ways. Doesn’t feel right, like going off to fight with your boots on the wrong feet.”

“You know you wouldn’t leave the war behind you, even if it was for her Aaron.” Gertrude pointed out. “There’s still plenty of fighting left to be done, fighting that you are needed for.”

“Hopefully it will be on the outside of the walls of Dover and not within it for once.” Aaron grumbled, thinking about Perrine and at that mess that he had been dealing with since he came over.

“Like everybody says,” Erica assured, “it just takes time.”

“And patience.” Aaron retorted, revving the engine harder. “Something that I’m rapidly running out of at this moment and time with her. I’ve done everything right since I got here. I’ve swallowed my pride, said all the right things, ignored the insults, hell, I even gave up the Croix de Guerre, my Croix de Guerre for that woman and saved her best friend’s life into the bargain, but no, the fucking shrew of a woman just turns her nose at me, as if I was a dog bringing her a pair of slippers in its jaws. If there is a piece of the puzzle that I’m missing then by all means tell me what that could possibly be.”

“You haven’t done everything Aaron.” Gertrude absentmindedly quipped and immediately clapped her mouth with both hands, knowing that she just betrayed a secret, one that Perrine herself told her many months ago.

Aaron slowed the bike down and regarded the captain in the side car. “Whatever you tell me, I’ll keep in confidence. Not a word of this will be spoken of ever again.” he solemnly promised.

Gertrude put her hands to her face and silently cursed herself for getting in this mess. I don’t like betraying a friend like this, but this could help them put their differences aside and hopefully forge a peace that otherwise would never have been possible. Taking a deep breath, Barkhorn sighed and began to explain, “I trust you to keep this under your hat, so I’ll tell you. It all has to deal with something that she lost long ago, something that if you could get for her, would put her mind at ease and get her to stop feeling sorry for herself, just like what you did for me. If this doesn’t work, all of
Heaven and Hell can’t make it work.”

“At this point and time,” Aaron replied, keeping his eyes on the road, “I’ll settle for just about anything. Price be damned.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Aaron gets a bit of a surprise and an unwanted traveling companion while Lynette receives a command that she can't refuse. Upon coming back, battle lines are drawn and things go from bad to worse for Divale and Clostermann, prompting Aaron to get the transfer order. Will he sign away or will the words of a brave friend stay his hand?

Chapter XXV: Heart Of A Lion

- Confidence is an uncommon innate ability found in human beings. It is a trait that wards off the worst possible attacks against one’s character and gives them no doubts as to what they mean to do or say. When one looks at it with a clinical eye however, such a thing doesn’t just appear out of nowhere, it had to have had a progenitor. Out of all the possible virtues that can be found within the soul, only one makes sense: courage. From there, confidence can come forth, but it doesn’t always. You see, in order for that chain to play out, one must realize that courage isn’t just standing up to one’s enemies, it also entails going against your friends too, to show them the error of their ways when they make mistakes, to protect them from their worst enemies, themselves. Such a person is worth their weight in gold.

Diary Entry May 9th 1942

Lynette waved goodbye to the postman’s truck as he sped away from the main entrance to the Dover Castle keep, watching the tires kick up the faintest clouds of dust as it traveled around the walls towards the exit. The letter carrier politely waved back, sticking his hand out the side of the driver’s side window before disappearing, the sounds of a rumbling engine and the smell of exhaust fumes the only evidence that he was there at all. Bishop walked to the large tan burlap sack and took it into her arms. Surprisingly light today. Course I’m not complaining. I’ll take a light load rather than a heavy one any day of the week. Slinging the mail bag over her right shoulder, she walked towards the open gate door, holding her collar close with the other hand. The weather was getting warmer, as it should given that it was now the middle of March, but it was very windy and the skies were overcast, carrying a chill that made you want to stay inside for most of the day. Thankfully for Lynette, her chore, gathering, sorting, and passing out the mail, required very little in the way of going outdoors, though deep down she wished that she had something more adventurous. Maybe I can ask Mio if she would allow me to take over for a bit doing the gardening. I miss doing those sorts of things at home. I wonder how mother and the rest of them are doing, especially Wilma considering that her big day happened not too long ago.

Walking up the stone steps and crossing the threshold broke her train of thought and she closed the doors behind her by pushing the button on the side of the wall, the pulleys cycling in reverse,
lowering the door. Lynette took her time, patiently strolling down the corridor to a long table, placing the mail bag down on it gently as the door came down with a clunk at the other end of the passageway. Bishop flipped up the sack and bobbed it up and down, so the envelopes would all come out. Strangely enough, it was a box that emerged first, roughly the size of the top of a coffee table, branding iron stamped lettering saying that it was from the local quartermaster’s office in London and was to be delivered to a certain A. Divale. What could that possibly be? The question lingered in her head as she sorted the letters. Most of them were their paychecks that they would simply cash in town, while a few were postcards from home or friends. No one got more than two each, but Aaron, in addition to the package, got three letters, one of which was his paycheck, while the others were from Doctor Domino and Gieves and Hawkes. Maybe Perrine’s coat is finally finished. That’s good. She has been ranting and raving about how late they’ve been in getting it done for some time now. Clostermann can be really impatient at times. Credit to Aaron though, taking it all in stride and reminding her that there were days that they didn’t do business and the rationing bit.

Lynette stacked them all neatly and stuck her right hand into the bag, feeling around every square inch lest she forgot a letter. Content that there was none, she left the sack there and picked up the envelopes with one hand and the package in the other and proceeded to make her way to the mess hall, letting her nose lead her to it. Shirley was the cook for today and she always did things country style, or whatever that meant, whipping up filling heaping plates of eggs, bacon, ham, sausage, and her famous cheddar garlic biscuits with fresh butter. I can tell those things were just made a mile away. Bishop kept walking, the aroma of breakfast getting more pervasive with every step she took until she came to the mess hall doors, doors that were wide open. The entire squadron was seated, save for her and Shirley, who was passing out the plates with the help of a tray-jack, the weight of the massive platter too much to bear. “You came in just in time Lynn.” Yeager remarked, placing her own heaping plate down at her seat next to Lucchini, who was munching away on a biscuit. “Breakfast is served.” She then regarded the wad of letters and the package and asked, "Anything good?"

“Just the usual.” Bishop replied, her answer the same as every other time she did her duty, and walked up to each of her friends, passing out their letters. Aaron’s were given out last, as he took a seat next to hers on his left without knowing, Perrine sipping her marigold tea next to him on his right in silence as she started opening up her letters. After taking a forkful of sausage and eggs into his mouth, Divale wiped his lips and hands with a cloth napkin and regarded the envelope from Lucretia. Curious, he opened it up carefully using his unused knife, and pulled out a piece of paper. Upon reading it, he couldn’t help but smile as Domino’s native tongue flowed as eloquently as her cursive. Caro Aaron: come stai facendo il mio amore? So che è passato poco tempo dall'ultima volta che ci siamo visti, ma so che il tuo cuore si fa male quando non mi Vedi, proprio come il mio quando sono lontano da te. Dannazione questa guerra e la natura segreta del nostro rapporto! Non hai idea di quanto vorrei che uscire senza una cura senza che nessuno ci giudichi per questo. Per quanto mi riguarda, i miei sforzi per trovare qualcosa che possa aiutarvi sono stati ostruzionismo da parte del Vaticano stesso, dicendo che mi mancano le credenziali per l'accesso. Ma, io non mi arrenderò, sto cercando di ottenere alcuni miei colleghi di aiutarmi. Non preoccuparti, prendo tutte le precauzioni del mondo per assicurarmi che non scopran di noi. Sto dicendo che è per quanto riguarda un articolo che sto provando a scrivere riguardo all'uso della medicina orientale nella Chiesa durante la morte nera. UN tratto a dir poco tempo dall'ultima volta che ci siamo visti, ma so che il tuo cuore si fa male quando non mi Vedi, proprio come il mio quando sono lontano da te. Dannazione questa guerra e la natura segreta del nostro rapporto! Non hai idea di quanto vorrei che uscire senza una cura senza che nessuno ci giudichi per questo. Per quanto mi riguarda, i miei sforzi per trovare qualcosa che possa aiutarvi sono stati ostruzionismo da parte del Vaticano stesso, dicendo che mi mancano le credenziali per l'accesso. Ma, io non mi arrenderò, sto cercando di ottenere alcuni miei colleghi di aiutarmi. Non preoccuparti, prendo tutte le precauzioni del mondo per assicurarmi che non scopran di noi. Sto dicendo che è per quanto riguarda un articolo che sto provando a scrivere riguardo all'uso della medicina orientale nella Chiesa durante la morte nera. UN tratto a dir poco tempo dall'ultima volta che ci siamo visti, ma so che il tuo cuore si fa male quando non mi Vedi, proprio come il mio quando sono lontano da te. Dannazione questa guerra e la natura segreta del nostro rapporto! Non hai idea di quanto vorrei che uscire senza una cura senza che nessuno ci giudichi per questo. Per quanto mi riguarda, i miei sforzi per trovare qualcosa che possa aiutarvi sono stati ostruzionismo da parte del Vaticano stesso, dicendo che mi mancano le credenziali per l'accesso. Ma, io non mi arrenderò, sto cercando di ottenere alcuni miei colleghi di aiutarmi. Non preoccuparti, prendo tutte le precauzioni del mondo per assicurarmi che non scopran di noi. Sto dicendo che è per quanto riguarda un articolo che sto provando a scrivere riguardo all'uso della medicina orientale nella Chiesa durante la morte nera.

Dear Aaron: How are you doing my love? I know it’s only been a short time since we last saw each other, but I know your heart aches when you don’t see me, just as mine does when I’m away from you. Damn this war and the secretive nature of our relationship! You have no idea how much I
wish that we could just go out without a care without anyone judging us for it. As for me, my efforts to find something that can help you have been stonewalled by the Vatican itself, saying that I lack the credentials for access. But, I’m not giving up, I’m trying to get some colleagues of mine to help me out. Don’t worry, I’m taking all the precautions in the world to make sure that they don’t find out about us. I’m saying that it is in regards to an article I’m trying to write concerning the usage of Eastern medicine in the church during the Black Death. A stretch to say the least, but I will not stop in my attempts to help you. There is something out there, I’m sure of it. Until then, keep yourself save Aaron, for both our sakes. Your truest love and regards, Lucretia. P.S I have a little photo that you might like, just in case you get lonely or want to remember what you have waiting for you next time you come over).

Oh boy. Making sure, that no one was looking by using his peripheral vision, Aaron put his right index finger and thumb into the envelope and felt the picture edges along his fingertips. Moving just his wrist, Divale maneuvered the picture out and his face started to blush as there was the love of his life, reclining on her bed, naked save for a thin diaphanous sheet covering her breasts and groin, with a seductive grin that could tempt even an archangel to fall from grace. From across the way, Shirley stopped drinking from her glass of orange juice and cocked an eyebrow. “What did you get Aaron?” she asked.

Jolting in his seat as if he just awoke from a deep sleep, Aaron frantically placed the picture back into the envelope and buried it into his front left pocket, stuffing it so deep, that he almost split the seams. “Oh, just the usual back and forth between lovers. Twas very revealing.” he replied, collecting his thoughts and focusing on calming down.

“I meant that.” Yeager corrected herself, pointing her bacon grease stained fork to the package that sat on the table next to Aaron’s plate. All he did in answering was wink and Shirley quickly put two and two together. “Its the ignition system isn’t it?!” she exclaimed with joy. Without so much as excusing herself, she got up from her chair, causing everyone to stop eating and stare at her, and added, “You’ve got to put it in right away!”

“Steady sailor.” Erica quipped, making quite a few of those present chuckle at the inside joke, Aaron included.

Shirley suddenly felt as though she were a ship that just had the wind knocked out of its sails and opened her mouth to say something, but Aaron interjected with a sly smile, “While tempting, I’m not doing anything of the sort until I finish my breakfast and the commander gives me permission to do so.”

“That you do.” Minna replied with a courteous nod. "Installing the part that is.” She then regarded Yeager and motioned with her head for her to sit back down and eat.

A deep sharp sigh caused Aaron to turn his head right to regard Perrine, who was clearly not amused with the innuendo going around the table while she was eating. She hadn’t even touched her breakfast, the silverware still wrapped up in the napkin. Her marigold tea swirled in her cup as she lamented with a glare, “Must you encourage this sort of behavior at the table? It’s enough to put a rat off his appetite.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit of laughter.” Aaron replied calmly. He reached for the envelope from Gieves and Hawkes with his left hand and tapped it. “Besides, good things are on the horizon for you.”

Perrine eyed the letter from her seat and her face brightened a tad, though she did her best to hide it. “Finally.” she stated with finality. “It only took them the better part of a week and a half. Finest tailors in all of England my foot.”
“You know as well as I that there were-” Aaron started to say, but Perrine had had just about enough of the excuses.

“Mitigating circumstances, yes.” Closterrmann finished for him. “I’ve been hearing nothing but that coming out of your mouth for days.” She leaned in and muttered, “You are getting it pronto after breakfast. I want that coat in my hands before the noon bell, got it?”

Aaron turned away from his erstwhile crabby and impatient neighbor and cocked his eyebrow at Minna who nodded. “You can go, but make it quick. We just got a small shipment of ammo in according to the reports on my desk that needs to be categorized and put away.” she answered. Small shipment could mean anywhere between fifteen and twenty crates. Shouldn’t take long if the bastards actually packed them according to the shipping manifest.

“Thank you.” Aaron replied back and he proceeded to pick up the pace of his eating, devouring his meal with speed. Within two minutes, a good pound and a half worth of protein and two glasses worth of orange juice disappeared down his gullet. He wiped his mouth with his cloth napkin and made a move to excuse himself when Shirley, not admitting defeat just yet, also excused herself and gave Minna a pleading look that puzzled Aaron for a good second before he understood what it was all about. She wants to come with me just so she can experience the bike. Say no commander, say no. I hear she’s a backseat driver when she isn’t behind the wheel.

Wilcke stopped eating and steepled her hands, placing them close to her face in contemplative thought, never letting her gaze at the captain waver. “You promise to behave yourself?” she asked with a bit of emphasis on the word behave. Oh no, don’t tell me you are seriously going to let this happen.

“Absolutely commander!” Shirley quipped with a sharp salute.

Minna nodded slowly and turned to Aaron, “And what do you say about her coming with you?” she inquired, barely keeping a smirk from her face.

You motherfucker. You put this on me instead of you, making you look like the good cop to my bad cop. Well played commander, well played. Divale regarded Yeager who was practically near bursting from finally being able to ride his motorcycle, the agitation causing her to have minuscule tremors in her hands and a bit of a nervous tic in her left eye. Knowing that he couldn’t win, he threw up his hands and admitted, “Fine by me.”

The effect was immediate as Shirley balled up her fists and pumped them both into the air with triumph. “Whoohoo!” she called with a smile that went ear to ear. “To the victor, the spoils!”

Aaron grumbled like an old man that didn’t get his senior discount for his five cent cup of coffee as he picked up the box and the pair of unopened letters from the table. “You may have won this battle Yankee,” he pointed out, maneuvering around the seats, “but one bit of sass from your mouth and you are going to get a first class education at Tuck and Roll University.”

“Good luck getting me off that seat.” Shirley countered when he got himself free from the wooden jungle that were the chairs and turned towards the exit. “Once I plant myself, I’m coming up for nothing and no one.” Erica let a little guffaw loose as the pair walked to the doors leading into the hallway. Aaron went out first with Yeager taking up the rear. Before leaving, she stuck her head back in the room and called out, “I heard that Hartmann.”

Erica now lost all self control and laughed heartily. “Just too easy.” she chuckled, trying to gather her wits back. Lynette watched all of this transpire for a few more moments before regarding her mail. She only got one piece, a postcard from her family’s home in Sudbury, a small town about twelve
miles north-north west from Colchester, with a frequency code written on it with black ink, 726085.

That's mother. Has something happened? Overtaken with dread, Bishop excused herself and quickly trotted out of the mess hall, taking her communicator out of her ear and opening it up. Upon passing the threshold, she backed against the left hand wall and continued to adjust the fine mechanisms. When finished, she place it back in her ear and called out in a low voice, “Hello?”

“Ah, there you are.” the aged, but still strong voice of her mother, Minnie Bishop commented. “I was beginning to wonder if the postman had misplaced the postcard. How are you doing Lynn?”

“I’m fine mum.” Lynette answered. “Is everything alright with you, father, and the rest?” she added with concern.

“Oh, we are all fine my dear.” Minnie assured. “Your father is off on a business trip in America while I’ve shipped the rest of the children to our relatives in Leeds for their own safety. I heard that you were involved in a scrum recently and took down a fighter. Congratulations. I’m proud of you Lynn.”

“Thank you.” Lynette replied, very much relieved and happy that nothing untoward happened to her family. Don’t know what I would do if they got hurt. “So anything else you want to talk about? I have time.”

“Yes actually,” Minnie affirmed over the airwaves, “and it concerns your newest recruit, a certain Aaron Divale.”

Lynette grew very scared and her throat dried up. “Is there something wrong about him?” she timidly ventured.

“Nothing, if he chooses to stay away from my youngest daughter.” her mother replied with a hint of menace. “I understand he’s enlisted and there are certain things that enlisted men can’t do, but I’ve lived long enough to realize that things go out the window in stressful situations and certain things get lost in translation regarding men and women if you can gather my meaning.”

Lynette put her head in her hands. Not this thing again mother. I know what you’re saying and I understand you worry given how pretty I am, but this is getting a bit out of hand. The last time you gave this talk to a guy, I had to go to my graduation dance alone. “I assure you mother that he is not t-” she began to explain, but she was cut short.

“That will be for me and your sister to decide when he arrives at my house today.” Minnie interjected with authority.

Lynette’s eyes bugged out in shock. “He’s coming to Sudbury?” she breathed, her voice almost as soft as a mouse’s squeak.

“That is correct daughter,” her mother affirmed, “and you are coming with him. Wilma will be there at the base in a little less than an hour and a half. I know you have accrued leave so talk to your commander and use it. The whole meeting should take less than a day, maybe a day and a half at the most. I’ll see you later. Have a pleasant day Lynn.” The line went dead and Bishop’s legs gave out from underneath her. Her back slid all the way down the wooden wall slowly until she plopped down on the carpet with a soft thump. Oh bother. This is not going to end well at all is it?

“Lynn?” a voice called out from the doorway. Bishop looked up and saw the concerned face of her wingman Yoshika. Miyafuji walked to her and crouched down in front of her. “Are you ok? What’s wrong?”
“I’m alright.” Bishop answered, placing her left hand on Yoshika’s shoulder. “I will need your help to talk to the commander for me though.”

“To talk about what?” another voice inquired. Both witches turned and the tall form of Minna moved in with the speed of a stalking wolf.

At first, Bishop was too frightened to speak, but she soon regained her courage and expounded, “I need leave to see my mother. Two days if at all possible.”

“Why?” Wilcke asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I need to make it clear to mother that a certain someone isn’t going to do anything stupid.” Lynette stated.

Aaron scraped the inside of the grease can, taking a glob of the stuff on his right index finger, the lubricant reeking of chemicals. With the care of a surgeon applying a scalpel to an operating area, he ran his finger along the threads of the ignition system, making very sure that the layer of grease was as even as possible. Moses always said that grease is ok, but if you add too much, it will gum up the works and make it not fire. Go light and go even.

“Hopefully you can drive faster than you can do repairs and maintenance.” Shirley remarked in a mocking tone, clearly not at all patient with how long the process was taking.

Divale looked up from his work when he finished applying the grease and retorted politely, “There is a big difference between doing something quick and doing something right.” Not even waiting for an answer to that, he wiped his dirty finger clean on a rag and then turned his attention to his motorcycle, the kickstand out. A hole was near the front, just below the speedometer, probably no bigger than a plug of tobacco, the final resting place for the part in his hands. If the measurements are correct than this will fit like a velvet glove. He had made the modification during his off time, so that he didn’t have to do it later when the part eventually arrived. “See exhibit A.” he added pointing to a work bench across the way from where he was working.

Shirley followed his hand and her eyes fell upon a rag covered object on the workbench that she used the most often when making tuneups to her Strikers. Curious, she walked towards it, not so much as paying any attention to the rest of the vehicle depot interior, an area that gave her peace and joy in equal measure. When she got to her destination, she pulled away the clothes with both hands and gasped. There, lying down on the pitted and stained wood, was a finished canvas featuring a lovely painted picture of Bonneville at sunset, the salt hard pan of some ancient evaporated body of water glittering like rubies and off white pearls in the orange sky, a ceiling that seemed to give off an aura of it’s own. My God this is beautiful! It’s just like what I remember from my first night being there. “How in the world did you do this? You’ve never been there.” Yeager inquired, turning around to regard Aaron.

In the meanwhile, Divale was busying himself with aligning the ignition system and turning it clockwise, inserting it into the space he painstakingly made for it. “Rummaged through the library here and managed to find some pictures of it in a travel volume made during the turn of the century. The photos were grainy and in black and white and they weren’t much to go on, but thankfully my vivid imagination came to the rescue. Imagined the whole scene like being on water and watching the sun go down. Went from there and voila!” he explained.

“It’s amazing. Thank you.” Shirley stated, covering the picture back up. I’ll hang this up when I get back. She turned and quickly walked back to Aaron and got there just as he finished screwing in the
part, tightening it with a pair of needle nose pliers. “Looks like that should do it huh?” she observed, watching him fish out a key from the opened box that the ignition system came in.

“Looks like it.” Aaron agreed, holding a piece of metal that looked more like a coin in his hand than a key. “But now for the moment of truth.” He inserted the key into the ignition and turned it to the right. The engine to the motorcycle sputtered for a brief two seconds before roaring to life. Divale nodded silently in approval and triumph. *Like a fucking glove. Damn I’m good.*

Shirley’s reaction was far less subdued, throwing up her arms and shouting, “It’s alive! It’s alive!” She then turned to Aaron and asked, “So what’s it’s name?”

The question drew a look of confusion from him and Divale furrowed his brow. “Excuse me?” he queried.

“Most people who have machines that mean something to them give them names. Take me for instance, I’ve named my Strikers Merlin due to having been working on him and flying with him for so long.” Shirley elaborated.

“I never really gave it much thought.” Aaron admitted, scratching his head. He placed his right hand on his chin and thought, coming to a solution in moments. “Given how fast and truly unique it is, I’d guess I’d have to name it Sleipnir.”

“Sleip what?” Yeager asked, not understanding the reason why at all.

“According to old Germanic and Norse legend, Sleipnir was the proud steed of Odin, an eight legged horse so fast and powerful that no other animal could catch it, nor any man tame it.” Aaron answered. “Yes, Sleipnir will do nicely.”

Yeager sat on the front seat of the motorcycle and swung her leg over the side. “No man could tame it you say?” she dared, cocking an eyebrow.

Aaron chuckled and then put on a serious face. “I take us into London and you take us back to base. Fair?”

Yeager sighed and groaned while vacating the seat and shifting herself to the back, “I guess, considering that it is yours after all.”

Damn fucking right it is. Aaron then mounted his bike after Shirley was done settling herself in the back and kicked the stand back towards the main body. He spread his legs wide so as to steady the machine. Using his feet, he maneuvered the bike to face the depot door, one that was open, letting in the March air and little else. He turned his attention to Yeager who started to loop her arms around his chest and playfully asked, “You ready for this?”

“I was born ready.” Shirley proclaimed, the eager mien to her face detailing just how much she wanted to see this thing in action.

“Then get as close as you can to the action,” Divale advised, looking in front of him and putting his hands on the throttles, smiling like a maniac, “because you don’t want to miss this.” With a quick flick back with his wrists, he cranked the accelerators and Sleipnir charged forward, passing the depot door within half a second and flying into the main courtyard. Aaron unfurled his wings and added their aerodynamics to aid in navigating the corner leading to the gate to the outer ring, leaning into the curve so much that his left knee nearly grazed the ground. Soon, the exit came up, and instead of decelerating, Aaron kept the throttle down and tapped the break lever just a fraction, causing the motorcycle to slide, drifting through the gate while still maintaining a high speed. Behind
him Shirley was whooping it up, screaming in ecstasy as the wind blew her hair back all over the place, red strands flying this way and that, blue eyes filled with unbridled joy and excitement. Paying more attention to the way out than his passenger, Aaron tucked his wings did the same when he passed the main gate. Upon exiting out onto the dirt road, he decided to do something really daring. He hit the break a touch harder, making the bike buck up to a forty five degree and cranked the throttle, making them look like an ascending airplane taking off from a carrier deck. On one wheel, the pair rocketed down the road towards Dover, a distance of almost three miles, before Aaron asked with grin, “How do you like the ride so far?”

“Fucking love it!” Shirley bellowed at the top of her lungs, clutching his chest tightly. “This is the best day ever!”

It was then that Aaron saw a small path leading askew of the town proper, a not often used shortcut due to the hilly terrain, and got another idea. “It’s about to get better.” he mentioned. “Hold on tight because we are about to fly.”

Yeager didn’t have any time to process the meaning behind his statement, but thankfully managed to keep her hands locked as Aaron gunned it and rode up a rise at breakneck speed at a bit of an angle, catapulting them up into the air a good twenty feet, the machine drifting to its side until becoming as level as a machinist’s lathe stand. The acceleration carried them a good distance down the path and she could see that Aaron’s face was full of concentration as they began to descend, correcting the machine with his hips and legs. The wheels hit the ground and the suspension juddered as the rest of the bike and the weight that it was carrying made earthfall half a second later. Shirley kept her legs glued to the side of the motorcycle when they landed so that she wouldn’t buck up in her seat, hurting Aaron at best or being forcibly ejected at the worst. The shock didn’t so much as rattle her nerve and they continued to travel along the path. I have no idea what that jump is called, but I want to experience another! This is fantastic! “Again! Again!” she shouted with the glee of a child being pushed on a swing by one of their parents.

“You got it.” Aaron replied, catering to her demands. He spied another hill coming up, this one the taller than the last one and added hastily, “Hold on to your breakfast!” Shirley again pulled herself towards Aaron and waited with anticipation as the newly christened Sleipnir’s tires dug into the sod and pulled them up to the crest of the low hill. The top was there and gone in a blink of an eye and Divale rocked his body back hard, his strength causing the entire bike to spin in a circle in midair as they traveled further forward. It was at that point that Aaron could hear with great clarity Shirley screaming herself hoarse as they spun like a clock hand from a fixed position, going around not once but twice, before the journey ended with the wheels hitting a straight section at the end of the path leading to the main drag that would carry them to London proper. After the initial shock, Aaron brought the bike to a grinding halt, dust and small rocks kicking up into the air as they stopped. He kicked up the stand and got off the bike, Yeager’s grip coming away easily. It disturbed him and he looked at her out of concern. “You alright?” he asked, quickly looking her over for injures.

“Absolutely amazing.” Yeager replied dreamily, falling gently forward onto the front of bike, moving her arms against the side of the machine, stroking it with her fingers as if it were her lover. “I love this thing.” she added, nuzzling her face into the black leather seat.

Looks to be in more ways than one. “You want a turn?” he inquired. His statement caused Shirley to bolt upright and shift into the drivers seat with a speed that made frightened chipmunks look slow.

“Oh hell yes.” she commented with devilish grin. Aaron sat on the back of the seat and gripped the sides of the machine with his legs and hands. “Why are you doing that?” she asked, looking over her right shoulder at him.
“There are some potholes along the way.” Divale replied with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “You hit them wrong and my hands will shoot up into your, well, you know.”

“You make it sound like that’s a bad thing.” Shirley mocked. Aaron rolled his eyes as shook his head. “I’m kidding,” she assured, kicking the stand away. “I appreciate that.” With a crank of the accelerators, the duo rode ever onwards to London. During the first few seconds, Aaron lost himself in his thoughts. *Hope this works Gertrude, because this could very well be the last attempt.*

A turn of the key counterclockwise killed the engine to the motorcycle with a hard judder of gears. Soon gone was the hearty rumbling of an engine and in its place was an eerie silence as the pair found themselves in a rather well to do section of London, full of green space, black iron gated communities, and mostly vacant sidewalks, the random passing gentleman dressed in his Sunday best the only way to tell that this wasn’t some over the top ghost town. Opulence could be seen in the buildings, no longer brick, but full fledged stone and fine woods telling all who looked upon them that someone important was here, that someone here mattered. Neither of the two paid it much attention as they got off of Sleipnir, Yeager tossing Aaron the key with an underhand toss. He caught it easily and turned to face the storefront of Gieves and Hawkes. It was wide enough to the point where three of him could lay flat on the ground and there would be wiggle room, the wood and stone not showing so much as a sign of it’s one hundred and seventy plus year age, carefully and artfully maintained over the span of two centuries of serving England’s finest and best. Two large windows dominated the entrance way, scrubbed to a high sheen so that there wasn’t so much as an errant smudge of dirt from the road. Here, one could look inside at clothed mannequins, displaying the fashions of note or monthly specials, the price tags hidden from view until one inquired, as was customary. The door leading into the tailor shop was large and made of mahogany, waterproofed from the elements and featuring a silver door handle with the shop’s address proudly displayed at the level of one’s eyes, No 1 Saville Row.

Placing the key in his pocket, Aaron walked up to the door, Shirley following behind him, and opened it. Yeager stepped in first and had her breath taken away as the interior was far more sumptuous than the exterior. The air was filled with the scent of all manner of cloth, be it leather, wool, silk, or cotton, the aroma of prestige, of history. The walls were painted, not wallpapered, with a verdant green, here and there a black and white picture of the creative director shaking hands or standing next to celebrities, officials of state, and military elite. Above her, the ceiling was made of white tile, each one hand carved in the likeness of the company logo, one that was inlaid with gold filigree. Stands and plinths made of expensive and rare to find tropical woods served as brown islands, taking one on a nautical path through the store, traversing a blue carpet that carried no blemish or stain. Soft lighting from the outside and a trio of overhead chandeliers created the perfect atmosphere, one that was designed to awe and stick with you for years to come. “My God,” she muttered, barely remembering to move to the side so as to let Aaron through, “just a square foot of this carpet is worth more than my rank.”

Stepping through and closing the door behind him, Aaron added, “And probably more than my back pay.” He started to walk deeper in and gestured for her to follow him. Shirley obeyed and the two ventured deeper into the shop. About a few feet in, a large desk could be seen, one that was made of teak, manned by an young well to do gentleman, wearing a tailors smock, a green cap, a red tie, white button down business shirt with a green vest over it, and long tan slacks, secured with a black belt with a silver buckle. His hazel eyes regarded them both and he nodded in respect and greeting.

“Ah, Mister Divale,” he began, his voice rich and clear, “I see that you’ve received our notice in the post.”
“That I have,” Aaron answered, coming to a stop right in front of the man, “and I’m very glad for it. Again, I do humbly apologize for making such an unorthodox request.”

The tailor merely waved his right hand and shook his head. “Not at all sir.” he admitted, letting him know that all was fine. “We take pride in all of all our creations here at Gieves and Hawkes and yours is no exception.” Then he hunched down and reached underneath the countertop, returning with a white box, emblazoned with the company logo, and handed it to Aaron. “Thank you very much for your patronage sir. You and your lovely have a pleasant day.”

Shirley started to blush at such a statement and slowly turned around as Aaron made his excuses, not wanting him or the tailor to see that she was embarrassed. “Well,” Divale announced softly, giving her a tap on the shoulder, “off we go.”

“Right then.” Yeager affirmed without looking behind her, and proceeded to navigate herself towards the exit. Aaron chuckled as he tucked the package into the crook of his right arm as he followed her. After the pair had exited the shop and closed the door behind them, he turned to Shirley and stated, “Don’t feel hot and bothered by what he said in there, I get it all the time when a woman comes into a place with me. Happened so much in France that people believed that I had a secret harem. In fact, Gertrude got asked if she was my significant other when they looked for me at Belhurst, if you could believe that.”

Now, Shirley laughed as she got on the back of the bike. “That’s rich.” she chortled. Aaron walked to the motorcycle and handed her the package for safe keeping. As he sat down, taking his driver position, she noticed the envelope from Lucretia slightly sticking out of his front pocket. “So what did you get from Lucretia?” she asked.

“A bit of nunya.” Aaron answered, fishing for the key in his pocket.

“What’s that?” Shirley inquired.

“Nunya business.” Aaron deadpanned, making it clear that he wanted this line of questioning to end. Yeager felt slighted by this and decided that she wasn’t going to take a curt comment for an answer. With a dart of her left hand, she grabbed the letter and pulled it out of Aaron’s pocket, and opened it up before he even had a chance to realize what just happened. As she got the letter free, the photograph of his paramour fell out onto her lap, the scandalous nature fully exposed for her and all to see. By that time, Aaron had fully turned his neck around and cocked his right hand back, ready to reclaim his possession, but stopped in his attempt when he saw where the picture was.

“Son of a bitch.” he whispered, closing his eyes and grimacing.

Yeager’s eyes bugged out and uttered a wolf whistle. “That sheet is so thin I think I can see her v-” she observed, but Aaron cut her short.

“Very fascinating, but I would very much like to have that back if you don’t mind.” he demanded, crooking his index finger repeatedly.

Shirley picked up the photo and grinned. “What will you give me for it?” she asked with a hint of glee in her voice, knowing that she had him by the balls.

“Depends on what you wish.” Aaron replied, secretly apprehensive about what she could possible desire.

Yeager leaned in slowly, holding the picture away from him so that he couldn’t reach it fast enough and steal her blackmail away. “Oh I think you know what I want.” she said, tilting her head at the
Somewhat relieved, Aaron nodded and got up from the driver’s position, letting her shift in her position, cackling in her victory. “Alright you.” he agreed, watching her put the letter and picture back into the envelope. “Yet so help me, if there’s so much as a wrinkle in what I just got from that place anywhere, Perrine will make me live long enough to regret it.” he added, taking out the key from his pocket and handing it to her.

Yeager took it and gave Aaron back his letter. After waiting for him to sit down in the back, making painfully sure that the box wouldn’t get dirty or crushed in any way, she inserted the key into the ignition and said, “You’ll be fine. What’s the worst that could possibly happen?”

As Aaron got off the bike when they arrived back at the depot back at the castle, he couldn’t resist a small smile as he walked away from Shirley, who was placing the motorcycle back in its proper place. Well played captain, well played, but don’t think that I won’t get even if you blab about it. He opened the exit door and looked around, searching for someone to talk to, to inquire as to where Perrine could be so he could give her the package. No one could be seen down the hallway and he traveled the length of it, stopping here and there to peer in any of the side rooms for signs of occupation. Having no luck, he fell upon the idea of trying the mess hall, taking a right. Doing what they do requires a lot of caloric consumption so odds are high that at least one of them is there. Towards the end, he heard some joyful humming and sniffed the soft overtones of bergamot. His eyes glowed with realization. That’s Lynette’s voice and she’s got tea. She’ll know where she is.

Aaron picked up his pace and soon made it to the open doors. Inside, practically the whole squadron, save for Sanya, less to his chagrin, as she usually rested during the day due to her night flights and Perrine, much to his chagrin. They were sitting around the table, reading newspapers and enjoying cups of tea, a bowl of sugar, a carafe of cream, a bowl of honey, and a tray of biscuits in the center.

Lynette, holding a silver tray with three cups of steaming tea, walked up to Aaron and politely offered him a drink with a slight lifting of the platter. Aaron nodded and took up the saucer. “Any idea where I can find Clostermann?” he asked her, taking a sip.

“Perrine is in the kitchen.” Bishop reported, setting the platter down on a tray jack and taking her own drink from it. As she puffed over the surface in an attempt to cool it down, Aaron noticed that Lynette had a worried expression when she took an errant look at the doors leading into the kitchen. Something’s not right.

“Everything okay?” Divale asked with a bit of concern.

Lynette stopped what she was doing and looked to and fro, as if scared of who could be listening in. “Perrine’s been acting very strange today.” she whispered. “Ever since you left this morning, she’s been very quiet and wanting to be away from everyone. Hasn’t even eaten anything at all so far, just drinking that disgusting marigold tea straight. Something’s wrong with her, but no one else seems to pay it any mind, not even the commander, even when I brought it up to her attention.”

“Well, that ends now.” Aaron intoned and he advanced at the quick step towards the doors, the tattoo his boots made along the hardwood drawing the attention of everyone present. Minna looked up from her cup and the newspaper she was reading and cast Mio a look that made it clear that something was going to happen if he completed his journey. However, the major couldn’t get up from her seat fast enough to catch Divale, who opened the door and walked inside the kitchen. There in the farthest corner was Perrine, leaning against the counter, not even turning around to face him, a cup of tea next to her. That isn’t steaming at all and it looks like it hasn’t been touched. He placed the package near the sink and slowly walked behind her, trying to gauge from her body language
what was wrong. She’s upset about something. Be cool and collected. Upon getting close enough, Aaron stated softly, “A little lonely in here isn’t it?” That statement caused Perrine to reach for her tea cup with her right hand and take it to her, the vessel now hidden from view. Divale was about to say something else, but suddenly, Perrine whipped around, cup and saucer clutched in the palm of her right hand and slapped Aaron so hard in the face, that the porcelain shattered and knocked him hard to the ground. As he fell down to the tiled floor, he could see the tell tale redness of crying around the lieutenant’s eyes, the streaming tears still flowing down her face, one that was contorted with emotional stress and sadness as the shard of the cup and saucer whitshed through the air and struck everything in their path with the sound of glass falling.

“She’s upset about something. Be cool and collected.” She said softly, but then she whipped around, cup and saucer clutched in her palm and slapped Aaron so hard in the face, that the porcelain shattered and knocked him hard to the ground. As he fell down to the tiled floor, he could see the tell tale redness of crying around the lieutenant’s eyes, the streaming tears still flowing down her face, one that was contorted with emotional stress and sadness as the shard of the cup and saucer whitshed through the air and struck everything in their path with the sound of glass falling.

“Shut up and leave me alone!” she wailed in a voice full of sorrow and ran out of the kitchen, nearly running over Aaron’s prostrate frame, crushing the pieces of porcelain into dust, and almost bull rushing Mio into the wall in the process as she came in to investigate what was going on.

“Lieutenant Clostermann!” she shouted as Perrine sped away from her towards the mess hall doors, but Perrine didn’t listen, running like a woman possessed across the room and out the doors without a word of explanation, the squadron looking upon the fleeing woman with wonder. A groan drew her attention away from the fleeing French witch and she saw Aaron sit up. A nasty trio of cuts from the porcelain went across the left side of his face, but they weren’t very deep at all, at best superficial and no problem for him save for the sting and the blood that flowed down his cheek, the herbal tea coating him and the front of his shirt with a fragrant musk. “What did you do?” she demanded.

“I didn’t do a damn thing at all Mio!” Aaron retorted, drops of crimson dotting the floor as he stood up to his full height. “All I did was say, ‘A little lonely in here isn’t it?’, and she takes her cup and saucer and cracks me against the skull with it! What the hell is up with her!? What’s going on?!”

“Her mother passed away a year ago to the day Aaron.” a voice answered. Aaron looked away from Mio and saw Minna enter the room, her face carrying almost the same emotional distress that Perrine had. “She was very close to her, but that relationship took a turn for the worse when she told her about her decision to enlist. Perrine’s mother didn’t want her to serve, saying that it was no place for her, and the two argued viciously until Clostermann just up and left, saying that she was going to fight with or without her consent. Broke her mother’s heart. The two didn’t have much contact until she got a letter saying that her mother was in her final hours. I went with her to act as a witness. She got there to say her goodbyes, but there was still that old anger underneath the surface, that resentment.” She sighed and continued, “Those words that you said were the last ones that she heard from her mother’s lips before he died.”

Aaron stiffened and started shaking his head back and forth. “No. No. No. No.” he uttered quickly and he sprang for the door, weaving his body around his superiors.

“Sergeant!” Wilcke called out after him, trying to stop him. “Leave her alone!”

“Not until I make this right!” he shouted from over his shoulder, and he, like Perrine before him, ran through the mess hall and out the doors within seconds, leaving everyone in a state of shock and near panic at the intensity of his reply and the stern look to his face.

“Fuck!” Minna breathed under her breath. “Let’s go Mio!” She ran out of the kitchen in pursuit of Aaron.

“Understood!” Mio replied, but before she ran out of the area, she spotted the package near the sink and picked it up. With the box in tow, she ran down Minna before she reached the door and was followed by the rest of the squadron, who having recovered from the initial shock, all got up from their chairs and joined the chase.
Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron could see nothing as he rounded the corner and gusted up the hallway leading up towards the dormitories. In front of him, he just caught a glimpse of the sole of Perrine’s right foot as she made a quick left. That’s where she resides. Need to go faster. He unfurled his wings and flapped them once, propelling him forward down the remainder of the corridor and jinked around the left turn. Knowing that she was being pursued, Closterman turned around, still wracked with emotion and cried out while backing up towards a partially open door, “Leave me alone damn you! You’ve hurt me enough!”

Aaron tucked in his wings and advanced at the quick step with both his hands held in from of him, palms up in a gesture of meaning no harm and wanting calm. “I just want to talk to you.” he said in an imploring tone.

“Shut up! Go away!” Perrine shouted, jolting to the door of her room and pushing it open violently with her body. Divale tried to jog up to her and wedge his boot in the frame to prevent her from closing it, but he was too late. The door bolt latched with a click and the racking of a slide made it perfectly clear that it was now locked. Not to be thwarted so easily, Aaron balled his right hand into a fist and knocked on the door hard three times with a motion that made it look like that he was throwing a javelin, the booms reverberating up and down the hallway, just barely drowning out the hurried footsteps of the rest of the squadron. Have to make this fast.

Taking a deep breath, Aaron lowered the tone of his voice and leaned in towards the door. “Perrine, please open the door.” he pleaded.

“No I won’t! You can’t make me!” Clostermann retorted, the occasional sob being heard.

At that point, Minna and the rest of her command showed up, huffing and puffing and looking not at all amused with what was going on. They stopped and looked at Aaron standing right outside the door to Perrine’s room, hands on his hips and head downcast, searching for the words to say that could possible make the situation better. Mio made a move to go towards him, but Minna raised her hand and that arrested her attempt. Let’s see what he does first. “Perrine,” Aaron started again, “I didn’t know about it at all. If I was told, I would never have said that. You have my word on that.”

“To hell with you and to hell with your word!” Perrine countered. “You have brought nothing but problems since you came here!”

“Yet they got solved because I was here.” Aaron pointed out with emphasis. "You might be deaf and blind to what I’ve done, but no one else here is. If I wasn’t here, that banshee would’ve killed you, Shirley, and Yoshika in those woods. If it wasn’t for Mio and I, you never would’ve seen Amelie alive again. Yes, bad things happened while was I here, well so fucking what? This is war. Bad things happen everyday all the time and there’s no getting around that. You may not have been there in the beginning like I has, but you’ve been around long enough to know better.” Aaron breathed in again and uttered, “Just open the door Perrine and let us solve these so called problems for good.”

“The only way they’ll be solved is if you leave and never come back!” Perrine shouted. “I’ll never open the door for you, not in a million years!”

“Think about your situation for a second.” Aaron illuminated, changing his tactics. “You are in great internal turmoil, you are not thinking straight. Look around that room of yours. From what I’ve heard about it, you don’t keep food or water in there at all. Sooner or later, you have to come out to get something to eat or relieve yourself. Granted, there is a window that can be opened, allowing you to escape, but you’d have to get back inside in order to get to the mess hall because those windows don’t open. You might say back to me that you can just get inside through the windows of your squadron mates rooms, but I think after what happened in that kitchen today that the commander will put out the APB on not letting you in, or else punishments will be administrated to any who give you
aid.” He furrowed his brow and added, “I realize now that you have been in a lot of pain recently and
that may explain all of this behavior towards me. If that’s the reason, I forgive you for all of it.
I’m willing to make amends here and I’ll stand outside this door until doomsday if need be to make
that come to pass.”

“Well stand this!” Perrine bellowed. Though separated from the arguing pair by a good twenty feet,
Minna could hear with frightening clarity the cocking of a pistol. Her eyes widened in shock. She’s
not serious! Wilcke didn’t have any time to shout out a warning to Aaron before three rounds were
fired, blowing a trio of tiny holes in the double thick wood, and burying themselves in Aaron’s chest,
his service uniform billowing slightly from the impacts. The commander and the rest of the squadron
stood rigid, unable to move, unable to comprehend what was going on. For his part, Aaron had
raised his shields just in time, the small caliber rounds doing nothing but sticking out of his skin like
bronze acne. He fluffed out his shirt and the rounds fell to the carpeted floor, their falls fully muffled.

If anyone could get a good look at his face, Aaron would’ve scared them to death. So great was his
anger that his eyes went orange and he was trembling, his body trying it’s hardest to contain the ire,
to ward off the explosion. Through gritted teeth, Divale roared, spittle coming from his mouth and
lips, “Fine bitch, fine! You win! You want me gone you fucking got it! I’m signing a transfer order
and putting it on Commander Wilcke’s desk come the morning! You want to fly alone, go ahead!”
He started to turn away from the ruined door and added with venom and a resounding kick to the
lower section of the portal, the impact sounding like a tank round going off, “And you can die alone
you stuck up, spiteful, prejudiced, arrogant cunt!”

Sergeant Divale!” Minna called out with authority, intending to stop this matter dead in its tracks.

Aaron whipped his head around to face her and yelled back at her with a voice that shook the walls.
“Yes!” For a second, no one else spoke, but Divale looked around and saw the faces of his
comrades, all afraid, all concerned for everyone involved, and realized what he was doing wasn’t
helping. He bit his lip in frustration and forced down his anger before asking again with a more
respectful tone, “Yes, commander?”

“You are hereby remanded to your room until you calm down.” Wilcke ordered, holding her stern
gaze.

“I do remember having a duty to preform today.” Aaron pointed out politely, recalling the weapons
shipment that had to be cataloged and put away.

“That is currently on hold until you get a grip and things die down.” Minna forcibly explained. “Do
we have an understanding Sergeant Divale?”

“We have an understanding commander.” Aaron replied, turning around to leave with haste.

“And sergeant,” Minna added as he made his way down the hallway leading up to the stairs, making
him pause without looking back, “if you do intend to go through with what you said, be sure to have
that transfer order on my desk by oh eight hundred tomorrow morning sharp.” She watched Divale
give an almost imperceptible nod before he resumed his journey, taking the steps three at a time and
disappearing from view. She turned to the rest of the squadron and ordered, “Please go attend to your
duties. There’s nothing more to see here ladies. Dismissed.” Everyone started to fall out, not wanting
to stay in the vicinity any longer, that is everyone save for Mio and Lynette. Minna cocked her
eyebrow at Bishop. Mio sticking around I understand. Bishop answered her superior’s stare with a
hand gesture towards her head and then at the last position that Aaron was in. Then it all made sense
to Minna, recollecting what they had discussed earlier today. Wilcke ran her hands through her hair
and thought about it. It gets him out of the situation and might just calm him down to knock some
sense into him. Don’t like it at all, but it’s worth a shot. Regarding Lynette, she consented, “If he is
of sound mind, he can go with you, but make sure he comes back before oh eight hundred tomorrow. Take the back way and be careful.” Lynette smiled and gave a salute which Wilcke returned. That done, Bishop went the opposite direction and scampered away.

“Well isn’t this a fine bit of mess we have on our hands.” Mio remarked in a hushed tone, still holding the box from Gieves and Hawkes.

“Mess is not the word I would use to describe it.” Minna curtly quipped. “It’s a catastrophe. Wingmates shooting each other with live ammunition is something I never thought I would ever see under my command. This spits on my authority and yours. I need to put my foot down here and hard. This needs to end.”

“You want me nearby?” Mio asked, willing to do whatever was necessary to help.

Minna nodded and turned her attention to Perrine’s door, the holes leaking sunshine onto the rug. With measured steps, she and Mio stuck to the near wall, muffling their footsteps. I should’ve told him sooner and all of this might never have occurred. This is my fault and now I’m paying for it. As she got closer, Minna’s ears could pick up the sounds of heavy muffled crying from within. Poor girl, but I have to do this. Being close enough to the threshold, but not in front of it, Wilcke asked calmly after motioning for Sakamoto to stay put, “Perrine, can I come in? It’s me, Minna.”

Despite the thickness of the door, Wilcke silently breathed a sigh of relief as she heard a body come off a bed and heavy footsteps cross the carpet. Within seconds, a hand pulled away the dead bolt and Perrine answered in a hoarse voice, “It’s open.” Minna put her hand on the door knob and opened the door. Inside, Perrine’s room looked every bit the domicile for a woman of her birth, with elegant wooden furniture and luxurious fabrics, the thick carpet a sapphire blue, her family crest emblazoned upon everything. On the far wall was her dresser with a half mirror that could be turned in place to allow a better angle. A telescope sat in front of the open window, the blue curtains fully drawn back, a reminder of her hobby of stargazing on cloudless nights. Her rapier, a throwback to her days as a fencer training for the Olympics, sat in it’s scabbard, the main-gauche hanging on pegs next to it on the opposite wall near her nightstand and a bookcase filled with some hardcover novels and cheap paperbacks. In all, no expense was spared by her father to provide for his only daughter, his sole heir to his fortune and legacy. Perrine had backed away from the door and walked to her bed, holding her arms around her sides, looking down at the floor out of sadness and shame. Minna noticed the pistol on the cover sheet at the foot of her bed, a Walter like hers, twinkling like a silver bar in the sunlight. With great caution, Minna began her approach, keeping her eyes riveted to Perrine, watching for any sign of sudden movement, not wanting to endure the same outburst that Aaron got. “Turn around.” she said when she got within arms reach, standing near he bed, making sure that she was between her and the gun. Slowly, Clostermann turned around and Minna’s heart broke when she saw her face. It was red and contorted, deformed by the grief that consumed her mind. Her fox yellow eyes couldn’t rise up to meet her gaze and were mostly shrouded by her hair, matted like wet straw on her skin or twisted and jutting out at odd angles. Wilcke opened her arms and Perrine started to whimper, tiny tears leaking out of her eyes as she hugged her tight, sobbing into the left side of her chest. Minna parted the stuck on strands of Clostermann’s hair and held her close, sitting them both down on the bed and rocking her back and forth. As she held her, her thoughts drifted to the last time she held her like this, the day that her mother passed on. She was inconsolable, beyond all hope. Cried herself to sleep in my arms. I stayed with her, watching and making sure that in her grief she didn’t harm herself any more than she already had.

“Minna.” Perrine’s voice croaked within the fabric of Wilcke’s uniform. “I can’t. I can’t do it anymore. It’s too hard to bear.”
“It’s still fresh in your mind.” Minna consoled. “You will master this in time. I’m here is you ever need me, you know that.” Absentmindedly, she shook her head and remarked softly, “I knew I should’ve told Sergeant Divale sooner.”

That statement caused Perrine’s head to bob up suddenly, almost connecting with Minna’s chin. Her face was full of fear and confusion. “You told him about me and my mother?” she gasped. “You promised me that only Mio and Gertrude would be the only others. Why did you tell him?”

“All he wanted to do was help someone that he thought was in trouble.” Minna explained. “Good wingmen are supposed to do that.”

“He’s not a good wingman at all.” Perrine countered, not believing the reasoning for a second. “He’s been nothing but a nuisance and he doesn’t belong here at all.” She saw Wilcke’s face darken very quickly and the calming exterior of a mother caring for a child soon gave way to one of contained wrath. “Commander, please listen to-” Clostermann tried to add, but Minna’s lips curled in anger and it put to rest her pleas.

“No!” Minna retorted with heat, her eyes almost burrowing a hole through Perrine’s skull. “All I’ve and the major have done for the past three months was listen to your feeble explanations as to why every pilot we brought in to be your wingman was inadequate. Right now, you’re listening to me.” She continued to hold the lieutenant in her arms so that she could drive her point home. “You are a very good pilot Perrine, but every pilot needs help up there. A lonely pilot quickly becomes a dead one and you deep down know that. We have had eight, eight women, very capable witches all, get transferred here by the recommendation of Major Sakamoto and I in the attempt to find a match for you, to protect you.” Wilcke released her right arm and pointed at Clostermann with her index finger. “And you drove each and every one of them away, including the last one Toth.”

It was then that Perrine grew emboldened and decided to interject. “That Hungarian was reckless to the point of being borderline suicidal!” she exclaimed. “She never worked well with us at all! You can’t blame me for that one!”

Minna glared back at her and replied through gritted teeth, “Yes, I can and do. There were disagreements between her and several members of the squadron, but she was slowly coming around. The last great skirmish in mid January showed her the value of teamwork and she started flying like a real pilot. She was with you then, truly and fully, behind, in front, to the side, didn’t matter and for the first time in a very long time I was suddenly filled with hope that finally, finally we have found that missing link and you destroyed it.” She swallowed deep and continued with a more calmer voice, “Then, there was no warlock nor any seemingly ungentleman-like behavior being done that made you think that there was a so called problem, so why did you do it to Laura?”

Perrine opened her mouth, trying to find the words to defend herself from her superior’s onslaught, but nothing came out but small wheezes that ended as quickly as they began. In time, an answer came out as well as more tears. “I haven’t gotten over it commander, seeing my country, my home be destroyed. Everything I had was there, my family, my friends.” she offered, lips trembling with every syllable. “I felt like I failed France and I still do.”

“Which is why you put yourself in a position like this.” Minna illuminated, gently wiping away Clostermann’s tears with her right hand. “That is why you became a lone wolf, because of that burden, that cross you continue to bear. It changed you, making you believe that you had to personally atone for your weakness, shunning any and all help in order to do so even when it was to your advantage to do so. All that you tried to bottle up inside came out and caused everyone to leave. I find it a miracle that Lynette, despite the ringer you put her through had stayed.” Wilcke then became quite stern. “You’re doing the same thing to Yoshika right now and don’t even say that
you’re not because both the major and I have seen it with our own eyes. I’ve already have possibly
lost one pilot today because of your pride, if I lose another, things are going to get really hard around
because when Toth’s transfer out went through, I was presented a notice from the Allied Command
saying that the request list for transfers was severely curtailed against us, that we had an environment
that was quote “too unbecoming for effective growth and camaraderie”.”

Perrine’s eyes bugged out in surprise and Minna could see that what she said struck home like a
sniper’s bullet to the brain pan. “I don’t want another notice like that on my desk ever again.” she
stated in a soothing way. “With any luck, Aaron will realize that he’s making a mistake and retract
what he said. If that occurs, I want you to make a sincere effort to mend the relationship between you
two. He’s done enough heavy lifting and more over the course of almost two weeks, dong
everything right. Now it’s your turn lieutenant.” Minna then held Perrine’s chin in her right hand and
and tilted her head so that her yellow eyes met her brown ones. “I want you to swear to me that you
will do this in good faith.”

Clostermann could do nothing but look into the commander’s orbs and resign herself to her fate.
She’s right, absolutely right. I have been horrible to people and drove them away, but that Miyafuji
girl does need to go and as for him… “I will commander,” she swore, “but I don’t know where to
begin. He’s may be like an open book, but I can’t understand the language.”

“Just handle it one page at a time.” Minna suggested, letting her embrace go and getting up from the
bed, content that she had done good. “You can bring it on in Mio.” Cocking her eyebrow, Perrine
looked towards the open door and saw Major Sakamoto come in with a white box with the Gieves
and Hawkes logo on it. My uniform.

“Sorry I’m late. I had to bring a friend. Aaron. A friend? What does he mean by that? Is there something else in the box? Seeing if her theory was true, Perrine carefully picked up the uniform and stood stark still, not even breathing as she gazed upon
what laid beneath. Even Minna and Mio gasped in awe. Hidden by her uniform was a piece of
clothing that Perrine could only have imagined being in possession of, one that was promised by her
mother so long ago, yet cruelly taken away by her death. It was a sapphire blue sundress made
entirely of silk, the edges white with raised yellow fleur de lis and her family crest separated by red
diamonds. A white sash around the waist was secured by a gentle bow and two side loops on the
back. Her hands lost their grip on the uniform and it fell unceremoniously onto her bed with a dull
thump and she took up the sundress in her arms, holding it close like a loved one. All the while
questions raced through her dazed and confused mind. How? Why? Who? It was then that she had
the answer and frantically thumbed her communicator to Gertrude’s frequency. “Trude,” she called
into it, “I need to talk to you.”

The answer came back with a second. “I had a feeling you would.” Barkhorn replied.
“Aperta!” Aaron snarled as he got near the door to his room, unbuttoning the first few buttons of his uniform that was still slightly damp with marigold tea and with three holes in his lower abdomen. Immediately, his magic opened the thick door and he barged in, ripping the shirt off him, the cloth taking off his glasses in the process, the spectacles getting lost in the folds of the tan overshirt as he threw it against the wall hard, the impact sounding like a waterlogged cape falling from a coat rack. He balled both his fists and ran them over his temples and around his skull, grinding into his hair and stretching his skin tight to the point of shearing. Closing his eyes and biting his lip, he gritted his teeth, the breath coming out in feverish rasps. The fucking bitch! Ismenoth was right all along! She would go to any lengths to get me out of here and she got her wish! Not liking the sting of defeat nor admitting that the demoness was correct, he opened his eyes and whirled around, cocking his right arm back, looking to punch the nearest object in frustration. Given his position in the room, he stood to connect with the glass half mirror on his desk, but he stopped, the knuckles mere inches way from the pane.

Growling like an animal, Aaron faced his reflection, one that was every bit the definition of caged violence. His lips were pressed hard and the contours of his face were rigid. The eyes were oscillating from molten bronze to orange and back again as fast as the beat of the bal musette that he danced with Sanya at the coven. On the left cheek, his wound had already closed up and almost disappeared due to his passive healing, the flaky clotted blood that still remained on his face the color of plums. Suddenly, the mirror began to smoke. Can’t resist to see me in agony huh? Swirling into view was the upper torso of Ismenoth who simply stared at Aaron with her black eyes, her face expressionless. “Go ahead and say it.” Aaron dared, retracting his right arm and looking away from her.

“I’m only going to say that the warning signs were there all along.” the fiend stated flatly. “Sign the order and get it to Commander Wilcke pronto. Let’s get out of this shithole and have some real fun Aaron. Let’s make them regret pairing you with that French blueblood.”

Gladly. Divale then went over to the caisson and opened it up, rummaging through its contents, looking for his straight razor. Finding it, he opened a false panel, a hollow chamber along the left side and pulled out a heavily folded piece of paper. Good thing I used a shroud spell on this thing before I got here or else Mio would’ve found it. He casually tossed it back in the chest and walked to the desk, spreading it out in his hands. When he got to the chair, he sat down and laid the sheet on the desktop. It was a transfer order, the same one that every malcontent received when they wanted out. Though Eisenhower and Churchill had lofty expectations for him here, they also realized that it was a great risk, one that needed to be corrected if things went south. Reluctantly, the general presigned the order, handing it to Aaron during the car ride up to Dover Castle saying that if things didn’t pan out, that he would grant it as soon as he could. All Aaron had to do was fill out his name, the date, reason for leaving, and all was done. If getting out of trouble was this easy, I wouldn’t be a soldier at all.

Then something caught the edge of his vision and his eyes darted back to the mirror just in time to see Ismenoth’s image fade from view. Someone’s coming. He turned around and saw the fringe of Lynette’s head disappear quick behind the left side of the door frame out of fright at having been discovered and unsure if he was alright. After a bit, she poked her head out again and tentatively asked, “Are you okay Aaron?”

Divale calmed down and nodded. “I’m a little steamed, but I’m tolerable Lynn. Come on in.”

Bishop slowly moved around the frame and walked into Aaron’s room. It was the first time that she saw it and was at first appalled by the living conditions. The walls were still bare, but free of dust and his shelves on the far wall were filled to the point of bursting with all manner of books with some stacked in knee high piles on the floor next to it. In the right hand corner was his easel, a canvas
tucked in the grooves that had the beginning sketches of some flowering trees over looking a hillside, the tops of a castle of far eastern architecture visible. As for his bed, it was shabby and unmade, the caisson wide open at the foot of it. *It isn’t much at all but it seems homely enough.* She walked up to Aaron and placed a reassuring hand on his right shoulder, a gesture that made him bend his right arm up and clasp her hand with a gentle squeeze. Looking down, she saw the transfer order and her eyes narrowed. “You had one all the time?” she inquired, a hint of sadness in her voice.

“Yes.” Aaron answered without mirth, eyes downcast as if he were receiving a dressing down that he deserved. “General Eisenhower himself gave it to me on my way here earlier this month. Said it was his version of an insurance policy.”

Lynette regarded Aaron with her blue eyes and queried, “Are you really going to sign it?”

Aaron swallowed hard and let his grip on her hand go. “I see no reason why not considering the present circumstances.” he replied, craning his neck and reaching for a drawer, trying to search for a pen. It was at that moment that Lynette felt something stir in her, a feeling of concerned anger, one that forced her body into action. *He’s not thinking straight, going off of his heart rather than his brain. He’s not going out like this! I refuse!* Her hand darted forward and grabbed the sheet of paper from the desk, catching Aaron completely off guard and ran towards the door. While surprised, Divale reacted fast, holding out his hand at the open portal and calling out, “Murus!” Bishop stopped dead in her tracks as a shimmering wall of green crackling energy covered the exit, her sole escape route blocked. She heard the creaking of a chair and whipped around, holding the transfer order behind her and backed away and into the nearest corner, her back flush with the rough stone wall.

Aaron got up from his seat and glared at her like an elder that had been insulted at a family gathering and took one step towards her, right hand outstretched and palm open. “The paper please.” he requested flatly.

“No!” Lynette replied with force.

Aaron’s head cocked to the side and his eyes blinked repeatedly, his mind not believing what was just said to him. “Excuse me?” he uttered in a menacing tone.

“You’re not thinking straight right now Aaron.” Bishop explained. “Emotion is clouding your judgment. You need to calm down and think clearly about what you’re doing.”

“I am thinking clearly Bishop.” Aaron growled, his patience nearing an end. “There is nothing more I can do to salvage the situation here and we both know it.” He took another step towards her, moving at an angle so that he was square with her, his boot heels near the side of his bed. “I’m not asking anymore, I’m telling you.” Suddenly, his right hand began to glow red, orange runes appearing on his knuckles and fingernails, and he pointed his arm right at the witch. “I’m giving you to the count of three to give me my transfer order or I’m going to make you give to me, and it won’t be pretty.” he warned. “One.”

“You don’t have it in you Aaron.” Lynette observed, standing her ground without fear in her posture or voice.

“We’ll see.” Divale retorted. “Two.”

Bishop then began to cry, a single tear rolling down her face. “Would you really hurt me over something like this?” she asked, lips trembling. Aaron opened his mouth and was about to say three when a hard thought rammed itself into his head, like an icicle embedding itself into a snowbank after breaking loose from a eave. *What the hell are you doing Divale?! Stop it now!* The effect was immediate. Within a second, the magic in his hand went away and he fell backwards onto his bed,
the wooden frame groaning in protest as his bulk landed on it. He kept his arm level with her eyes and quickly leaned forward, arresting his tumble. Aaron was breathing hard, deep gulping breaths with beads of cold sweat running down the back of his neck as if he just woke up from one of his nightmares. His eyes were filled with fear, an intense fright that caused his right hand to shake. Over the course of seconds that seemed like hours, he fell backwards onto his bed, hands over his face, moaning as if in pain. Keeping her distance, Lynette took one step towards the warlock, mewling like a wounded animal. She hesitated as he took his hands away from his face, gasping as if coming up for air and looked at her.

“Lynn I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.” Aaron apologized, sitting up slowly. “Please forgive me. I wasn’t myself.”

“I do Aaron.” Bishop assured him, moving the paper in front of her, but still clasping it firmly in her hands. “I knew the moment when you said those things to Perrine that you weren’t in control.” Putting the paper in her front pocket, she walked up and sat down next to him, giving him a hug of support. “You’re emotions got the best of you, just like hers.” Lynette looked up at him and inquired, “Did you mean what you said back there, that you forgave her for acting out towards you like that due to her being down for some reason?”

Aaron nodded. “Yes I did,” he illuminated, embracing her, “I forgave her for all of it, though I doubt that she’ll forgive me.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t wait around long enough to find out.” Lynette countered. “This was a very big moment between you two, one that I think will yield positive results if you both just give each other space and time to calm down. Let yourself sit on it for a day and then try again. Can you promise me that you’ll do that for me, and you?” Aaron simply nodded and was intent on leaving it at that, but a tiny left hand took him by his chin and tilted his head towards Lynette’s face. “Where I’m from,” she intoned, “you look at the person you’re making the promise to.”

Understanding that he now had no choice, Aaron stated solemnly, “I promise Lynn.” He then looked down at the pocket that contained the transfer order and started to reach for it, but Bishop’s other hand covered up the opening.

“I’ll hold onto it for a little longer,” she explained, “not because I don’t trust you to keep your word, but because if you do decide to leave, I want to be the first one to say goodbye.”

Tears welled up in Aaron’s eyes at such sentimentality and he nodded. “If that does happen, you’ll be given farewells as a friend of mine.” He hugged her and added, “Welcome to the circle.” Withdrawing his embrace, he got up from the bed and dispelled the magical barrier at the door. He then turned towards Lynette who he expected to get up and leave, but she just sat there as if it were her room instead of his. Aaron cocked his eyebrow. “Is there something else you want to talk about?” he asked.

“My mother wants to meet you and my sister Wilma is picking us both up in less than half a hour from now.” Bishop replied.

Aaron froze in shock. “I’m going to meet her mother, my idol?! “Even after all of that, I can go?” he asked in disbelief, gesturing out the door.

“Commander Wilcke gave me the go ahead if you were of sound mind.” Lynette explained.

Quickly, Aaron went through the numbers in his head. Alright now Divale, you have the shipment that you can use magic for handling, labeling, and storing. ETA maybe ten minutes if everything is in order, fifteen at the worst, which gives me another quarter hour to play around with. Piece of
“Alright Bishop,” he said walking briskly to his desk, “I’ll get everything done up before she arrives.”

“However Aaron,” Lynette began to explain as she got up from his bed, “I deeply suggest you prepare yourself.” She waited until he turned around to face her before continuing, “Knowing my sister, she wouldn’t embark on this venture alone, and I have a very good feeling who she would take with her.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Courtesy of Lynette's mother, Aaron is taken to the family estate in Sudbury. Along the way, Wilma's friends engage in dialogue with him to seemingly pass the time, a conversation that reminds them at the end to never underestimate the wit of a warlock. Later on, Aaron confronts his childhood idol and feels the bite of an old lioness.

Chapter XXVI: Coming Down The Mountain

No organization works in perfect harmony and never is this shown to be more true than in a military unit. Though united in purpose and bound by blood in some sense of the word, we bicker, we fight, and we certainly have some rough times. Despite it all, we remember that in the end, we're all brothers and that nothing could ever divide us, that no trifling matter would stand in the way of doing our job. Reminds me more of a family than anything else, a family that I didn't willingly choose, but if I did have a choice in the matter, I'd take it in a heartbeat.

Diary Entry January 27th 1940

Lynette waited patiently at the stone steps for her sister to show up and looked at her timepiece. Aaron's still not here. I hope he doesn't make her wait because if there is one thing that Wilma hates more than anything is waiting. Mother why are you doing this to me again? The sun was shining now through breaks in the cloud cover and the wind had died down considerably from the morning, which made waiting outside less of a hassle. Bishop was dressed in her spare uniform, every care taken to make sure that every wrinkle was ironed out prior to departure, and she redid her braid so that there wouldn’t be any stray hairs poking out. Suddenly, the thrum of an engine could be heard around the corner and her heart began beating fast. Last time I saw her was at the wedding not too long ago, but I still miss her when we’re apart. The sound of tires rolling on pavement got louder and louder until, coming up the drive, came a cream colored Rolls Royce that was custom made to have a bigger passenger compartment that allowed for not only more people, but brought them face to face, like the arrangement found on stagecoaches. The windows were smoked to the point of being gray reflective sheets, fully rolled up to keep in the warmth. It came to a halt and out from the passenger side door came her sister Wilma, smiling in the sun.

She was the same height as her, though older by a good three years. Features in the upper body were virtually identical with the blue eyes, blond hair, fair skin, and strong shoulders. They even had the same rank and role as a sniper, though even Lynette had to admit that Wilma could shoot better than her. Wilma had on her old uniform, gray boots, red and near orange knee high stockings, brown leather bomber jacket with her old unit patch still on the right shoulder, the 416th RAF, a long creased white shirt, a red scarf around her neck, and a brown cap that was slightly off centered on her head. “Lynn!” Wilma cried out, advancing at the quick step and extending her arms in
sisterhood. Lynette also moved in fast and laughed as the two came together and hugged each other in greeting. “It’s so go to see you. How have you been?” she asked.

“I’ve been well Wilma, thank you.” Lynette replied. Her eyes wandered to the wedding ring that her sister wore on her left hand, a twenty four carat gold band with mother of pearl inlay and three diamonds. “Wow. It’s even more beautiful up close.” she commented.

“Yes it is.” Wilma admitted, letting her embrace go and looking at her hand. “Still getting used to it.” She then looked around and frowned. “Speaking of close, where is this Sergeant Divale of yours? I thought you said he wouldn’t be late.”

“I’m never late.” a male voice echoed from beyond the threshold. Both witches looked at the doorway and saw Aaron emerge, dressed to impress. Gone was his khaki uniform and in its place was a white dress shirt with a powder blue cotton vest over it, long black slacks that terminated at a pair of shiny black dress shoes and secured with a leather belt with a silver buckle, and wearing his glasses, the aluminum frame catching rays from the sun. His hair was neatly combed and his face clean shaven. In his right hand, he carried his sergeant chevrons and began to affix them to his collar. “I arrive exactly when I mean to.” he added with a grin when he finished up. “So you are Wilma Bishop.” he deduced. The two are almost identical, might even pass as twins at first glance, but she is more energetic judging from the body language. And what’s this? He saw the wedding band on Wilma’s hand and quickly made an apology. “Forgive me, Mrs. Wilma Bishop.”

When she saw him for the first time, Wilma simply stared in amazement and her jaw dropped at witnessing just the sheer size of the man in front of her. That’s a lot of man on that frame. Easy 6’4”. Is he even going to fit inside the car? When he made his apology, she brought it all back and she waved her right hand in a way that made it clear that none was needed. “Mrs. Peterborough actually.” she illuminated.

Aaron’s eyes opened that much wider as he heard the name. “Peterborough?” he asked absentmindedly, his mind working to connect two pieces of a puzzle, eyes darting this way and that. “Mrs. Edmund Fitzgerald Peterborough?”

“Why yes!” Wilma exclaimed in shock. “He’s my husband.”

Aaron looked off to the side and gave an exhaled of disbelief, shaking his head and smiling. “Edmund and I have known each other for a good three months. He and his team got me out of France twice, once in December of last year, and again earlier this month, and I owe him greatly. The captain’s a good man, hold onto him, for he’s worth it.” he explained.

“I will, thank you.” Wilma graciously replied. She looked at him and added, “Well Lynette, you were right about him. He’s very polite and just full of surprises.”

When she finished saying that, Aaron’s brow furrowed and he gave Lynette a questioning look. “I didn’t say anything other than the basics,” the younger Bishop reassured.

“And only from what mother had told me about you from the records she managed to get from her connections in the War Ministry.” Wilma added.

So The Lioness of Flanders is prowling around my personal files eh? Trying to find out more about me before I come on over? This day is starting to get interesting really fast. “And are those records valid enough to do me justice?” he asked them both.

“Some parts do fall very short of the reality.” Wilma admitted, backtracking to the still open car door, “but I can see that you’re a solid soldier whose used to fighting on the front lines given that little scar
on your face. But we can talk about you more when we get underway.” Aaron walked behind Lynette and let her get in first, Bishop situating herself on the left side, away from her sister. Divale made a move to get in and nearly hesitated when he saw another two pairs of legs on the right side, these ones to the left and right of Wilma. *This must be the company Lynette warned me about.* Steeling himself for any possible trouble, Aaron bent down and entered the Rolls Royce and closed the door behind him. Upon hearing the door close, the driver shifted gears and started to drive out of the castle, making the long circuitous loop towards the main gate. Unlike the car used to take him up to Dover Castle earlier in the month, this interior was actually big enough to accommodate his size in terms of leg room and width, but his head came awfully close to the roof to the point that Aaron had to slouch forward.

When he finally got comfortable, he regarded the two other witches that Wilma brought with her. On her left was an intimidating German with fair skin, clothed in a long gun metal gray overcoat that came down to the tips of her black combat boots and a gray cap with a Luftwaffe insignia. Her eyes were a mix of brown and green, a rare form of mossy hazel. Along the bridge of her nose was a long scar that ran under her eyes and along her cheek bones. Long blond hair that went down to her waist was secured by a gray ribbon. Her hands were clad in brown gloves and the fingers were curved, never straight, and the woman was flexing them every so often. *This one’s a fighter and a tall one too. Probably 5’7” minus the boots. Tough witch that’s seen a lot of action. Has the battle twitches going on in the hands. She’s agitated, almost like she doesn’t want to be here right now. As for the one on the right, Aaron faced a woman who looked more or less intimidating than the former with a paler complexion than Wilma, a shade that was close to Eila’s but not quite. Her hair was brown and came to the tips of her shoulders, contrasting the blue eyes that looked him up and down. The witch wore long black stockings, the tops disappearing under a thick white wool sweater that had dark brown felt patches on the elbows and shoulders and a collared white undershirt. Along her waist, she carried a black belt with a long black handled kukri knife. *Again, another fighter. Shorter at probably 5’4”, but certainly not a push over. The eyes carry some sort of sadness inside them and… oh boy, this one has that twinkle in them too. Just my luck.*

“These are my close friends,” Wilma began, gesturing to her left and right respectively with her head, “Major Hanna Rudel of the StG 2, 3rd Squadron and Sergeant Elizabeth Beurling of the 403rd RCAF.”

Rudel inclined her head silently in greeting while Beurling shot Wilma a heated glance. “I’d prefer if you said the 507th JFW thank you very much.” she stated gruffly. Wilma shrugged and rolled her eyes, which caused Elizabeth to divert her attention from her to Aaron again, tilting her head to the right side and cocking her eyebrow. “You packing?” she asked.

Aaron followed her gaze and looked down at his crotch. He answered her question with one of his own. “This a trick question?”

Instead of replying, the Canadian smiled, raised her left leg, and crooked her toes. She moved it up Aaron’s left leg, his gaze never going lower than the level of her eyes, slowly from the ankle to the upper thigh before tapping her big toe against both front pockets, the movement sparking a metallic tink that reverberated within the passenger compartment. Catching her drift, Aaron reached into both his front pockets and pulled out two flasks. “Gin or whiskey?” he asked, shaking the left than the right as he rattled off the contents.

“Definitely the gin.” Elizabeth answered, pulling her leg back and rubbing her hands in anticipation. Aaron handed her the flask and got a shocked look from Lynette.

“I know it’s your cheat day Aaron, but the commander said only one drink.” she stated.
“In my view,” Aaron defended, opening the whiskey flask and holding it near his mouth, “a drink is equal to sixteen fluid ounces and these flasks here only hold eight. Combined, they are equal to a full drink. Plus, the agreement we have is only applicable to alcohol consumed on base grounds, and as of probably thirty seconds ago, I’m in neutral territory, making me the master of my fate in that department.”

“Cheers to rule lawyering.” Elizabeth crowed, raising her now open flask of gin. Divale returned the gesture and they both took a swig from the metal vessels. “Good stuff.” she commented, savoring the liquor and handing it back to him. “You didn’t skimp on the quality.”

“Never do.” Aaron replied, taking a swig from the gin as well before closing both flasks back up and putting them back in his pockets.

“Having the courage to bend the rules to your advantage is good, but make sure you understand the risks involved in that or else you’re only going to shortchange yourself.” Hanna quipped from the side.

“Speaking of courage,” Wilma observed leaning forward, her tone suspicious, “I’ve been noticing that Lynn is sitting awfully close to you. Care to elaborate on that?”

Puzzled, Aaron looked over at Lynette and she looked at him and both saw that they were indeed sitting close to each other, almost to the point where their hips could touch with just a small readjustment. They replied in unison, waving their hands, “Oh no, no, no.”

“Nothing at all like that is happening between us.” Aaron anxiously imported. “Not in a million years.”

“And why not?” Elizabeth inquired. “Is she not attractive enough for you?”

“Beurling!” Wilma retorted in horror at such a bold statement.

“It’s a fair question.” Hanna countered. “One that I think should be answered sergeant.”

Now put on the spot, Aaron held up three fingers on his right hand and explained, each completed reason resulting in a finger being retracted, “First, I’m an enlisted man. Next, I’m a taken enlisted man. Finally and most importantly, I’m a taken enlisted man who her family might not approve of.”

Wilma put a hand to her face and thought. A man with moral scruples? Interesting. “What’s so wrong with you?” she asked.

Aaron pulled down his glasses from his nose and showed all inside the passenger compartment his true eyes. “Where do you want me to begin?” he inquired, placing them back on his face after he made his point.

“The quirks of the human body are nothing to be ashamed of.” Hanna piped up, unfazed by him. “We’re all different and unique and you should embrace such a thing not as a shortcoming, but a defining feature of your being.”

“Say’s the one who had no problem walking around naked on base grounds.” Elizabeth muttered under her breath.

Looking to bring the three ring circus back to earth for a bit, Aaron regarded Wilma and queried, “So where are we going?”

“To the family home in Sudbury.” the elder Bishop answered.
Aaron looked down and away, thinking, trying to remember the details of a map of all of Great Britain that he saw during his stay underneath the city of London. “That’s out in the country.” he recollected. “North of Colchester I think right?”

“Yes you are.” Lynette affirmed. “We live on the outskirts of the town so it’s really quiet and beautiful.”

“I look forward to seeing it.” Aaron said while wincing a tad and shifting his position in his seat.

“You look to be uncomfortable there sergeant.” Elizabeth observed. “Ant’s in your pants?”

“I don’t really wear underwear all that much.” Aaron answered, a bit embarrassed. The whole group proceeded to laugh raucously and Divale sank down into the black leather, trying his best to vanish and hide his mortal shame. “Well I don’t!” he exclaimed, only raising his voice a half octave.

“You really are full of surprises.” Wilma chuckled, calming down. “Now, it’s going to be a long ride to home, so I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind answering some questions that we have for you.”

Aaron immediately regained his spirit and sat back up, raising to his full height. He furrowed his brow and looked at Wilma for a good few seconds in silence before nodding slowly. “You want to act as a go between for your mother, relaying information to her before we get there am I right?” he asked, his tone not at all accusatory. Wilma stiffened and she looked frantically at her friends who maintained their demeanor. “I am right aren’t I?” Divale went on. “And I’m willing to bet money that Hanna and Elizabeth here are the second and third opinions, one of which is probably bugged with a listening device. The only question is who?”

Lynette took an interest in what was going on and saw that all three witches were not feeling so confident. Hanna lifted her cap up by the faintest of degrees, revealing a communicator, a thin wire moving away from her scalp and disappearing behind her back, hidden by her long hair. She grew angry and seethed, “He’s not some criminal you guys, he’s a good man, a man that has saved many lives already within the squadron.”

Wilma put up both her hands. “We know that.” she calmly said, trying to deescalate the situation. “Mother is just looking out for you, that’s all.”

“Your sister is right.” Elizabeth added with Hanna giving a silent nod in approval.

“I’m eighteen years old! I’m not a child anymore! I have my own life now!” Lynette ranted, getting angrier.

“Your mother loves you.” Aaron stated, bringing attention to him. Lynette stopped raving and looked at him. “No matter how old you all get, you’ll always be her daughter and she’s wants to be a part of your life for as long as possible. Parents never stop worrying about their kids. You’ll understand that later on, believe me.”

The younger Bishop’s shoulders sagged, her ire gone in an instant, and looked at her sister. “I’m sorry.” she apologized, recognizing that there was no bad intentions.

“Me too.” admitted Wilma, taking her sister by the hand.

“And me for cutting this tender moment short.” Aaron interjected. “Now, what questions do you all have for me?”

“Plenty and to spare.” Hanna replied, leaning forward and steepling her hands. “Even if a fraction of what Wilma let us know about you is true, it paints a picture of something that borders the
“Like is it true that you fought from Leningrad to Lyon, Abbeville to Athens, and all points in between?” Elizabeth asked.

“That is true.” Aaron answered without doubt in his voice.

“Is it also true that you deadlocked the enemy along the Carpathians for over half a year, buying us time to regroup?” Wilma inquired.

“That is true as well.” Aaron replied.

“And is it true that you took a shot to the heart and lived through doing surgery on yourself during a heated battle?” Hanna queried. Aaron merely nodded, not wishing to repeat that it was true, a move that made Rudel, lean back, cross her arms, and utter, “That’s a load of horseshit.”

Aaron’s face grew stern and he took off his vest, casting it off to his right side near the door. He unbuttoned the top three buttons before pulling down the dress shirt, revealing the chest wound that he carried since Kharkov. “Horseshit this.” he dared.

Hanna looked at the wound and nodded, an implicit admission that she was wrong and pressed with a hint of curiosity, “Any more besides?”

Divale then took off his overshirt, revealing to all his bare scarred chest, arms, and abdomen. “Jesus Christ.” Elizabeth gasped, staring at him in awe.

“Bloody hell.” Wilma breathed, putting her hands to her mouth. “How are you still breathing?”

“I learned quick and got lucky numerous times.” Aaron suggested, shrugging his shoulders. “Other than that, I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

“I think that all might just equal mine.” Hanna admitted. Aaron looked at her as he drew up her overcoat at an angle, revealing her right leg, one that was heavily marked up with slash, puncture, and stitch scars, some of the flesh dimpled inwards from loss of tissue. He looked it over and noticed that there was a pattern and he figured out what it was within a second.

“Spiral fracture.” Divale deduced. “Missed your femoral by a hair.”

“Got this in Memel.” Hanna explained. “Around the same time I got the one on my face. A lucky beam knocked out both my Strikers and I had to execute a crash landing in rocky terrain. Put me out of action for four months and hated every single second of it.”

“I’ll bet. “Do any of you mind me asking questions?” Aaron asked.

“Yes actually.” Elizabeth rang out. “You’re the one we need to get squared away, not us.”

“Now that’s hardly fair.” Aaron remarked.

“Nothing’s fair in life.” Hanna added. “Take it or leave it.”

“You’ve probably heard that I can read people very well.” Aaron intoned. “My assumptions are rarely wrong.”

“Put your money where your mouth is buddy and I’ll let you assume me first.” Beurling boldly volunteered. “Both your flasks that you get something wrong.”
Aaron nodded and leaned forward, placing his right hand under his chin, knuckles flush against the skin, and looked deep into Elizabeth’s blue eyes. His breathing slowed to the point where stood motionless, like a colored living parody of Rodin’s Thinker. After a good while, he opened his mouth and spoke, “You’re not a born soldier, but you’ve been raised as one. The fingers are slim and limber, perfect for handling a knife or a gun. There’s this spark of mischief in your eyes, born mostly from an innate distaste of the ordinary. You value freedom and the ability to do what you want and you resent any who try to curtail that.” He squinted his eyes and continued, “Yet like me, there’s a pall of despair behind them, a leftover from some massive pain that you experienced long ago, a regret that no amount of alcohol can wash away in order to make you live it down, one that I know very well.”

All the witches looked at Elizabeth as she gasped, moving against the black leather cushioned seat back, trying to get away, but failing. Her lips started to tremble in fright as Aaron hit everything on the head, sobering up from the gin in an instant. “Can you read minds?” she breathed, her eyes locked to his.

“No,” Aaron answered simply, almost sad, “just people. I have a very strong theory as to what plagues you, but out of respect, I’ll keep it to myself.”

Beurling slowly calmed down and nodded out of thanks. Aaron then turned his attention to Hanna who had been looking at her friend across the way in wonder and concern, yet now diverted her attention to him, glaring at him with those moss colored eyes of hers, almost daring him to try to figure her out. “You’re a born warrior, that’s easy to tell. However, it’s not from the scars you carry, but the hands. Every so often, the fingers twitch, especially the index, pulling an invisible trigger, and the rest of the digits follow suit, clasping a grip or barrel. Having a gun in your hands is as natural to your being as a tail is to a fish.” He leaned forwards and eschewed the English in favor of German. “Die Verletzungen, die Sie erlitten haben, sind ein Zeichen dafür, dass Sie nicht nur das tun, was Sie tun, sondern auch große Risiken eingehen. Aber das ist die offizielle Geschichte, die man den Leuten gibt. Inoffiziell hat etwas auf dem Weg aufgehört, dich vor Schaden zu schützen, etwas, das du für selbstverständlich hielt, da zu sein, wenn du es brauchst, genau das, was eine Hexe so lange leben lässt. (The injuries you’ve suffered are indicative of not only what you do, but in also taking great risks. However, that’s the official story you give people. Unofficially, something along the way stopped protecting you from harm, something that you took for granted to be there when you needed it, the very thing that makes a witch live for so long).”

Hanna’s eyes widened in surprise and she went paler than any in that passenger compartment thought possible, experiencing for the first time in a very long time, fear. “Ich habe noch nie jemandem davon erzählt, mit Ausnahme der- (I’ve never told anybody about that with the exception of-)” she began to say, but Aaron held up his right hand, politely interrupting her.

“Und so wird es auch bleiben. Mehr werde ich dazu nicht sagen (And it will remain that way. I’ll say no more on the matter).” Divale swore.

Elizabeth glanced over at Rudel and grew concerned. She’s never been this spooked, even when we were wingmen in the Baltic Area. “Hanna, what did he say to you?” she asked.

“It’s personal business.” Hanna replied curtly. “Nothing is wrong.”

Beurling pressed, “What did he-”

The German witch rounded in her seat and gave Elizabeth a hard, mean stare, one that made it clear to everyone, Beurling included, that the matter was not up for discussion. Looking to dissolve the tension, Wilma piped up, “What can you tell about me?”
Aaron cocked his eyebrows and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. “You sure you want me to do that?” he inquired.

“I am what I am and I’ve nothing to hide.” Bishop replied.

It took all of five seconds for Aaron to respond. “You are the neutral of the group, the border that separates yet binds the two halves of discipline and anarchy together into one harmonious whole. Much rode on your shoulders during your youth, being the elder, setting examples for your sister to later follow. Lots of energy within you and-” He paused as he looked into her eyes and smiled, marveling, “You’re an optimist, a very rare type of breed in this day and age.” That smile faded away as he continued, “Yet something is amiss within them. Loneliness?”

Wilma looked down and clasped her hands. “I do feel lonely.” she answered at length sadly. “Edmund and I have really never spent any meaningful length of time together given what he does. Just as he got back from an operation, he was sent on another. Normally he tells me what he’s doing when he’s able to, calming me down, but this time he only said that it came straight from the top brass in Dover. I miss him terribly and I worry about him constantly.”

Aaron then reached over and clasped his hands over hers, his massive paws engulfing hers completely, save for the ring on her finger. “Edmund will be okay.” he assured. “He’s a big boy that knows the risks. He’ll do everything in his power to get back to you.”

Wilma looked at Aaron and said, “You’re very kind Aaron, thank you.”

“Oh he most certainly can.” Lynette replied enthusiastically from across the way. “At our coven he sang Puccini’s Nessun Dorma with Sanya.”

Elizabeth utter a low whistle and remarked, “That’s some heady stuff, but I’m think we’re all in the mood for something lively and humorous. Anything in your wheelhouse that you can come up with?”

Aaron looked up at the car roof and thought before coming to an apt conclusion. “Well, there’s always Gilbert and Sullivan.” he offered.

“You can sing Gilbert and Sullivan?!” both Bishops exclaimed in unison. Aaron smiled at them and began to hum and later sing the opening tune to “Major General”. All in the car listened and watched as Aaron’s voice went up, down, and all around, delivering a furious verbal onslaught of multi syllable fury in perfect key and meter, with the occasional gesture at some invisible audience as he sang. As quickly as it started, it ended and Aaron took a bow, or in the case of being seated, a respectful tilting of his head. Everyone clapped in approval, save for Hanna who merely nodded up and down. And the scores from the judges; a nine, a nine point five, a nine point nine, and a six from the German judge.

“Not bad at all.” Rudel commented, begrudgingly so. “Needs some bit of polish, but not bad. No offense.”
“None taken.” Aaron replied. “You’re not the first German who’s said that to me.”

Wilma looked out the window and saw the small hamlet of Sudbury pass by in an instant and announced, “We’ll soon be out and about.” She looked over at Aaron who had fallen silent, lost in contemplative thought. “Hey,” she called out, getting his attention, “you alright over there? You look like you’re about to be sent to prison.”

“I’m a bit nervous right now.” Aaron admitted, stretching his arms up as best he could. “You’re mother is an idol of mine and I don’t want to make a bad impression.”

The elder Bishop shook her head and sighed. “You’ll be fine. She’ll see what we saw during this trip and come to the same conclusion as me.”

“And what conclusion would that be?” Aaron inquired, clearly intrigued.

“You’re a good sort.” Wilma answered. “True, you look very threatening, but when you actually sit down and talk with you, you’re like a giant teddy bear.”

“A teddy bear with big claws.” Hanna quipped. “You’re not someone pretending to be something you’re not. War is you’re calling and you fight with purpose and never compromise with either yourself or your convictions when it comes to prosecuting this conflict to the very end.”

“Though you’ve been made to be a soldier,” Elizabeth added, “I have a good feeling that that’s not what you’ll always be. You’re deep and have great talents for many things if you set your mind to it. Keep that in mind, and you will be fine.”

“And you’re a good friend.” Lynette interjected, putting her right hand on his massive shoulder.

Aaron smiled as everyone felt the car come to a stop. “Guess I’m not the only one who can figure people out.” he observed. Elizabeth opened the door and got out first, holding the door open. Wilma went out next followed by Hanna and Lynette. Out of courtesy, Aaron got out last and steeped out into a partially sunny midday environment, the wind gently blowing through the large fields of green grass and tall trees that stretched for as far as the eye could see. He inhaled the air and felt a sense of intoxicating purity within it, far different from the cloying atmosphere of Dover or London. Looking down the road from whence they came, Divale could catch the faintest glimpse of Sudbury, a community that one could fit on a postage stamp and looking like it hadn’t changed in over a hundred years with old brick and white washed wooden buildings. The group was standing in a long gravel driveway, easily a mile long and ending at the foot of one of the most luxurious places of habitation that Aaron had ever seen. The Bishop family home, if it could be called such, was an immense three story building made of pristine marble that glistened as if moistened with dew that looped in a squared U, the ends taller than the middle section as customary of English architecture. Grey slate roofs were lined with white gutters and dotted with no less than twelve chimney tops, smoke billowing out of some of them into the crisp March air. Marble guide rails lined the immediate vicinity of the structure with a three step marble set of stairs leading to the large oak door. In front of the house was a gorgeous marble fountain, depicting Neptune in all his glory, surrounded by all manner of deep sea creatures, their mouths that should’ve been gushing water now bone dry, victims of the rationing protocols. Slightly behind him, out amongst the freshly mowed lawn were long garden plots filled to the brim with flowers just beginning to bud. It’s beautiful, staggering, marvelous, perfect, flawless, bewildering. No expense was spare here. Just one of those marble stones is probably worth more than my backpay. “And this is your house?” Aaron asked Lynette in disbelief.
“Yup,” she replied, not thinking the sight overpowering at all. “Home sweet home.”

Aaron was about to say something more when his eyes caught movement near the door. He looked and saw the oak portal opening, revealing a man in his thirties with short blond hair and blue eyes, dressed in the livery of a butler, with the black slacks, black shoes, black deep V neck shirt, and black bow tie with a white undershirt. “Ah, that’s Reginald, the family butler.” Wilma pointed out “We all best get inside. Mother doesn’t like wasting money on heating if she can allow it.” With civil haste, the group walked down the gravel drive and up onto the marble steps, their boots clunking on the hard stone towards the door. Hanna took off her cap and handed Reginald the bug she had hidden underneath there before crossing the threshold. Aaron dropped his shoulder before entering lest his head hit the frame. Inside, main greeting area was as lavish as the exterior with marble flooring, this type of stone resembling pink and speckled, the walls and ceiling buttressed with columns that also acted as points of navigation judging from the bronze numbers inlayed into the rock. The center part of the ceiling was recessed, a trio of lights shining bright from a chandelier making the structure look like a honeycomb. A pair of fireplaces blazed away, the butler eyeing them with a clinical eye, seeing it they needed more coal or wood. A set of steps lead up to a raised platform, a viewing area with recessed niches that housed beautiful sculptures and busts, edged with black iron railings. Up the steps the group went, lead by the family servant, and made a right down a long hallway replete with a floral white and red wallpaper and even more sculptures, joined with paintings and bronze statuettes on plinths of expensive woods, the carpet cream white and soft, muffling footsteps like a hand from behind does a voice. They walked until they came to a white painted wooden door, one which Reginald opened graciously. Wilma, Elizabeth, Hanna, Lynette, and Aaron trotted into a sitting room with a high white ceiling with the sides molded into ached patterns with plaster of paris. The wallpaper and floor color were the same as the hallway, but less decorated, the mostly bare walls populated instead by light green sofas and padded wooden chairs, with a pair of recliners facing the fireplace. Reginald then gave everyone a polite bow and walked out of the room, closing the door silently behind him.

Lynette looked around and smiled. *It’s good to be home after so long.* She looked over at Aaron who was standing in the middle of the room, spinning slowly in place like a music box ballerina, dancing to the invisible tune of shock and awe. He stopped pirouetting and walked to her. “This place is unbelievable Lynn.” he said excitedly. “I’ve never been somewhere this awe inspiring or this intact for that matter.”

“Get away from my daughter.” a feminine voice articulately boomed from near the fireplace. Everyone stopped what they were doing and regarded the newcomer, though she wasn’t new at all for she’d been there in the room the whole time, waiting for the right moment to introduce herself. From the right hand recliner rose a small figure, one that barely crested the chair back and moved into view. Minnie Bishop, the matriarch of the Bishop family, was dressed in a red short sleeve dress with gold buttons and lined with white lace, a tiny left breast pocket there but not, the smooth skirt coming slightly below her knees and directing attention to her black heels, adding maybe an inch of height to her below five foot body. Her skin was fair, yet her face was stern, enhanced by her long wavy light brown hair that came down to her waist and her blue eyes that regarded Aaron as less of a friend and more like an enemy. “That was not a request.” she added with emphasis after a second went by with him not moving at all. Aaron backed away, raising his hands to show that he meant no harm, trying to diffuse the situation. Once he moved away a good three feet, Lynette’s mother opened her arms and beckoned, “It’s so good to see you Lynn. Welcome home.”

On command, Bishop walked over and hugged her mother, both thankful that she was well, yet fearful that she was in a bad mood. “It’s good to see you too mother.” she replied

“I see that you are quite comfortable around the sergeant.” her mother commented while shooting Aaron another glance. “Remarkable feat considering who he is and what he does.”
Divale looked back at his idol and inwardly began to get uneasy and a bit annoyed. *This is my childhood idol? This is The Lioness of Flanders? The woman who could look into the soul of an enemy and laugh at it’s pitiful existence as she gunned it down in defense of her country and freedom? Looks to be no better than Perrine.* “That’s not all that I am.” he ventured, defending himself. “As I’m sure you’re well aware of.”

“Oh I am aware,” Minnie replied coolly, releasing her embrace from her youngest daughter, and walking towards him with measured steps, eyeing him all the while, “yet that doesn’t make me feel any better knowing that you share the same roof as her. You may be a taken man and you may profess to be faithful to whoever it is that you’re seeing, but I know the hearts of men better than anyone. Every man has a dark side, one that lies beyond the pale. Most of the time, it does nothing but sit and watch, yet sometimes, it emerges with a vengeance and causes problems.”

Aaron crooked his neck and his orbs narrowed. “You think I have designs on your daughter.” he surmised, finally understanding the reason why she was agitated and probably why she had summoned him in the first place.

“But of course.” Minnie answered, coming to a stop right in front of him, staring up at his face without fear. “I looked to have made you angry Sergeant Divale. Did I hit the nail on the head?”

“If you mean besmirching my honor, then you most certainly have.” Aaron curtly shot back, his hands starting to ball up.

“Obfuscation doesn’t suit you.” Minnie countered, her voice rising.

“Speak for yourself.” Aaron spat back, raising his voice higher than hers to the point where he was just below shouting.

Minnie’s eyes flashed at such an affront being committed in her own house and opened her mouth to say something, but Lynette had had enough of the verbal sparing and yelled, “Stop it both of you! You’re both acting like children!”

“This is for your own good Lynette.” her mother intoned, not even giving her a look.

“Who are you to judge what is or isn’t in my best interests?!” Lynette countered, turning away from her mother.

It was then that Minnie broke her stare with Aaron and regarded her daughter. “Don’t you dare turn your back on me girl.” she warned, almost growling.

Lynette whirled around, her face contorted with anger, “I’m not a child!” she screamed.

“You’re my child!” Minnie retorted, point her right index finger straight at Lynn’s heart. “And you’re in my house and I will be obeyed!”

“Not for much longer.” the younger Bishop replied with force. “I’m leaving.” With that, she turned around and briskly walked to the door. “I may not have my Strikers and you may have Reginald not give me a ride back to Dover, but I don’t care anymore. I’ll get a cab at Sudbury. Worse comes to worse I’ll walk.”

Wilma sprang into action and threw herself in front of the exit in an attempt to stop her sister from making a mistake. “Lynn, think about what you’re doing.” she advised, doing her best to calm her down. Her younger sister had other plans, grabbing her by the front of her jacket and throwing her away from the door, Wilma landing on the body of a blue four seater sofa and rolling off over the side to the floor with a thud. With the obstacle removed, Lynette started to reach for the door handle.
with her right arm, but someone grabbed her, stopping her escape. She wheeled around and came face to face with her mother who had a pleading look to her face, one that fell on deaf ears, for Lynette had reached her breaking point.

“Let go of me mother.” she seethed. Instead of releasing her grip, Minnie puled her daughter towards her and embraced her, tears streaming down the sides of her face, tiny waterfalls that suddenly made Lynette realize just what she had done. She tried to apologize, but her mother caught her flatfooted.

“I’m so proud of you Lynn.” she wept. “You have no idea how long I and your father have waited to hear you say those words, to assert yourself.”

“M-Mother?” Lynette stammered, hugging Minnie tenderly. “Wha-What do you mean?”

Minnie looked at her and wiped the tears away from her eyes with a small handkerchief that she took out of her breast pocket and explained, “We wanted you to be strong Lynn. The world is a very hard place, more so now than ever. While grateful that you helped around the house and minded the rest of your siblings, that wasn’t what your father and I wanted for you, to be a glorified housewife. But every time we tried to get you to stand up, you just sat back down and let us roll over you with no resistance. When you enlisted and held your ground against me, my heart soared, and I thought finally she has turned the corner. However, I was afraid that the whole thing was a fluke and I couldn’t calm down for those many months that you were gone.”

“So you hatched a plan to see if I grew up.” Lynette replied.

Minnie nodded. “Yes and you most certainly have. Where did that confidence come from daughter?”

Lynette’s answer was quick and without hesitation. “I learned it from my friend’s mother.” She then gestured to Aaron who was standing there where Minnie had left him, looking over the scene with a mixture of happiness and wonder. “And from him.”

“I did nothing of the sort.” Aaron replied from across the room, shaking his head in modesty. “All I did was remind you that it was there all along and gave you a slight nudge in the right direction.”

“Well whatever you supposedly did or did not,” Minnie stated, “you did good for my daughter and good by me.”

“So you didn’t want to see me at all eh?” Aaron asked, slightly hurt that his presence at the Bishop mansion was just part of an elaborate ruse.

“Not quite.” Minnie admitted walking back towards the fireplace, Lynette walking behind her. Lynn gave Wilma a look and her sister nodded, letting her know that there were no ill feelings. “However, I did wish to see you, if just to see if my assumptions were true.”

“Are they?” Aaron inquired.

“Let me see who you really are.” Minnie commanded. Aaron slowly took off his glasses and unfurled his wings, arching them so that no drops of blood would fall on the carpet. Minnie then walked up to him and touched his left wing, gently stroking her fingers along the length. “An angel made real.”

An angel with no halo and one wing in the fire if truth be told. “With that squared away,” Wilma piped up, “I think we could all use a small drink to calm our nerves.”

“I second that.” Elizabeth answered.
“I think you’ve had enough you lush.” Aaron countered politely. “You’ve already consumed all of my gin and half my whiskey.”

“I’m a big girl, I can take it.” Beurling replied with a grin.

“I third it.” Minnie said. She looked at Aaron and Hanna and asked them, “Could you both move the recliners to the sofa please?” As one, the German witch and the warlock each took a chair in their hands and lifted them up off the floor and gently sat them down near one of the sofas. Minnie went over to a stand and picked up a silver platter with a sestet of glasses, a pile of cork coasters, and a crystal decanter filled with cognac. Holding it firmly, she walked over to the group, Wilma, Lynn, Hanna, and Beurling sitting on the sofa, with Aaron moving a small table to the space between them and the recliners. After setting it down, she in turn took her seat in one of the recliners and bade Aaron to sit down next to her in the other. He obeyed while the witches, both young and old, filled up their glasses, him going last, conducting his ritual before he drank, except instead of dropping the alcohol on the floor, he let it fall on the coaster instead. Minnie noticed him do it and commented, “A libation, but for whom?”

“For those that can’t be here.” Aaron intoned looking at her.

“Say Aaron,” Lynette spoke up from the sofa after taking a sip, “you didn’t do that in the car. Any reason why?”

“Well,” Aaron explained, “that car interior was worth probably more than my rank back in the old days and I didn’t want to get anything on my clothes so I withheld it. Besides, I’m sure given the amount of times that I’ve given the boys a taste, that they’ll forgive me for being lax just this once.” The reasoning seemed to sit well with Lynn and she went about her drink. The sounds of someone rummaging in their pockets drew his attention towards Minnie, who fished out a pack of cigarettes from one of her front dress pockets along with a steel butane lighter. “You smoke?” he asked her as she placed a cigarette between her lips and flicked the lighter to life.

“One of the many things that have stayed with me since the Great War.” Minnie replied, taking a drag to get the tobacco burning. She killed the lighter and placed it on the table with a dull clatter and exhaled, smoke billowing out and around her. Sighing she continued, “Including the memories.” Turning to Aaron, Bishop asked, “So you’re an admirer of me I hear.”

“Yes.” Aaron answered, getting a touch giddy by being acknowledged as a fan by his idol.

“What did the people you heard about my exploits from say about me?” Minnie inquired.

“That you fought like a hellcat to protect the Channel ports from occupation during the opening stages of the war.” Aaron replied, recollecting all the conversations he had heard. “That your courage was an example for others to follow. Because of you, the Germans couldn’t flank the northern line.”

Minnie chuckled mirthlessly, looking at her glass of cognac, swirling the contents. “I’m willing to bet our entire fortune that those words were spoken by men and women who weren’t even there, because if they were, they’d be telling a different version of the tale. In the beginning, I’ll admit that I felt that I had gotten the best of the war, going up to the skies in defense of liberty and fraternity with our sister nation, protecting her from aggression.” she illuminated. Quickly taking a look at Rudel she added, “No offense.” Hanna merely shook her head, letting her know that everything was under bridge. “However, all that changed during those fateful months in ‘14, two months that changed me forever and really opened my eyes as to what I was in.” she continued, her voice drifting as her mind got lost in the past.

Aaron knew what she was referring to in an instant. “Ypres.” he said softly.
Minnie nodded as she puffed on the cigarette again, the ashes falling to the table like gray rain. “I was part of a small team that flew reconnaissance during the battle, due to a lack of field radios and all the fog and mist that obscured signal flags. We had to fly over a front roughly fifty miles long, quite a stretch of ground that had to be covered, especially in those days when the Striker was nonexistent. Ypres wasn’t really a battle at all, just a series of offensives that took place on a wide front at the same time. Langemarck, La Bassee, Armentieres, Gheluvelt, and Nonne Bosschen, pure chaos everywhere you went. We sent intelligence to command daily, telling them that the Germans were weak here, and here, but the damned idiots wouldn’t listen, instead hitting them in the spots where they were the strongest. Having all those men to play around with must’ve made them drunk with feelings of superiority. It was like they cared nothing for the lives they were about to help end. They even had to gall to tell us to support the inevitable counter attacks, to push an enemy with more men and machine guns back whence they came. Fools, the whole lot of them.” She paused and shook her head sadly, looking like she was about to cry. “I’ll never forget the way those men charged through those fields, straight at them, out in the open. They all charged valiantly and were butchered like pigs. I saw it all while I did my part, doing nothing but help it fail. Some of the counters by the BEF did take back some ground, but it wasn’t enough to justify the cost. Over one hundred and twenty thousand men, most of them young boys were killed over the span of a month. So many dreams and hopes wasted, and all in exchange for a length of dirt not much longer than my driveway.” Minnie took a deep drag from her cigarette, draining it to the butt before extinguishing it by twisting the remains into the silver platter. “Did you ever have that happen to you?” she asked Aaron, looking into his eyes, orbs that he had covered back up with his glasses. “Did you ever participate in an act of doomed defiance?”

Aaron regarded her and nodded in the affirmative slowly, taking his time to collect his thoughts. “I had a man in my unit by the name of Esau Teak, head of the Sixth Coterie, the Silencers.” he began. “Their main weapon of choice was the sniper rifle and they all were fantastic shots, but none could ever hold a candle to Esau. He’d been shooting a sniper rifle since the age of five and he never missed a shot. A bit of a nutball though. Even though I was the company chaplain, he read the Bible more than I did. Would quote it verbatim as he drifted off to sleep at night, an odd little lullaby to say the least. Even got to point where whenever we got to a church on one of our supply runs, he would scour the place high and low, looking for Bibles, cutting out verses and affixing them to his coat. After a few weeks in Russia, he looked like a walking version of pin the tail on the donkey.” Aaron shook his head violently and apologized. “Sorry about the digression there. Where was I? Oh, yes. In Minsk, we were paired up with each other, me acting as his spotter as he rained death from a high rise. Stayed there for a good while, giving a good account before the enemy bracketed the place with air and ground fire, making us scramble to find a way out. We raced through hallways and rooms, plaster and wood all flying this way and that, the flashes of warmth across our bodies as the beams crisscrossed our escape route. Got to within twenty feet of freedom when a bit of masonry fell from the ceiling and struck Teak on the back of the neck. He goes down immediately, howling in pain and holding his neck. Thankfully, another one of our guys heard him scream and helped me get him to safety.

When I got him in medical and looked at the wound, I found out that his second, third, fourth, and fifth vertebrae were all cracked, some fissures so severe that I could almost see exposed nerve fibers. Under any normal circumstances, his career was over, but I was determined to not let him go out that way. So I decided to make a cast to keep him from doing anymore damage to his spine. Using a piece of steel, some cabinet hinges, and screws, I managed to create this spinal cage cast of sorts and wrap it around his upper neck to not only prevent more fracturing, but also to allow him a decent range of movement while it healed back up. After the operation, I told him to take it easy for three days, concentrate on getting well, and call me in the morning. Three days later he came back to me saying that he felt great, no pain at all, and shook me by the hand. Though he smiled at me and I was patting myself on the back at a job well done, we both knew that he was on borrowed time. His role
as a sniper oftentimes placed him in situations that required him to stay in positions that placed a great
deal of strain on his spine, his neck in particular. It was only a matter of time before the call would
come down asking for that time to be repaid in full and that call got made at Bratslava.

I had given orders for everyone to hold out as long as possible to allow civilians to get out, which
wouldn’t be long as the combined Austro-Hungarian armies were woefully under equipped and
massively outnumbered. Teak comes up to me and asks me to be his spotter as his got killed a week
ago and he didn’t feel comfortable with anyone else but me. I originally was going to go up to help
with the defense of the northern flank and I told him this but he grabs me, pulls me close to him, and
whispers, ‘I need you to be my spotter’. It was then that I realized that something had happened. We
flew into the city proper and found a bit of high ground that gave him a great view of the
surrounding area and confided in me that over the past two weeks he’d been in a lot of pain. There
were days that when he woke up that he literally couldn’t move a muscle for a good half hour, and
that periodically during the day, he’d lose feeling in his arms and legs. I took another look at the
wound site and saw much to my chagrin that while the injury had healed, the stress and strain that he
put his body under doomed the process. His spine was fusing at odd angles and I told him that I
would need to put him under the knife again and re-break his neck or else one small move the wrong
way, even something as slight as tilting his head up, could cause him to spend the rest of his life in a
wheelchair. He nodded silently and racked the bolt to his gun, answering, ‘Call them out’. Over the
next nine hours, I gave him the ability to put down high profile targets with ease, helping him in the
process with fire from my own weapon. Predictably, the Austro-Hungarian army got rolled up north
and the whole kit and caboodle ran through the city, obstructing our view with all the dust they were
kicking up. Scouts told me that the whole enemy force was advancing right on top of us and I made
a move to tell Esau to get ready to pack up and leave when he turns to me, handing me his rifle.

At first, I didn’t know what he was doing, but it soon dawned on me that he was going to sacrifice
himself to protect those soldiers. Before I could do anything, he sucker punches me right in the gut,
knocking the wind of me, and runs off, charging towards the enemy. I recover and wheeze with all
my might, imploring him to stop and turn back, that he was a stupid fucking fool for throwing his life
away, but there was no stopping him, his mind was made up. I did the only thing I could do; I loaded
his weapon and fired at the enemy, trying to kill as many as I could before they took him down.
Forward Neuroi elements see him and fire, a volume of shots that could wipe out battalions in an
instant, but Esau shrugs them off with his magic and crashes through the first line, killing anything
that stood in his way, seeking out targets of importance along the way. He bull rushes through the
second line, continuing his destructive rampage, screaming a bloodcurdling shriek. I saw it from the
high ground, or as much as I could given how blurry my eyes were from crying. I continued to
chamber and fire round after round to support him, the barrel getting so hot that the skin on my hands
blistered and cooked from the heat and the rifling grooves melted away, making a weapon that could
shoot the lint of a hat with pin point accuracy into a smoothbore musket.

The third line broke him and he fell. Not taking any chances, the enemy kept on firing at his corpse,
turning it into ash. When the last scrap of what was once a good friend had vaporized into nothing, I
broke the gun over my knee, grabbed as much of the ammo that remained as I could, and flew away,
hoping that his sacrifice wasn’t in vain.” Aaron took a deep draught from he cognac glass, draining it
completely before setting it down and placing his right hand under his chin and shaking his head.
“Only six people from the entirety of those charged with defending Bratsalva had made out, the rest
being outflanked by the Neuroi and encircled, cut down as they tried to get out.”

“Why did he do that?” Hanna asked.

“I don’t know.” Aaron replied. “He probably thought that dying in battle on his own two feet was
preferable to life as a paraplegic. Either way, another good man got killed for next to nothing in
return, and I just sat there like some fat pigeon in my nest, doing nothing to help save him.”
“You kept him alive long enough to blunt the advance.” Hanna pointed out. “If it weren’t for his charge, even you might’ve suffered the same fate.”

That may be so major, but it doesn’t make me feel any better about myself at the end of the day. “Oh, it’s almost that time already.” Minnie suddenly quipped, looking at a wall mounted clock.

“Time for what?” Aaron asked.

“You see my boy,” Minnie began, “when I said that I wanted to see you just to see if my assumptions about you were true, it was, yet it was also misleading. From your records, they say that you have great reflexes and possess great protective instincts which makes you perfect for what I have in mind for you.” Aaron cocked his eyebrow and watched Minnie lift up a corner of the platter and pull out from under it a folded bulletin that she had hidden underneath it, featuring a large sphere with white and black pentagonal checkering with the words above it: CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH ANNOUNCED. SUDBURY LIONS VS DEDHAM DRAGOONS. 2 PM. “And what I have in store for you is being my new number one.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Roped into a charity soccer match by his childhood idol Minnie Bishop, Aaron and company find themselves the newest members of the Sudbury Lions, with him minding the rattan corners and getting a rude introduction to England's national pastime. Chaos ensues on the pitch until an offensive defense and a secret weapon ekes out a victory. Unfortunately for our co MVP, Aaron falls hard from grace and feels ever more determined to leave until an unexpected guest back at Dover Castle reminds him that even a loss can yield a win.

Chapter XXVII: Sticks And Stones

Blow after blow rained down on my naked frame, bruising my flesh and ripping skin, but not once did I feel any regret for turning myself in. I had broken one of our most important rules: Never reveal your true self. Secrecy is our sole defense against being discovered and I jeopardized that by forgetting my glasses in my tent before going off into the countryside, asking around for directions to the nearest shop so I could get supplies. If I hadn’t have forgotten them, she’d still be alive. However, if there is a silver lining here, it is this: The world will never accept a monster like me.

Diary Entry December 27th 1939

“So let me get this straight.” Minnie stated with her hands held out in front of her, palms open, and all ten fingers pointed at Aaron like opened pencil packages. “You’ve spent over three and a half months in my country and not once have you heard of soccer?”

Divale squirmed uncomfortably in the black leather seat of the car as the entire group at the behest, or rather the machinations of Minnie Bishop, traveled to Colchester for the championship game. Turned out that not only was Aaron to participate, but everyone else as well due to injuries sustained by the squad in the previous match. When she gave the news, and the subsequent command, Elizabeth nearly spat out her drink, Hanna pursed her lips in anticipation, Wilma cheered, and Lynette looked incredibly confused and scared out of her mind. “I really didn’t have the luxury of freedom back then.” he explained. “They didn’t trust me well enough to have me roam about.”

“Still, that’s no excuse for not having a clue about the national sport of England.” Minnie pressed, her hard stare burrowing a hole through Aaron’s chest. “Did you play any games with your men when you had free time?”

“Of course,” Aaron defended, getting his courage back, “just ones that helped us with working out stress and hone our edge.”

Minnie put her right hand to her face and sighed into her palm, the other arm going limp and
dangling off to her side like a snapped rope. “Then I guess it’s a good thing that I’m making you the
goalie.” she admitted as she withdrew her hand.

“Speaking of that,” Aaron began, “what exactly does a goalie do?”

“The objective of the game to score points by kicking them past a line and into a net.” Minnie
illuminated, reaching underneath her seat and pulling out an ermine muff. “Your job is to stop the
ball from crossing the threshold by any means necessary. However, I forbid you from using any
magic whatsoever. I’ll not have it said that Sudbury won the cup through cheating, is that perfectly
clear to everyone in here?” she ordered while placing her hands into the muff openings, keeping the
cold out of her hands.

“Yes!” everyone called out, Aaron included.

“Just so you know,” Wilma added from across the way, “they can also use their head and knees to
knock the ball past you so watch it. Good tip: Watch the positions of the hips and the foot when it
connects with the ball for that will tell you where they’re aiming for. Never rely on the eyes for good
players use them to fool you.”

“Whatver you say.” Aaron replied, not feeling confident at all with his new responsibilities.

“Are we scared there sergeant?” Hanna gloated from his left, her head coming up to his jawline.

Before Aaron could frame a response, Elizabeth anxiously interjected, “Probably not as frightened as
Lynn. Look at her, she’s almost pissing herself.”

“I am not!” Lynette shot back. “And even if I was, at the very least I’ll be able to run in a straight line
you alcoholic!”

“Enough from all of you.” Minnie ordered, raising her voice just enough so that everyone knew that
she meant business. “Save the bantering for when this is over. Right now, I need all of your heads to
be in the here and now and your bodies to get changed into your uniforms.” She took a quick peek
out the window and smiled. “Good. The clothing shop is still open. We made it just in time.” Aaron
craned his neck carefully across Beurling’s shoulder and peered out the smoked glass pane. His eyes
caught a large wooden building on a busy corner with a storefront sign carved in the likeness of a
spool of thread with a needle. A woman was standing outside the doors to the shop, holding a white
box, waving at the vehicle to slow down and exercise caution. “Ah dearest Mabel,” Minnie quipped
while reaching into her purse and searching for her billfold, taking her hands out of the muff,
“always looking out for me when she really doesn’t need to.” The driver promptly slowed down and
pulled up next to the sidewalk, just as Minnie gathered her cash and thumbed her way through the
bills. Mabel, a skinny young woman in her early thirties with blond hair and green eyes, smiled and
walked quickly over to the car. Minnie cranked the window down and exclaimed, “Nice day for
work isn’t it??”

“It is when you have a good customer like yourself.” Mabel replied, handing the box over to her.
“As usual, the fee is enclosed within.”

“Naturally.” Minnie answered, taking the box and setting it on her lap. She opened the cover and
saw much to her delight that the uniforms were there and freshly laundered, as per her instructions.
Also, there was a slip of paper in the lower left corner denoting what was owed. She frowned in
puzzlement as she ran the figure in her head. Turning to Mabel, she asked her, “An extra five
hundred? For what?”

Mabel withered under the gaze and stammered, “W-We had to make a m-major readjustment to the
crotch line on the f-fly or else the pants w-wouldn’t fit comfortably.”

Aaron started to whistle and pick at his fingernails in an effort to obscure the fact that he was as mortally embarrassed as Mabel was. Wilma chuckled at the explanation while Elizabeth shot a glance at Aaron’s face and then declined her head and eyes towards his groin, a maneuver that made Divale point at his skull with the index finger of his left hand and emphatically state, “Oi, Yukon Jackie, my head’s up here.” It stopped Beurling dead in her tracks and she sat upright in an instant, making her blush so bad that one would’ve thought that she’d burst all the blood vessels in her face.

Shrugging her shoulders, Minnie produced the necessary bills and handed them off to Mabel. “Guess that’s a fair assessment. Keep the change.”

“Bless you Mrs. Bishop and give them what for.” Mabel encouragingly thanked. Minnie nodded in approval and raised the window back up as the car moved away from the sidewalk and resumed it’s journey.

As soon as they got fifty feet away from the place, Beurling glared at Aaron disdainfully and warned, “You call me that again you, whatever you are, and you’ll be shipped back to Dover in very small boxes.”

Aaron gave her a playful gaze of his own and remarked, “Just remember to send me first class. My commander doesn’t like delays.”

Minnie stopped the back and forth by handling out the jerseys, staring with Lynn, then Wilma, followed by Hanna and Elizabeth before passing out Aaron’s. He took the fabric in his hands and unfolded the top article, his top. It was sheep’s wool white with a snarling lions head patch over the left breast with a blue line running down along the sides. On the back was the number 85. Kind of low to denote a goalie isn’t it? “How do you like them?” Minnie asked.

“They look and feel great in my hands.” Aaron answered after thinking about it. “Don’t know about how they feel on me though.”

“You’ll get your chance soon enough.” Minnie relayed as the car came to another stop. “We’re here. Get out and line up with the rest of the squad.” She opened the door and hopped on out, with Wilma, Lynette, Hanna, and Elizabeth following right after her. Aaron was the last to leave the car and he stepped out onto a concrete sidewalk in front of a very tall building face made of wood and brick with a long arch leading into a curving tunnel that seemed to give off gratuitous feedback. That’s not feedback, that’s the sound of people talking and cheering. Lots of people. Far up near the roof, pennants flew, dancing in the cool breeze, and large bullhorn shaped speaker phones blared commentator talk, but he was too far down on the ground to hear it properly. Immediately off to his right, near the wall, were six women, all dressed in the livery of the Sudbury Lions, looking proud and ready to play. They had watched their newest recruits step out of the car with stoic grace, yet that soon turned to awe as they saw him emerge from the car interior, towering over them all. One was so stricken, that she looked like she was about to faint, but Aaron, instead of keeping away and letting the tension die down, kept walking towards them and pantomimed tipping his hat.

“How do you all do?” he stated politely.

“No time for idle chitchat.” Minnie barked before anyone had the sense to reply as she walked into the tunnel and pointed at a door with both her hands fully in the fur lined hand warmer. “We have to get ready. Get changed and get back out here on the double.”

Aaron and company made a beeline for the door, entering the room, but Divale stopped before crossing the threshold and commented, “I think there might be a problem.”
“Define problem Aaron.” Minnie pressed. Aaron looked at her and said nothing, letting the statement hang for a bit before she understood what he meant. “Then wait out here then.” she sighed.

Relieved, Aaron moved away from the locker room door and stood by his childhood idol, looking more like an overdressed bodyguard or doorman than a soldier, but he didn’t care. “So how many people are here to see this game?” he asked, wanting to pass the time.

“Roughly ten thousand as of last real count.” Minnie replied, craning her neck and looking up the tunnel. “Judging by the crowd noise, this place is close to full capacity.”

“And as for listening in?” Aaron ventured.

“Are you kidding me?” Minnie answered, regarding him. “This match is being broadcasted on all the major radio stations within a hundred mile radius. Ever since war broke out, all the major teams lost members to the draft boards so there’s been a dearth in play. These charity games and tournaments help placate the entertainment starved masses.” She paused and did some quick number crunching before adding, “You’d be looking at almost everyone up past Dover way and nearly half the Dominions.” Which would equal a hell of a lot of people, easily into the tens of millions. Please God don’t let me embarrass myself. As soon as he thought it, the locker room door opened and out popped Wilma, Hanna, Elizabeth, and Lynette, looking like the players that Minnie needed, though to be honest, Lynn was having a devil of a time readjusting her shirt, the fabric stretched tight over her chest and making her uncomfortable.

“I knew you grew a bit since I last saw you.” Wilma commented, withholding her laughter.

“Shut up and help me!” Lynette shot back. “Cursed thing.” she muttered under her breath. “She made it too tight.”

“I think she made it just fine.” Elizabeth cruelly remarked. “Really brings out your figure.”

“Go f-” Lynette began to retort, but Aaron quickly interjected.

“Feeling I should change now.” he said hurriedly and he was at and through the locker room doorway faster than you could say duck and cover.

“Hmm.” one of the other girls quipped from across the way. “Didn’t even excuse himself. How rude.”

“He might not be a right proper gentleman,” Minnie admitted as she walked over to her younger daughter and helped her with her little issue, “but he’s the right proper man for the job we need him to do?” After a few seconds of tugging and twisting the shirt top, Minnie stepped back a pace or two and smiled. “Now you look like a Sudbury Lion.” Lynn meekly smiled and kicked at the ground, still feeling the jitters.

“Don’t tell me that you’re scared sergeant.” Hanna observed, standing a full head length over everybody now that Aaron was gone. “Fear will lead to mistakes. Let it turn to something else.”

“Easy for you to say.” Bishop replied, trying to defend herself. “You all look like you’ve had some experience in playing the game. I’ve never set foot on the pitch save for gym class and even then I was terrible, like I was born with two left feet.”

“Oh come on Lynn.” Wilma said, poking her little sister in the side with her elbow gently. “It’s not like anything big is at stake here. It’s a charity game. Just go out there and do your best. Everything will be fine.” Lynette smiled at Wilma in thanks and the door to the locker room suddenly opened up again and out walked Aaron momentarily bare chested, revealing his battle scars as he put the shirt
over his head and pulled it down.

“My God.” he said in apparent surprise as he looked at the lions head patch and the blue stripe sides. “This is a perfect fit.”

“And as for below?” Elizabeth spoke up grinning, resisting the urge to look down.

“No comment.” Aaron replied, rolling his eyes. A little bit of pinch and it doesn’t leave much to the imagination. Thank God I’m wearing underwear or else I’ll be drawing a sizeable crowd at my end. Might not be too bad of a thing though. Might distract the opposing team.

“Looks alright to me.” Minnie stated a tad loudly, making Aaron really self conscious and he moved his large hands over his nonconformity, some of the other players near the wall chuckling and letting out wolf whistles. “Put a sock in it.” Bishop ordered and the tomfoolery ceased. “Let’s move out and wait for the announcers to introduce us.” Everyone started walking down the tunnel, the near darkness making them look like ghosts coming to haunt some poor individual, the roar of the crowd getting louder and louder with every step they took. Soon, Aaron could pick up the announcers over the loudspeakers.

“Hello ladies and gentleman, I’m Allen McCabe and we welcome you to Layer Road for the grand final of this equally grand tournament. It’s a David versus Goliath derby today with the dominating Dedham Dragoons squaring off against the plucky upstart Sudbury Lions. Joining me live in the booth is former player and current head coach of Colchester United, Martin Livingstone.”

“Pleasure to be here Allen and there is a near sold out crowd here at Layer Road. It feels great seeing all these people here today.”

“That it is and as always Martin, thank you very much for letting this charity tournament take place on your home pitch. Your gesture of goodwill and your association’s generosity is deeply appreciated.”

“Anytime Allen and speaking of time, we have just enough to deliver a recap of each teams journey to the final.”

“That we do Martin. Starting with the heavily favored Dedham squad, believe it or not folks they weren’t rated too highly compared to the other teams, but when the starting eleven were announced, bookies from Leeds to Liverpool made them the favorites due to them managing to get the Soviet phenom herself, the czarina of soccer, Tatiana Nabakov.”

“I don’t know how the coach managed to wrangle her from the Soviet national team Allen, but the inclusion of her on the pitch has been nothing short of a revelation. In the round robin group stage, of the ten goals that Dedham scored on route to a first place finish and an automatic bye into the knockouts, Nabakov scored seven of them, including a hat trick against Cavendish.”

“In addition to being an offensive juggernaut Martin, Dedham also boasts the best defense in the tournament with a plus minus goal differential of plus 16, allowing just one goal in the six games they’ve played, that lone mark coming in the form of a fluke header in that Kersey match in the semifinals.”

“Hopefully the head coach of the Sudbury squad, Minnie Bishop herself, paid very good
attention to that game Allen, hoping that maybe Kersey had the beginning parts of the
defensive code cracked because the word juggernaut in no way shape or form adequately
describes the team she fields.”

“Right you are Martin. In fact, the word that most aptly describes them is mediocre at best. If
memory serves us all right, Sudbury nearly didn’t get into the knockout stages at all, needing
overtime in three of their round robin games to punch their ticket and a lot of lucky strikes,
one of which was an own goal during that match with Wormingford that ultimately gave them
the point that got them into second place in their group.”

“We didn’t have much hope for them after that, but it looks like they rode the underdog tag
well and have pulled off upsets against the other squads they faced, starting elevens that I
thought would vie for the cup at the end, Allen.”

“As did I Martin, as did I. In order, Braintree, Clacton-On-Sea, and Ipswich all fell to these
Lions. But today, I think their luck will finally run out.”

“It may be so Allen for that semifinal match against Ipswich was an absolute slobber knocker,
less of game and more of an exercise in destruction. All told, eight players had to be ferried off
the pitch over the course of that match, five from Sudbury alone, including their goalie who
suffered a concussion in a midair collision, trying to punch the ball away.”

“It got so bad out there Martin that I thought the medics with the gurney might have to get a
crew to get themselves off the pitch. But I’ll tell you this much right now, we’ve just received
word from our men in the field that Sudbury did manage to find replacements for those that
can’t be here, making this an even match and not a forfeit.”

“I can see some of the players all getting ready to take to the field in the tunnel now Allen.
Let’s see who they got.”

Aaron stopped in his tracks as the team all gathered together at the tunnel threshold. Minnie looked at
them all and stated, “We’ve suffered much in this tournament ladies and gentleman, but at the end of
the day, here we are. Win or lose, I’m proud of you all. Go out there and give them what for.” With
that, she directed her attention to her newest recruits and gestured to each in turn. “I will go out with
my ladies. Hanna will go next when her name is announced, followed by Elizabeth, Wilma, Lynette
and Aaron. Clear?” When everyone nodded silently in acknowledgement, Minnie strode out into the
stadium to roaring applause and cheers from the fans gathered in the seats.

“As per usual, we have the coach of the Sudbury Lions followed by the survivors of that
Ipswich game. Minnie Bishop looks very confident out there Martin.”

“The Lioness of Flanders never backed down from anyone during the Great War and she
certainly isn’t about to start now. A true warrior and competitor through and through. Truly
an inspiration Allen. And now we have the replacements that she managed to find to
supplement her starting eleven, starting with Hanna Rudel.”

“She’s a witch with a combat record longer than the pitch she’s walking on, having been
amassing kills since ’39 Martin. Rudel’s widely regarded as the best ground attack witch in
the world.”

“And probably the foremost authority on intimidation Allen. Just look at those eyes. I’ve
never seen anyone look so focused in their life. They’re enough to give me the willies and I’m up in the booth. After her, we have Elizabeth Beurling."

“Don’t have much on her from the reports Martin, but she’s been a wingman to Rudel and does have experience, having played with her hometown squad for a brief time before she enlisted, but was kicked off the team after only two matches for conduct that was, and I quote here verbatim, ‘detrimental to the spirit of the game and common decency’. I’d get into details here ladies and gentlemen, but due to me being a Christian man, I shall not divulge anymore.”

“Speaking of kicked there Allen, she’s looking a wee bit wobbly on her feet. Me thinks she’s not all right in the head.”

“More like the liver Martin. Now we have Wilma Bishop, the eldest daughter of Minnie. Looks like she’s picking from the family tree with that selection there.”

“Not too bad of a pick at all if I’d say so myself Allen. She played heavily during her days in primary and was fairly good at it. True she’s been out of the game for a spell and recently got married to boot, congratulations by the way, soccer is like riding a bicycle for people like her. It will all come back to her.”

“Back to the intros, we see Lynette Bishop, Wilma’s younger sister. Now this is shocking here Martin.”

“Aye, it’s definitely a head scratcher there for sure Allen. According to the reports we have in front of us, she’s never played a real game outside of gym class at primary and even when she did, it looked like she was cursed with two left feet.”

“Careful there Martin, her mother can hear you.”

Aaron watched Lynette venture out and soon found himself alone in the tunnel with his thoughts. Times about up for you. Bring it on.

“Now finally, last but certainly not least, is the number one for the Sudbury Lions, Aaron Divale and- Holy Mother Mary Magdalene, look at that! Ladies and gentlemen if you could see what’s walking out on the pitch right now, you’d be stunned. Look at the size of this ham hock Martin.

“That’s a big boy Allen, easy six four, two hundred pounds. Not very wide in the frame, but those legs and hands look supple and quick. Could be the difference between victory and defeat here today.”

“That’s the biggest tossup I’ll admit to having seen Martin. There’s next to nothing on this man save for the fact that he’s currently serving with the 501st JFW and holds the rank of sergeant. And would you have a look at the Dedham coach, he looks positively livid and is arguing with the ref something fierce.”

“Won’t do any good there Allen. According to the tournament rules, any player can be used as a replacement due to injury, regardless of gender. Though we’ve seen these teams composed almost uniformly by women, the men have filled in from time to time and gave account when called upon. Plus, the ref today is none other than Luke Shannon, a
contemporary of mine during my playing days and who put on absolute blighters of defensive play in his time day in and day out. The man’s fearless and will not hesitate to send you off if you deserve it so my advice to the Dedham coach, with respect, sit down and shut up.”

Aaron made his way to the right hand sideline, the team all lined up neatly, standing at attention, and was temporarily awestruck by the sheer spectacle. Three tiers of seating, buttressed with iron poles, were jam packed with people, all cheering and waving pennants, workers going up and down the stairs holding large wooden trays filled with refreshments, peddling their wares. Doing a quick rough head count, Aaron estimated that there were easily ten thousand men, women, and children in the stands. The playing surface itself was a lush green field with freshly painted white lines and the height of the walls of the stadium killed most if not all wind from sweeping the area. Across the way, another tunnel could be seen, the threshold occupied by eleven bodies, no doubt the other team. Far above him on the opposite side, he could see the wooden booth with the two announcers inside. He kindly gave them a small salute as he journeyed to the holding area, standing next to Lynette. Minnie calmly broke ranks and walked to the nearest sideline barrier, handing a refreshment peddler some bills and receiving a bag of roasted peanuts in exchange.

“And now for their opponents this afternoon. We’ve seen their coach on the sidelines Martin, yet now is the time to see the players. Choosing to be introduced as a team and lead by their team captain Tatiana Nabakov, the Dedham Dragoons.”

Directing his attention to the other tunnel, the eleven individuals he saw gathering there all ran out in their red and black checkered uniforms, holding their heads and hands up high, urging the crowd to give them their just dues and the masses complied, going into a frenzy. At their head was a very tall woman just a shade under six feet tall with long flowing blond hair and blue eyes with a look of sheer contempt and disdain as she glanced at the Sudbury Lions squad, burrowing a hole through them all. *You really think that a stare down is going to affect me you Russian bitch?* “Looks like someone has a staring problem.” Aaron observed with a slight grin.”I think we should rectify that with a swift kick to the head.”

Minnie chewed on a peanut she recently shelled and pointed a finger at him. “You mind the rattan and I’ll mind the rest.” she declared, killing the levity in an instant.

“And now all please rise and remove your hats for the national anthem.”

As one, the crowd did as the announcers told them to do and stood tall and proud. After a few seconds, a recording of “God Save The King” could be heard over the loudspeakers, followed by thousands of voices, singing loudly the words, Aaron included, lending his baritone to the mix. Though he wasn’t English, at least not that he knew of, Divale couldn’t help but feel the swelling of pride within his chest. *Good song.* At the conclusion of the anthem, all cheered and sat back down.

“And now everyone!!” Minnie barked, one hand holding the bag of peanuts and the other the ermine muff. “Huddle up and listen up! The plan is simple; we do a holding action in the first half and pounce on them in the second. However, if any of you see an opportunity, take it for all it’s worth. Formation will be a four three one two. Rudel and Beurling are the strikers, Wilma the center attacking midfielder, and Lynette the center left back. Keep your wits about you and make sure that Nabakov girl doesn’t get her feet on that ball for more than three seconds or else its going to be a long afternoon. Understood?! All present replied in the affirmative and Minnie added solemnly, “Good luck.”

Everyone broke ranks and took to the pitch, Aaron walking briskly to his main responsibility, the net, a pair of white washed curved wooden beams lashed with a wide rattan net, a distance twenty four feet wide and eight feet high. *Should be a piece of cake. I mean, come on, I’ve defended longer and
He heard a shrill whistle come from behind him and he turned around, coming face to face with Nabakov, her blue orbs regarding him with utter hate as she looked him up and down. “Ty moy chetyre glaza (You’re mine four eyes).” she growled with a smile.

With no fear, Aaron walked right up to her, back straight and making his height look that much taller. He saw the faintest hints of unease in the tall Russian’s body language and eyes as he leaned in with a mean glare and dared, “Ty khochesh’ eto? Togda prikhodite i poluchite eto (You want it? Then come and get it).” Nabakov pursed her lips and nodded slowly, backing away and towards her side. *Fear is the mind killer. Get the head of the opposition and all will go better for you.* He turned around and ran back to the net, jumping up and smacking his hand on the top crossbar.

“Now, just to remind everyone watching live and the people listening in at home, this is not your average regulation soccer match, am I right Allen?”

“That you are Martin. Instead of a full ninety minutes, the match length has been fixed at thirty, split into two fifteen minute halves. There’s also no stoppage time whatsoever, meaning that whoever hold the lead at the last tick wins the match. Strangely enough, there will be no penalty shootout at the end of regulation but rather another untimed half that acts as a sudden death overtime. Whoever scores wins. As always, a penalty is a penalty, a send off is a send off, and subs apply, but each coach is armed with an emergency timeout to change the formation on the fly during a match, get subs on, or both.”

Looking further down the field, he saw Rudel and Beurling near the center of the field, discussing strategy, Wilma was jumping up and down, getting loose and limber, while Lynette was minding her defensive area, giving him a thumbs up. Divale returned it and suddenly, Beurling kicked the ball, back heeling it to the elder Bishop. Less than a second later, the ref blew his shiny metal whistle and the match officially begun. Wilma drove forwards, juking her defender into overextending left while she went right. She saw Hanna run down along the right side and booted the ball, crossing it over the width of the field, changing the play up. Rudel knocked the ball down with her chest and tried to knock it over to one of the other girls who pushed up to support the attack, but the ball bounced awkwardly and it was stolen by a Dedham mid who looked for Nabakov, but Wilma had her covered like a camo tarp over a supply crate in enemy territory. The indecision cost Dedham the momentum and the ball as Rudel slid from behind, knocking it loose and sending the unfortunate girl up into the air in order avoid getting a pair of cleat spikes in her calves. The ball drifted out of bounds as the Dedham girl crashed to the ground and got back up with a wince. Rudel shook her head as she jogged down the side to aid the defense, cursing herself for going too fast and hard. A Dedham mid took the spot and grabbed the ball, holding it above her head and calling for her squad to push up. After a quick second, she threw it high and hard into the center left of the pitch to one of her teammates. Elizabeth was right there alongside her and they both jumped up into the air to try to head the ball. Beuring got the better of that tussle and deflected it off her forehead towards Wilma who took possession of it and kicked it hard up the field.

All the while, Aaron minded his position, never standing in one spot for too long and watching the action with interest. *Fast paced action, physicality, and strategy. This game is awesome! Why the hell didn’t I hear of such a marvelous thing before?* His thoughts died as Dedham went on the attack hard, pushing up with speed and intent, passing the ball between them so quickly that no one had a clue where is was going or how to react. Wilma stuck her foot out in the way of an errant pass, attempting to stop the offensive in its tracks, but the force of the delivery caromed of her shoe and into the waiting heels of Nabakov, who smiled with an almost maniacal glee as she raced up the pitch, darting into and away, juking left and right, making the defense look paper mache thin and just as inept. Aaron hunkered down and took a few steps forward, making himself a bigger obstacle and limiting the effective angle. The Russian still charged forward and was now within fifteen yards out,
a gap that closed to twelve and then eight before she brought her right leg back and struck the ball. It would’ve gone straight at the upper left of the net, but Lynette managed to extend her leg up high enough to catch the ball on the laces of her shoe, changing the trajectory, but for the worse as now it looked to be looping downwards. Knowing that he was out of position at that point, Aaron did the only thing he could do and jumped backwards as the ball came down almost behind his head and punched up with his right hand with all his might. His fist connected square and knocked the ball up and away safely over the net.

“Great punching save by Divale for Sudbury and the corner will be taken from the left by Nabakov.”

Getting back up from the ground and dusting off the back of his jersey, Aaron looked to the left hand side and saw Tatiana place the ball on the ground and look for an opening in the defense. Seemingly seeing one, she nailed the ball, curving it into the scrum in the middle, hoping for a lucky header or a bounce, but Divale would have none of it, running up into the fray and snatching the ball away, his height making the grab look like taking candy from a baby. He saw Lynette wide open and rolled the ball across the pitch towards her. Lynn took possession and ran up, dribbling the ball from one leg to the other before knocking it upfield. However, a Dedham attacker got in the way and intercepted the pass with a hard boot to the ball. It screamed through the air and nailed Lynette in the chest so hard it knocked her down with the force of a gunshot and flew out of bounds. As she struggled to get up, Dedham was already on the warpath, smelling blood in the water as they attacked again. Wilma did her best to cover Nabakov and Beurling was dueling with the ball handler. Rudel backed near the post, knowing that a cross could come in at any moment. Sure enough, the pass came and she leapt up, clearing the danger with a header back up to Lynette, who managed to recover and get the ball to her sister.

Wilma was virtually all alone save for two defenders who declined to press the advantage. Now, the tables had turned with the attackers realizing their error and going back on the defensive, but the elder Bishop was possessed, knowing that there was an opportunity. She ran pell mell down the pitch, outpacing her pursuers easily. The two defenders in front of her closed in at covering angles, hoping for a strip. As they drew in, Wilma simply knocked the ball up into the air over their heads while still moving forwards. The maneuver caught the defenders off guard and flatfooted, giving Wilma the ball back and a clear path to the net. The Dedham goalie spread her arms out and hunkered down, reading her movements and dribbling speed. She closed the distance to roughly six yards out before taking a crack at it. The ball sailed through the air towards the lower right corner, but the Dedham goalie was no rookie, having preserved shutouts on multiple occasions. She dove and caught the ball in her hands, drawing it into her and preventing a tap in. Knowing that it was over, Wilma threw up her hands in the air as if asking God why she was apparently robbed of such a golden opportunity or wondering how she could’ve attacked it differently.

“And a stellar save from the Dedham number one and Bishop is distraught there Martin.”

“I wouldn’t be feeling too sore about it Allen because that’s the closest anyone’s gotten to the Dedham goalie in a long time and it showed their squad that Goliath has a weakness here; overconfidence.”

Good try there Wilma. At least it gives us some damn breathing room out on this end. The Dedham goalie drop kicked the ball into the air and down almost the full length of the pitch, bringing the threat that much closer to home. One of the Sudbury girls tried to head the ball back up field, but Nabakov using her size and power to her advantage knocked her aside and took possession. Before she could turn up and run, Lynette tried a sliding tackle of her own, but unlike Hanna’s attempt, she caught less ball and more Russian, prompting the ref to blow his whistle, pull out a yellow card, and
“And that’s a penalty folks. Lynette Bishop tried to slide the ball from underneath Nabakov but failed miserably, earning a booking at probably the worst possible time with only two minutes to go until the end of the first half Allen.”

“This could put Dedham up a notch going into the final stanza Martin and going off of the figures, its almost assured with Nabakov successfully converting all five of Dedham’s penalty shots.”

Lynette shook her head in dismay as everyone started to give her a dirty look for having committed a boneheaded play deep in their zone. Aaron felt sorry for her and called out, “It’s alright Lynn, I got this all wrapped up.” His words seemed to have an effect as she held her head up that much higher and took up positions behind Tatiana who placed the ball down on the fringes of the penalty area and backed up a few feet, eyeing Aaron and the goal behind him. Alright you. Let’s see what you got. He relaxed his breathing and looked intently at her feet and hips, gauging where she was going to go with her shot. Their square right now. Eyes are looking to my left. Suddenly, Nabakov rushed forward bringing her right leg back. Tine seemed to slow down as Aaron continued to focus. Hips are splaying a bit, maybe going far left. Wait, she’s over doing it, trying to get me commit left. She’s got to be going right th- no she’s not. It’s- Her right foot struck the ball and it flew forwards directly at Aaron’s face. Quickly, he brought up his left hand and caught the ball cleanly, the impact feeling like a sledgehammer to the palm. The crowd went wild at such a save and Tatiana simply looked on in shock as Divale moved his hand down and away while wagging the index finger on his right hand as if to say, not today.

“It’s saved by Divale! Sudbury stops Nabakov and the crowd is loving it Martin!”

“Good bit of work from the number one for Sudbury and the score remains nil-nil in the final two minutes, but the ref is giving the sergeant a hard look there. Rubbing it in is one thing young man, but displaying it so baldly is childish.”

Aaron gave the ball a hard boot as the ref came by, pointing to his back pocket. “Another act of unsportsmanlike conduct and you’re booked boy. We clear?” he stated.

“Like crystal sir.” Aaron replied with respect. His hit propelled the ball down the field where is was kicked around for a small amount of time before the ref blew his whistle and crossed his arms over his head twice to indicate that the half had ended.

“And with that Allen, the first half comes to an end with the score still tied at zero. Not a bad half for Sudbury me thinks.”

“Not bad at all Martin. The Lions held firm against the Dedham onslaught and stymied them good. Play of the half has got to be that save by Divale. Great position and awareness. Let’s see how the two will respond in the next half. We’re going to take a quick five minute break here ladies and gentlemen so here’s a quick word from our sponsors.”

Minnie Bishop had eaten the last of her peanuts and beckoned with her voice, “Everyone huddle up now!” All complied with haste, so much so that some of the girls ran out of breath trying to get to the sidelines. When the last of them made it, she placed her hands within her muff and delivered her thoughts. “What did I say about not letting Nabakov get her hands on the ball here folks? We’re damn lucky that she hasn’t scored twice now. Speaking of lucky,” she began directing her gaze at Aaron and Lynette at the end, “you both should be counting your lucky stars. Lynn, you could’ve
been sent off such a botched tackle and as for you Aaron, you need to get that taunting under control or you’ll end up costing us the match. I expect better from both of you next half.” Minnie then turned her head and gazed at Wilma. “How in the bloody hell did you flub that shot? There was no one in front of you, daylight for miles around and you half ass the kick? Hell, my mum could’ve tapped that in for the go ahead and she’s been buried for close to thirty years.” All the elder Bishop could do was hang her head in shame as her mother continued on her warpath. “For wingmen,” she ranted, casting her verbal attack at Rudel and Beurling, “you both leave a lot to be desired. One of you is so dead focused to the point of tunnel visioning and the other couldn’t sprint straight and not hack up a lung even if her life depended on it.” Minnie ran her fingers through her hair and took several deep breaths before adding in a tone much more civil and praising, “Other than that ladies and gentleman, good job to everyone. We held them scoreless and really showed how vulnerable they are to counters. Now we have to ratchet up the intensity and really go for broke. Right now, we’re embarrassing them in front of a large crowd and they won’t like that. I fully expect them to go all out on us to try to put this one away, but we’ll be ready for them. Just keep doing what you’re doing and win this for Sudbury. Wear your boots out.”

Eager to get out on the field for the second half, and to partially escape the wrath of his idol, Aaron quickly about faced and jogged back to the goal, Lynette in tow slightly behind him. “Is she always like this?” Aaron asked, turning his head around as he jumped up and smacked the upper cross bar again.

“Oh! That had to have left a mark there Allen.”

“Only when she’s on her high horse.” Lynette replied, getting into position. “Good save by the way.”

“Indeed Martin and the injury crew is on the scene right now. From the looks of things the coach is out cold, and according to the rules, the team captain takes over the reins in the event of a coach being incapacitated or unable to execute their duties. How will Dedham fair with Nabakov calling the shots?”

The Dedham squad rushed onto the field, leaving a seething Russian walking calmly out to the center of the pitch, giving the fallen coach a piece of her mind by spitting at his upturned feet and grinding one of his dislodged bicuspids into the turf. She gave Aaron a look and smiled with evil intent. Oh I can tell what you’re thinking. Don’t even suspect that I don’t. You are looking to punish anything and everything in front of you. “Look out for her!” Aaron roared, his voice carrying far and wide across the length and breadth of the pitch. “She’s out for blood!”

Hanna and Elizabeth heard this and leaned in close together. “I think you take the tackle and knock her flat.” Beurling suggested.

“Not going to work a second time. She’s a veteran and she saw what I did. There’s no element of surprise now.” Rudel countered, shaking her head. She then furrowed her brow in thought and countered, “You take the shot.”
“What? Why me?” Elizabeth inquired, clearly confused.

“Would you expect it?” Hanna retorted as Nabakov got closer. She didn’t wait for her friend to respond before breaking ranks and taking her position. Beurling grumbled as she jogged to the other side of Hanna. Still got booze in my blood. I knew I should’ve passed up on that cognac. Tatiana knocked the ball along to one of her teammates that ran forwards during the set up, using her momentum to rush through the Sudbury midfield with haste. She sprinted down the pitch, making a beeline for Rudel who didn’t have enough time to sidestep out of the way before she brushed against her, though as she rocketed past, Elizabeth could see a flash of an elbow shoot out and ram itself into Hanna’s throat. The German witch rocked back and fell down from the incapacitating strike, clutching her neck. Oh you bitch! You’re going to pay you cunt! With heart filled hatred and black blood running through her veins, Beurling ran after Nabakov who gained possession of the ball from a good pass and flew into the teeth of the defense with reckless abandon. Anyone who came up to challenge her got either ran past or ran over in the Russian’s bloodlust, her cleats stomping into feet and toes with vigor. Lynette saw her approach and knew what she had to do. I need to help stop her, but I can’t afford to get another yellow or it’s over for me. It was then that she saw Elizabeth and Wilma swoop in behind Nabakov, Rudel making strides, having recovered from the illegal takedown that got missed by the ref. At first, she failed to see anything except a charging opposing player, but then she saw the pattern in the pursuit and gasped in realization. Threading the needle! They’re getting her to commit to one side or the other so that someone can get into a head on at the last second! Wait a minute… I’m the needle!

With that in mind, Lynn made a quick dart left, leaving Aaron a bit stranded in no man’s land and him yelling, “The hell you doing Bishop?!” Taking the bait, Tatiana ran into the gap and Aaron quickly tried to move into position, but he was caught unawares and hopelessly outflanked. He watched helplessly as the Russian drew her leg back, readying for the almost assured goal, but the strike never came as out of nowhere Lynette hurled herself into the ball. However, she tripped on a piece of overturned sod and instead of going into the tackle feet first, she went in head first. Her head connected with the ball and Tatiana’s foot found purchase in her left side, knocking the wind out of her and sending her into the air like a tinfoil can being kicked down an alleyway. The ref’s whistle rang out, stopping play and he signaled for a free kick at the spot of the foul, killing the attack.

“Lynette Bishop makes a diving tackle at the ball and pays dearly Martin, but the attack is dead and Sudbury have the ball with five minutes to go.”

“Gutsy play by the walk on, but it gets the job done Allen. There’s not much you can control on the pitch when the match gets underway, but what you can is the amount of effort you give and the younger Bishop looks to understand that. Brilliant play.”

Wilma ran to her sister who was writhing in pain on the field and knelt down. “I’m getting the injury crew. You’re done.” She started to stand up and signal the crew to come onto the field, but her sister grabbed her by the jersey front and dragged her back down. Wilma was confronted by her sisters blue eyes, now aglow with conviction. “You’re not doing anything, you hear me?” Lynette growled through gritted teeth. “I’m finishing this match and taking the free kick. It’s coming to you and tell your friends to get upfield. We’re winning this game right now.” Taken aback by the sheer force in her sister’s delivery, Wilma nodded and gave a quick battle sign to Elizabeth and Rudel that made it clear to both, get ready for something crazy. Her left hurting like a son of a bitch, Lynette rose up from the ground and took the ball from the ref, who eyed her clinically, making sure that she wasn’t intentionally hurting herself for the sake of the team. Confident in his findings, the ref signaled for the kick to take place and Bishop threw all her might into the strike, sending the ball through the air and over the attempted intercepting header of Nabakov and into the chest of Wilma who then immediately crossed it to Hanna on the right side. Rudel took the possession to the forty yard mark
before booting it into the middle of the Dedham defense who were dealing with an attacking Wilma and Elizabeth at the same time. One of the Dedham defenders managed to get a piece of their forehead onto the ball, but Beurling was right there to grab the loose ball and drive forwards, giving the goalie a start. Elizabeth saw the opportunity and fired, the ball curving to the left. Stretching like a rubber band, the goalie reached out and grazed the ball with the tips of her fingers, knocking the shot off just enough to send it into and over the upper cross bar.

“Fuck!” Elizabeth screamed at the top of her lungs. The ref heard her say such things and immediately blew his whistle and reached into his back pocket. Instead of drawing a yellow card, he drew a red card and pointed to the tunnel, indicating that he was sending her off.

“And would you look at that Martin! Beurling is being sent off due to some very choice words and just like that Sudbury is down to ten.” “Her teammates flood the scene and stop her from getting into a fistfight with Luke Shannon which is a good thing there Allen because I’ve personally seen this man knock his own son out, saying that it was, and I quote, ‘for his own good.’ And Minnie Bishop calls a timeout to discuss matters at hand.”

“You’re father sucks dead dog’s cocks in hell you soft inbred wonky toothed shit eating cunt!” Beurling yelled with all her might as Rudel stoically slung her over her right shoulder and carried her, kicking and screaming, to the friendly sideline. Minnie Bishop put her right hand to her face and pinched the upper part of her nose in frustration as Hanna plunked her down on the pine. Undeterred, Elizabeth bolted back up and tried to rush the pitch, but Minnie, without even looking, caught her by the arms and drew her back. “Let me go or I’ll-” Beurling began but the coach of the Sudbury Lions gave her such glare that her words died in her throat.

“Or you’ll what girl? Let’s hear it.” Minnie dared. Slowly, Elizabeth backed up and sat back down with so much as a peep. “Like I thought.” Bishop stated and then turned to face the rest of the team. “Alright folks, we’re changing the formation and where people are going to go. We roll with a five-one-two-one. Rudel minds the between the sticks, Aaron comes out to the right wing, Wilma shifts to center defensive mid, and Lynette lines up at striker.

“What?!” Lynette abruptly interrupted, not truly believing what her mother was saying.

“That’s right girl, you’re moving in that position, but lag behind a bit. The wings will move the ball up and try to get it to you for the last second goal attempt. If you make it, we’re golden, if not, we have overtime to get it done.” Minnie clarified.

“But who’s going to line up for left wing?” Wilma asked. “We have no subs.”

Minnie took off her hand warmer and regarded Aaron. “Hold my muff sergeant.” she ordered.

“Why of co- what?” Aaron began to say, not fully comprehending what she was saying until a split second had passed.

Minnie pushed the ermine muff into Aaron’s chest and then started unbuttoning the top of her red dress. After the first two were undone, she reached to the bottom edges of her skirt and pulled the whole thing up and over her head, revealing a white Sudbury Lions jersey.

“And this is a development folks! Minnie Bishop herself is about to sub on for one of the girls on the defense end, sending her to the pine alongside Beurling! I’ve never seen anything like this in all my years of calling matches Martin and the fans are loving it!”

“And neither have I in my playing or coaching days Allen and it’s causing me to look at the
tournament rules one more time to see if this is a legal change.”

“From the looks of things, it’s genuinely permitted Martin. According to the rules, only those registered with a player designation can walk on. Minnie Bishop’s official designation is player/coach which makes the move legal.”

“As for move Allen, the formation for Sudbury is changing with Rudel in goal, the coach lining up for left wing, Divale at the right wing, the elder Bishop in the defensive midfield, and hold on here, the younger Bishop at striker? What sense does that make?”

“Who knows Martin but the ref is about to resume the match.”

You’ve had time to see how this game is played and how to do the basics. Just copy and paste it into what you do and you’ll be okay, I hope. Aaron moved up to the front lines and looked over at Lynette who was very apprehensive about her new role. “You going to be alright?” he asked with concern.

“I don’t know Aaron.” Lynette admitted looking over at Nabakov who was grinning with delight upon seeing easy prey. “I’m scared.”

“Guess that makes two of us.” Aaron stated with a shrug in an effort to let her know that she wasn’t alone. He then watched Tatiana look over at Lynette and then at him before bringing one of her teammates over and pointed at Bishop. The girl gave a loud sigh of relief at not having to cover such a big target and moved into position. Divale watched as Nabakov lined up in front of him. “U vas khoroshiye ruki, no davayte posmotrim, naskol'ko vy khoroshi na nogakh (You’ve got good hands, but let’s see how good you are on your feet).” she offered, staring him down.

Chuckling, Aaron gestured with his head towards the Dedham sideline where the medics were still trying to revive her coach and replied, “Tochno tak zhe (Likewise).” The whistle blew and the Dedham goalie hard rolled the ball up the pitch to a defender who booted up to Nabakov, who hurriedly backed away from Aaron to get to it, but Divale was on her heels, watching the ball come in. Tatiana got there and rolled it up onto her foot and cast it up and over her head, trying to get it past Aaron and rush past him. Not today my dear.

Instead of over committing himself, Aaron jumped back, neatly intercepting the ball and heading it down to his right. Noticing Minnie getting open, he booted the ball across the pitch, crossing it to her. She slipped her minder and took it with the outer edge of her heel, knocking it down and moving in stride. However, the years had taken a toll on her speed and Bishop was caught up to by a group of defenders who had no compunctions about casting her to the ground if need be.

“Take it Aaron!” she yelled hitting the ball, curving it up and around the nearest defender before colliding with her hard.

“Mom!” Lynette screamed in horror and started to run towards her but Minnie waved her off with her hand as she slowly got up, a cut on her lip oozing blood.

“Mind your position and remember what I said!” she ordered. In the meanwhile, the pass continued to sail through the air and Aaron knew that he might not be able to hold onto it. It’s curving back to my left and Nabakov is right on my ass like blue on sky. He could hear Tatiana’s cleats tear into the ground and her steady hard breathing. Use your size and limit her options. His maneuvering room was rapidly running out and he could see the corner. Without recourse he eyed the ball again and timed his jump with Nabakov’s, who somehow managed to get a piece of it, yet it rolled out of
“And that will be a corner for Sudbury with only fifteen seconds left Martin!”

Aaron quickly gathered the ball up with his hands and planted it down on the pitch. Looking towards the center of the field, he could see Lynette still running up, huffing and puffing, red in the face. *She’s exhausted, but she’s in the perfect position.* He then furrowed his brow and came up with a plan, one that called for a bit of skill and a whole lot of luck. *Fuck it. Bring it on.* He gave a crack at the ball, sending it into the center mass of Dedham’s defense. Lynette saw the hit and noted the trajectory. *It’s looping downwards towards Nabakov. I can’t get to it unless-* The thought died as she felt another jab of cramping hit her sides and legs. Intense pain flared every time she moved or breathed. *God this hurts, but I need to do this for mother.* Summoning the last of her reserves, she sprinted hard into the scrum and and twirled around, pushing up from the pitch with her left foot. Nabakov was leaning her head in to intercept the ball, but hesitated for the briefest second, not wanting a face full of cleat spikes. Lynette flipped up into the air, her head down and her right leg up and reached out with her foot. Her aim struck true as the tip of her shoe made contact with the ball and it rocketed to the upper right corner, catching the goalie off balance, causing the number one to fall down. All watched, Lynette included as she continued to descend to earth, as the soccer ball flew through the air and squeeze itself underneath the crossbar and into the net as the ref blew his whistle after the fact.

“Goal! Goal! Goal! David has slain Goliath folks! What a strike by Lynette Bishop, a bicycle kick into the upper right rattan corner! Beautiful shot and Sudbury wins! Sudbury wins the tournament! What a finish Martin!”

“It was indeed Allen, a splendid bit of work there by Bishop and she’s being mobbed by the team. Great end to a great run. Really fantastic strike, and it was made possible by the interplay between all three forwards and the great corner boot by Divale. Must remind myself to get that boy’s number when this war’s over to see if he could play for Colchester.”

“Nice shot Lynn! That was one in a million!” Minnie cried out holding her daughter tight as the team closed in, cheering and shouting her praises.

“Damn fine bit of work.” Wilma added with Hanna nodding in approval and Elizabeth backing her up with a thumbs up.

“Let’s give the fans a glimpse of our hero.” Aaron declared, and before anyone had a chance to react, he scooped up Lynette who yelped in surprise, and planted her on his shoulders. “How’s it feel to be on top of the world there Lynn?” he asked as he pirouetted slowly, letting her see the cheering crowds. Lynette simply did nothing but stare into the mass of people, people on their feet clapping enthusiastically and yelling themselves hoarse. *They’re cheering for us, for me. This is amazing! What a feeling!* As if he could read her mind, Aaron set her down and added with emphasis, “Remember, you can do anything you want to and get this same feeling every time as long as you have confidence in yourself.” Lynn started to cry tears of joy and hugged him.

A shrill whistle from behind caused Aaron to break the embrace and turn around, seeing Tatiana Nabakov stand there with her left hand on her hip and the right arm extended with the palm open. “I’ll be right back.” he said to Lynn and he jogged over to the Dedham captain.

“Khoroshaya igra Divale. Vy pobedili nas chestno (Good game Divale. You beat us fairly).” she reluctantly admitted.

“Bol’she pokhozhe na udachu (More like luckily).” Aaron responded as he shook her hand. As
Tatiana took it, she stepped in close and moved her left hand from her hip, grazing her fingertips over the lower tip of his bellybutton.

“Khotite posmotret', kak vy budete chestny v odnom na odin (Care to see how you’d fair in a bit of one on one)?” Nabakov asked seductively.

“Ya tsenyu etot zhest, no segodnya vecherom ya by predpochel pobyt’ odin (I appreciate the gesture, but I’d rather be alone tonight).” Aaron politely declined, taking a step away from the Russian temptress.

“Mozhet byt’, v drugoy vecher (Maybe some other night)?” Tatiana suggested as she smiled and jogged back to the Dedham sideline. Aaron watched her go for a second and return back to the rest of team. *I hate having a cock some days.*

“So what was up with that?” Minnie asked as Divale got close enough.

“Just some mix up in extending foreign relations.” Aaron explained. “So what happens now?”

“No,” Minnie smiled with her arms held up high in celebration, “we tell them to warm up the bus because we’re getting pissed.”

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“In all my years of playing before the war, I’ve never seen a successful bicycle kick.” Minnie spouted off while the car continued to go through the sleepy streets of Sudbury. The six of them, all now out of their uniforms and in their normal clothes, were conversing about the match with a large silver cup on he floor of the passenger interior, the front unadorned save for the words **FIRST PLACE.** “The last time someone tried that, they dislocated their right shoulder and broke their tailbone from the landing.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass.” Aaron quipped with a smile. The whole crowd erupted into peals of laughter.

“Indeed sergeant.” Minnie agreed, wiping away a tear. She regarded Lynette who was still wincing from Nabakov’s kick, an ice pack pressed firmly to her left side. “How you feeling?”

“Fine.” Bishop answered with a shrug. “But I’ll feel better once we get to the pub.”

“You might want to take a rain check on that.” Wilma suggested, giving her a look of concern. “The first rule about drinking is never use it to remedy aches and pains.”

“Oh bullshit.” Elizabeth countered, leaning in and pointing at Wilma. “It helps in the right quantities.”

“Emphasis on right.” Hanna retorted while looking out the window.

“I neither agree nor disagree.” Aaron simply stated, perfectly willing to sit out the argument.

“Says the one who probably has the most experience in such things.” Lynette pointed out, shifting a bit in her seat.

“True that.” Aaron replied holding up his hands meekly, “so to that end I say, have fun, but mind how much.”

“And the fun’s about to begin folks.” Minnie declared, picking up the trophy. “We’ve arrived.”
Everyone felt the car come to a halt and watched Minnie open the door, letting in the five o’clock March evening air inside. Wilma followed her mother with Hanna, Elizabeth, and Lynette right on her heels. Aaron was the last to get out and he closed the door behind him. Looking around at what passed as Sudbury, he could see that the town was small, like the size of a postage stamp. As far as he could see there were only two streets, one coming up from the way they came, and the other bisecting it, making a town square of sorts with a post office, constabulary, library, and court house. On this side of things, a business district, or way in this case, lined both sides with shops selling all manner of wares. Most were closed for the day or beginning to. The sidewalks were barren of activity, reminding Aaron of the numerous ghost towns he saw on his journeys through lower Germany. So eerie, even after so long I still get the creeps. Walking with a gun in front of me for miles and not seeing a single soul. A whole community all gone, just like that. Silent as a tomb. He shook his head free of the memories and looked at where they stopped. It was a one story red brick building with an iron sign above the door, swinging in the light breeze, the creaking of metal loud and clear. In faded and chipped yellow lettering were the words ‘Admiral Benbow Inn’. Aaron chuckled to himself. Sounds like someone’s a fan of Stevenson.

“You going to stand out here or have some fun?” Beurling called out from the door. With purpose in his stride, Divale walked to the threshold and tucked his way under the door frame, coming to a greeting area with a built in wooden coat rack on the right side, cubicle holes for storing purses and suitcases right above. The interior was warm and he could smell and hear a fire going strong in the main room beyond a large door, one that was wide open. Voices could be heard as well and Aaron continued to walk behind Elizabeth, his curiosity getting the better of him. Going through, both now found themselves in a wide serving area with wooden tables and chairs scattered all around. The fireplace, an old but well maintained model made of stone, crackled and spat as the flames shot tiny sparks from the burning logs within the maw. Above it, was a picture of a ship in stormy seas, valiantly going against the wind in pursuit of safe harbors. Paraphernalia littered the walls at selected intervals. Old blunt cutlasses, ropes with all manner of shipmen’s knots, and other choice items of a nautical deposition could be seen. At the end of the room, towards the front, a bar ensconced within the jaws of some massive whale lay open with a sole weathered male bartender who looked as if he had been a sailor himself back in the day, with his beaten face, calloused palms, and stiff jaw. A lone scar ran up the length of his left hand, terminating in a tattoo of a heart pierced by two harpoons with the words, ‘A Sailor’s Heart.’ Slightly askew of that, was the rest of the gang, now joined by several new comers in the uniforms of the Sudbury Lions, with Minnie giving each one a hug. These must be the injured, but if they are, they look very well recuperated from such beatings. The last match they were in must’ve been some time ago.

“So good to see you all here.” Minnie stated with joy, looking at each one of them in turn.

“You kidding me?” one of them said, a burly looking red head with a face full of freckles and her right arm in a cast replied. “We wouldn’t miss the victory celebration for the world. Doctor’s orders be damned.”

“And look who’s finally come to enjoy themselves.” Hanna observed, looking at Elizabeth and Aaron who simply stood there, letting things play out before advancing in on them. The other members of the team saw Elizabeth first and smiled, but those smiles went away when they saw Aaron, his shoes rapping against the wooden floorboards like a hand does a when knocking on a door.

“Holy Christ he’s huge.” another one exclaimed, backing up ever so slightly.

“And for an extra five hundred in the crotch line, he bloody well better be.” Lynette piped up. Everyone chuckled at the inside joke and Aaron looked at her, absolutely mortified and blushing while her mother simply put her hand to her mouth to prevent herself from laughing.
Divale tried to frame a response, but no words came out as he flapped his jaw, mouthing silent syllables. “I can’t say anything except that there may be some truth to that statement.” he finally squeaked out.

“Wow Lynn, you take shots on and off the field with equal violence.” Wilma observed.

“Speaking of,” Elizabeth began, waltzing up to the bar with intent, and was about to place an order, but Minnie politely pulled her away with her left hand and directed attention to the cup that sat on the bar top by clearing her voice.

“After weeks of practice, pain, and lots of roasted peanuts, we finally have our well deserved trophy.” Minnie declared, drawing cheers and applause from the masses. “Though our names aren’t etched on the sides, everyone here contributed to this victory, and as such, all shall partake.” She signaled to the bartender with a wave of her right hand. The gentleman nodded and took up the cup carefully in his hands, positioning it under a barrel spigot. He turned it to the left and out came a dark liquid that began to foam at the top. It took a good minute for the cup to be completely filled, the head barely cresting the rim, fizzing like a lit dynamite fuse. With practiced ease, the bartender set it back down. “Starting with those that couldn’t be there at the end, but whose hard work helped us get there to begin with, drink.” All the injured reserves lifted the cup with both hands and took deep gulps, receiving congratulations and applause. The red head with her arm in a sling was assisted by Minnie. When all had gone, Minnie spoke up again, “And now for our walk ons who prevented a forfeit and fought hard to seal the deal. Drink.” Elizabeth went first and took quite a few gulps before belching loudly and passing it on. Hanna took one small drink, apparently not liking the brew, Wilma took took three big gulps, and Lynette took two of her own. By the time it got to Aaron, he lifted the cup with one hand clasped around the thin necked base, and was amazed to find that it was still half full. “And last, but certainly not least, our sole gentleman who preserved the shut out.” Bishop announced.

“One who cleans up everywhere between the sticks and the bottom of the glass.” Aaron replied with gusto and he tipped the cup, drinking deeply. The alcohol was hearty and very thick, almost like a stout and it tasted marvelous as Divale drained the trophy to the last drop. When he was done, he held the silver cup in his hand, nodding almost absentmindedly, and asked the bartender, “What was the beer you put into it?”

“Guinness Stout my boy.” the old bartender replied with pride.

“Next,” Minnie asserted, causing everyone to regard her, “we have the awarding of Most Valuable Player. Given the circumstances, I’ll make an exception and award this to not one but two players tonight. First, with a great sliding tackle in which she took a boot to the side, a well timed deflection, and a thunderous shot on goal that gave us the cup, Lynette Bishop.” Everyone stepped away and allowed Lynn a chance to bow and smile. “And for the second, with three incredible saves, including a penalty shot, and delivering a great assist from the corner that helped set up the winning goal, Aaron Divale.” Again, there was applause and cheers, with Aaron bowing his head and shaking a few hands while placing the cup back on the bar top, the streams of foam flowing down the silver interior. “For such gallantry on the field, there is but one reward, the Golden Boot.” This time without waiting for a command, the bartender reached under the bar and pulled out two two foot tall glasses in the shape of a wide toed boot and started filling them with stout. Aaron’s eyes bugged out as he saw them and looked over at Lynette with concern, yet she was strangely calm. Apparently Minnie caught the meaning behind his anxiety and inquired firmly, “Are you suggesting that my youngest daughter can’t drink all of that by her lonesome?”

“No,” Divale blurted out, cursing himself for being so transparent in his motives, “not at all. It’s just that’s a lot of booze.”
“Oh balderdash.” Lynette simply replied, “I may not be as prestigious of a drinker as you, Elizabeth, or even Erica, but I can surprise a few people when I’m in the mood to do so.”

“That’s the spirit.” Elizabeth encouraged, rubbing Lynn’s shoulders like a boxer getting ready to go back into the ring. Hanna merely glanced at Wilma who gave her a nod. Aaron knew that look and the answer that normally went along with it. *Make sure she’s alright at the end of it. Well, I guess if she has people looking out for her, I guess it’s okay.* The last drop of alcohol fell into the last boot to be filled and the old bartender plunked them both down on the bar top. Aaron and Lynette took their glasses and were about to drink them together when Beurling spoke up, “Any of you two want to have a friendly wager?”

“Oh no,” Bishop replied, wagging her left index finger as if it were a stick about to be thrown to a dog, “I’m not getting involved.”

“Party pooper.” Elizabeth mocked and then turned to Aaron. “What about you? Are you down for a throw down?”

“Depends on who’s throwing.” Aaron answered with a wink.

*Oh you’re a tease.* “I bet you can’t consume the whole thing within a minute and not spill a solitary drop.” Beurling challenged. “If you fail, I get any article of clothing that I want off your back. Temporarily of course.”

Aaron cocked his eyebrow and nodded, mulling it over. “I’ll agree to those terms for me, if you agree to the same terms for you.” he decided. “Again, temporarily of course.”

Beurling took a step back and looked away, thinking about the deal and gauging whether or not he could do it. “Only as long as the group votes on which one for me.” she riposted.

*You’re afraid you’ll lose this bet. I would be too, because you’re about to lose.* “Agreed.” Aaron stated. He then turned to Lynette and offered to toast. Bishop tinked her glass against his and declared, “Bottom’s up.” Without hesitation, Aaron threw back his glass and started to drink, opening up his throat impossibly wide. The whole bar watched and urged him to go on with the words ‘drink’ over and over as Divale absolutely bubbled up with Minnie Bishop acting as the official timekeeper. Elizabeth observed all this and just by the sheer volume of beer that was disappearing down Aaron’s gullet knew that she was going to lose. *Fucking hell! Half the boot’s gone and it’s only been what, not even twenty seconds! I’m done!* By the time she finished that thought, Aaron’s beer line was barely cresting the middle sole and with a few more monstrous gulps, Divale emptied the boot, licked his tongue around the rim, catching any stray drops, and set it down gently on the bar top.

“Forty eight seconds on the dot.” Minnie announced, showing everyone her watch to prove that she was telling the truth. Everyone clapped and cheered as Aaron softly burped into his massive right fist, not wanting to be a pig in front of such splendid company. He was about to turn to Beurling to inquire as to what her friends would vote on when he saw that Lynette was bubbling up and was halfway down her boot as well. The younger Bishop then took her mouth off the glass and sighed in happiness and relief.

“I’ll be buggered.” Aaron muttered under his breath. Regarding the group, he then asked, “So what do the masses want?”

The answer came in a low chant that got louder and louder. “Shirt, shirt, shirt.”
“Okay, okay.” Beurling spat out, annoyed at the loss and the fact that her friends had allowed such a thing to happen, giving them dirty looks. Wilma shrugged and grinned while Hanna merely looked on impassively. She reluctantly reached for the bottom of her hems and was about to pull the sweater up when Aaron leaned in.

“Please, allow me.” Divale offered with a courteous air.

The entire room went silent and Elizabeth looked like she had just been slapped in the face. “Those hands go anywhere else, you’re withdrawing bloody stumps.” he threatened, moving her arms away.

“Good luck with that.” Aaron quipped as he reached down, but instead of going for the sweater, he took hold of her knife belt and unhooked it with a deft flick of his left wrist, taking it up and away from her side with his right hand. “Considering you now lack the means to do so.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal!” Beurling exclaimed, thinking herself cheated.

“As a gentleman, I’m altering the deal.” Aaron explained. “Unless you want me not to.” When Elizabeth didn’t answer, he pulled the kukri blade out of the sheath and looked at it. The polished knife was heavy, easily two pounds and close to eighteen inches long, with a notch at the base that can allow for blood to drip away from the hand or catch another blade if necessary. Within the scabbard, inside smaller pouches, were two additional knives, one for polishing and the other for sharpening. He gripped the black handle tightly and stated, “This is the closest I’ve even come to these blades. When I got ferried over from France, the people who guarded me had these knives on them, and every so often, I would catch glimpses of them practicing with them, throwing them at dummies or conducting improvised fights. Very serious weapons in the hands of someone who knows how to use them.” Suddenly he flicked the blade up and made it dance between his fingers, betwixt the webbing, around his wrist, over and under the elbow, every which way to Sunday as the knife twirled, rolled, spun, and popped up and down like a fishing lure being grappled by a feisty fish. For thirty seconds, he did this before letting it fall into the scabbard, the aim so precise that not so much as a stray speck was struck off, and handed it back to Elizabeth, who stood there awestruck.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Beurling asked. A bright light and all one could hear is screams and the frantic tattoo of feet smacking on stone in an effort to get away. Gunshots ring out and strike an unseen body, but cause no discomfort. Nothing is felt but rage and fury as a hapless soldier, believing that his firearm would save him, is picked up off his feet by a massive cleaver, the blade under swung and catching the chest at the sternum. Blood gurgles out the throat as the body is hurled upwards and into a roaring fireplace, the flames catching within an instant. Howling could be heard followed by the acrid reek of burning flesh. The slaughter isn’t done, not by a long shot, as the murderer lets loose a mighty roar and jumps into a throng of fleeing men. The cleaver lashes out, lopping off a blond haired head in a spray of crimson, and then back down at an angle, going into and through the right shoulder blade of another man, the cleaver going to the lower ribs before being withdrawn, arterial vitae gushing all over the place. One man works up the courage to fight back, knowing that he’s about to die, but unwilling to go like a lamb, swinging his empty rifle like a club. The cleaver catches the weapon and bats it away. With the feeling of a smile stretching over a face, the blade punches out towards the mans face—.

“Somewhere I don’t like remembering.” Aaron replied, the memory of Houska Castle fading away as quickly as it came on. “But enough about me, let’s talk about getting some more to drink and start having some fun.” Cheers came forth from many throats as the bartender smiled and started going to work.

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“So you could only imagine the scene.” Minnie went on, nursing a pint of stout as he continued her
Cradling a young girl in your lap, tears flowing down a face that was caked with so much mud that you could’ve mistaken it for the bottom of a mushroom.” She took another deep drink from her mug and added, “And that was the last time I ever gave Lynette a horse riding lesson.”

“Aw mom.” Lynette groaned, holding her right hand to her face. “Must you always tell this story to strangers?”

“Why not?” Wilma spoke out in defense of her mother, moving aside her pint. “It’s a cute story. No shame in not being able to ride a horse. Most can’t anyway.”

“I can.” Elizabeth boasted, taking swig from her heavily rummed hot toddy.

“In more ways than one.” Hanna let loose, alternating her drinking with glass of milk.

“Quiet you.” Beurling shot back. “You’re no saint yourself.”

“No one’s a saint at this table me thinks.” Aaron observed, sitting back down with another full boot. “We all have things we’ve done that we don’t want people to know about.”

“Such as?” they all stated in unison.

Put on the spot, Aaron searched for a possible tidbit about his past that wouldn’t paint him in a flattering light, but ultimately came to a much simpler solution. “Being famous isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.” he answered, taking a drink from the two foot tall glass and wiping away the foam with the backside of his left hand. “When I was in France, helping out the Resistance, people accepted me with open arms, despite knowing what I was. Wasn’t a bad thing at first. I actually appreciated the fact that I wasn’t being shot at for a change, but as I soon discovered, not all help had the same price attached. You wouldn’t believe the amount of women who wanted to sleep with me, just because I was a hero who built something as simple as a flower garden underground. Got so bad that I had to go from place to place in disguise to avoid attracting a crowd. Damnedest thing, half wanted to be with you and the other half wanted to be you. So many hilarious stories.”

“Name one.” Hanna dared, curiosity taking hold.

“Well,” Aaron began, collecting his beer addled thoughts together, “there was this one time in Beauvais that I was slated to be the best man at a wedding and caused someone to drink some very fresh red wine.”

Wilma started to chuckle as she took another drink, prompting Lynette to lean over and inquire, “How did you manage that?”

“All I did was give the lad some advice.” Aaron honestly answered. “He had his sights set on her for a while and the two really loved each other very much, but he had massive self confidence issues. So one day, he comes to me asking what I would do and I tell him to just go for it. I mean, what were you really fearing if you know that she loves you? What’s the worst thing that could happen, she says no? Emboldened, the boy goes to her, delivers a small spiel and gets on his knees, offering her a ring, or rather a band of iron because that was all he could get his hands on. The girl starts crying and says yes.” The table had a round of ‘awws’ at the mention of true love requited. “Out of thanks, he makes me the best man and the two get hitched within the day, inviting friends and other big wigs from around the area. A small affair and the time soon comes for me to give the speech. Now, bear in mind, I have no fucking clue about the past between the two, but I use my talent for reading people and spew out this rambling blurb that somehow manages to get everyone smiling and crying. Really heady stuff. I close it with, ‘May all your ups and downs be between the sheets,’ and everyone drinks and starts having fun. I try to migrate to a corner, but one of the bride’s friends wanted to
dance the bal musette with me. Not wanting to look ungrateful, I agree and we dance a number, all
the while rubbing herself against me really close like. Thinking to myself, ‘Oh shit, here I go again,’
and she pops the question, ‘Aimerais-tu coucher avec moi (Would you like to sleep with me)?’ All
from a dance.”

“And I take it you accepted?” Minnie inquired, swirling her stout with her right hand, eyeing him.

“Yes I did.” Aaron replied with a sigh, letting everyone let loose their obligatory ‘ohhs,’ “and it was
the biggest mistake ever. When we get alone and she undresses, I notice that she’s having her time of
the month.” Elizabeth roared in laughter while Wilma and Lynette grimaced in disgust, crossing their
legs simultaneously. “She notices me staring and starts to apologize, but in my view, I was like, the
point of no return is reached, so I console her by saying that a little blood never scared me. We go at
it for a good bit, afterwards wiping up the debris with a rag and throwing it into the corner. She
leaves with a smile, saying thank you, and I proceed to do the same when the groom’s father
stumbles in with an empty wine tumbler in his hand, obviously drunk off his tits, and notices the rag
in the corner, exclaiming, ‘Oh, some more wine.’”

“Oh dear Lord have mercy he didn’t!!” Minnie exclaimed, not wanting to believe the worst case
scenario.

“He grabs the rag and wrings out a good half inch of you know what into the glass and quaffs the
whole thing down. After he was done he comments that the vintage was very dry and earthy.” Aaron
going on, taking a deep drink from his glass in an attempt to get the taste of such a bawdy tale out of
his mouth.

“And you watched all of this?” Hanna asked. “And you didn’t once tell him what it was he was
about to lap up?”

“C’est la vie (Such is life).” Aaron responded with a shrug.

“Good thing we’re not having food eh?” Elizabeth joked.

Minnie chugged the rest of her glass and stood up. “The bal musette you danced with her was the
same you danced with Lynette’s squadmate Sanya am I right?” she asked, looking at Aaron. He
nodded and she illuminated, “I want you to dance that dance with me.”

“Mother!” Lynette cried out, nearly spilling drink in shock. “What would dad say?”

Minnie gave her youngest daughter a look and replied, “There’s nothing wrong with an innocent
dance.”

“Well, here goes nothing. Bring it on.” Everyone in the room looked on, Aaron took Minnie Bishop
by the right hand with his own, left hand at her side, and started to dance a quick one-two, spinning
and waltzing around the room with gusto, with some of the team stomping on the floorboards in time
with the rhythm. Lynette looked on in disbelief, Wilma mouthed the words ‘oh boy,’ Elizabeth
whooped and hollered, and Hanna nodded, sipping her glass of milk. All while this was going on, Aaron moved around the floor with Bishop’s mother gracefully spinning, dipping, and holding her. Minnie smiled the whole time, having the time of her life, the expression on her face indicative that she didn’t want this to end. However, end it did and Aaron sat her back down in the chair. “That was amazing!” Minnie exclaimed with a smile, after taking a few deep breaths from the exertion. “You can dance a mean bal musette young man.” She looked over at Lynette and grinned. Lynn saw the look and hastily tried to get up and away, but her mother would have none of it, snatching her daughter’s hand and announcing, “Now for our co MVP’s to have a go at it.” Lynette tried to politely protest, but she was already being pushed out of her seat by the combine efforts of Elizabeth and Wilma. Oh God no. I can’t dance to save my life. I’ll embarrass myself.

“Don’t worry.” Aaron whispered to her as he led her away from the throng and onto a clear space, noticing her distress. “I’ll go slower for you. Relax and take a deep breath. I’m not going to let you go.”

Lynette looked up at Aaron and did as he instructed, forcing down the butterflies in her stomach, and nodding. “Ready.” she stated, and the two danced a slower one-two-three-four, a speed more reminiscent of a school slow dance than the vigorous tango like velocity of the previous one. Divale didn’t dip her at all, but did allow himself to spin her a few times. All was going well, until Lynette caught her foot on the side of a chair, and started to fall backwards. Aaron was caught off balance, but not unawares, and he quickly shifted his body underneath hers, so that she would land on him rather than the floor. The two landed hard and Aaron felt something slip off his face and fly through the air. At first,he didn’t know what it was, but then he realized with awful clarity what had happened. My glasses. Within seconds, the rest of the team started screaming and the bartender back away in absolute terror as Aaron’s true self was revealed.

“Oh God no. I can’t dance to save my life. I’ll embarrass myself.”

Bishop yelled out while getting herself back up, “Aaron, where are you going? Come back!”

Aaron didn’t turn around and instead called over his shoulder, “Anywhere but here.”

Lynette tried to get up faster and run after him, but he was already gone, out the door and into the early evening. “Let him go Lynn.” Minnie said from the table.

“But-” Lynette started to answer, turning around to face her mother, but her protestations went away as she saw, all four of the people still sitting there have a look of sadness about them, like they felt guilty in not saying anything in Divale’s defense or allowing it to happen.

“He’ll be okay.” Wilma assured, gesturing to an empty seat. “He just needs time to be alone.”

“Should he even be alone?” Hanna asked with concern. “Where will he go?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Elizabeth ventured, taking Aaron’s still mostly full boot glass into her hands. “I may not be a man, but if I were, I’d go to the one place where I know I’d be accepted, a haven safe from ridicule.” She took a small drink from the glass and added with emphasis, “A loved one.”

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Lucretia crumpled up the rejection letter from the Vatican and threw it at the nearby wastebasket, the ball of paper hitting the side and falling to the floor, rolling another inch or two before coming to a rest near the wall. Dejected, she leaned back into the hardwood chair, the folds of her white robe giving her some modicum of comfort, and took up her cup of tea that was sitting on the coaster from the coffee table next to her. \textit{God damn it all. What is it going to take to get them to open up? The second coming?} The aroma of the steeped liquid, one that smelled of mint, did little to calm her down as she put it gingerly to her lips and sipped. However, the warmth made her feel a bit better about herself and her failure and she looked around her living room. Like the dining room further down the way near the front door, it was sparse and lightly decorated with a low lying ceiling of white tile and faded green wallpaper. A few pictures hung from the walls at selected intervals, here a rose filled vase and there a sunset over calm waters. The heater continued to provide warmth alongside the far wall, occasionally puttering as heat was pushed through it’s metal pipes. A large blue sofa of wide wale corduroy, so long past its prime that a mouse would sink into the cushions, lay across from her, and beyond that, the door to her bedroom.

Subconsciously, Domino’s thoughts drifted to the night she and Aaron made love for the first time, and smiled. \textit{He was so gentle with me, making me feel like a real woman. I’ve never known such compassion and love before. Oh my love, though I failed you today, I will never give up my efforts to help you end your curse.} Suddenly, she heard someone knocking on the front door to her flat, and she immediately grew scared. \textit{It’s seven in the evening. Who would be here at this time of night?} Lucretia put down her tea and reached under the coffee table. With a small tug she pulled the pistol she had affixed there with a metal slide, an old C96 with it’s black metal partially scuffed and the wooden ‘broom handle’ grip cracked along the right side. \textit{I’ve never liked guns, but after what happened to me in February, I’m not taking any chances.} The right side of her face felt parasympathetic pain as her memory recalled the hit she took from that thug that robbed her of her medical supplies on that snowy day. Domino never figured out why he wanted them, but all she knew was that the bruise was there for days, no matter how much foundation she applied to her face. When she went in the next day for another session with Aaron, he was furious when he saw it, vowing vengeance for such a transgression. \textit{Bastard was never caught either.}

Lucretia got up from the chair, holding the gun with her right hand off to her side as she made her way through the hallway leading to the dining room. The knocking began again, this time more heavy and rapid. \textit{Persistent whoever it is.} Looking down, she checked to see if the safety was off, which it was, and crept towards the door. With her left hand, she flipped up the brass peephole and gasped as a very familiar form greeted her eyes. \textit{Aaron!} In an instant, she put the pistol in the walking stick holder and unlocked the door. “Aaron cosa ci fai qui (Aaron what are you doing here)?” she asked, opening the portal. When she actually got a good look at him, her heart sank. His clothes were still unblemished, but his face told a different story. Evidently, he’d been crying for his face was red and the lips were trembling. Strangely, Divale didn’t have his glasses on, the molten bronze orbs glowing like lanterns in the March night, both looking down and way. Slowly, Aaron looked at her and he managed to choke out, his voice hoarse from sobbing, \textit{“Ti dispiace se vengo (Mind if I come in)?”}

“Certo, amore mio, vieni qui. Potrai prendere la tua morte di freddo essere là fuori (Of course my love, get in here. You’ll catch your death of cold being out there).” Lucretia hastily stated, taking him by the right hand and pulling him inside, lest anyone else saw them together. She nearly let go of him as he was freezing cold to the touch. \textit{How long was he out there?}

As if he could read her mind, Aaron assured her as she took him past the threshold, “Sono stato là fuori solo per pochi secondi, anche se ho dovuto volare qui da Sudbury attraverso essere invisibile. Nessuno mi ha visto venire o stare qui. Il nostro segreto è sicuro (I’ve only been out there for a few seconds, though I had to fly here from Sudbury through being invisible. No one saw me coming or standing here. Our secret is safe).”
“Perché eri a Sudbury (Why were you in Sudbury)?” Lucretia asked, closing the door quickly and fishing the gun out of the walking stick holder. “E dove sono gli occhiali? Perché piangi (And where are your glasses? Why are you crying)?”

“Lunga storia triste amore (Long sad story love).” Aaron replied sadly, closing his eyes and letting more tears fall down his face.

“Parliamone. Ho tutto il tempo del mondo (Let’s talk about it. I’ve all the time in the world).” Lucretia suggested, beckoning him to go into the living room as she extracted the pistol from its temporary hiding place.

“Brava ragazza (Good girl).” Aaron pointed out, gesturing with his head towards the gun as he walked slowly down the way. “Ti sei ricordato (You remembered).” Lucretia smiled to herself as she followed him, her mind filled less with pride and more with concern. What happened that made him break down so?

It didn’t take long for Aaron’s stride to take him into the living room and he sat down on the sofa, his bulk sinking like a stone in water as the cushions sagged and groaned in protest. Domino sat next to him and watched dejectedly as he put his hands to his face and started crying harder. She did the only thing she could do and held him close, rocking him gently. “È stata una giornata di cacca (Such a shitty day this has been).” he uttered. “Un giorno come te non ci crederesti (A day like you wouldn’t believe).”

“Cos’è successo Aaron (What happened Aaron)?” Lucretia inquired, holding his hands in hers.

“Ho saputo che l'uniforme di Perrine era dentro e l'ho preso dal negozio con l'intenzione di darla a lei, ma ho sentito da Lynette che era in un funk, così sono andato a vederla. Trovato lei nella cucina del messhall e tutto quello che ho detto è che era un po' solitario in qui e lei frusti intorno e crepe di me in tutto il viso con la sua tazza e piattino, correndo davanti a me in sua stanza. La insegno, cerco di fare le cose per bene, ma poi spara tre colpi dalla pistola contro di me (Got word that Perrine’s uniform was in and I got it from the shop with the intention of giving it to her, but I heard from Lynette that she was in a funk, so I went and saw her. Found her in the kitchen of the messhall and all I said was that it was a bit lonely in here and she whips around and cracks me across the face with her cup and saucer, running past me to her room. I pursue her, trying to make things right, but then she fires three shots from her pistol at me).” Aaron began to explain. Lucretia’s eyes bugged out and she frantically touched Aaron’s chest to see if he was hurt. “Non mi sono fatto male, ma l'ho persa subito (I didn’t get hurt, but I lost it right then and there).” he illuminated, taking her hands away from his chest. “Ho urlato a lei che aveva vinto e che stavo per andare via (I yelled at her that she’d won and that I was going to leave).”

At the mention of the word leave, Domino threw her hands to her mouth in horror and disbelief. “Te ne vai (You’re leaving)!!” she exclaimed.

Aaron quickly took her by the shoulders and added, “Ho quasi dannatamente ben fatto. Ero stufo di tutto il dramma tra me e lei e ho avuto l'ordine di trasferimento tutti disposti davanti a me fino vescovo è venuto in camera mia e mi ha convinto a lasciare riposare per un giorno fino a quando le cose si spense (I nearly damn well did. I was sick of all the drama between me and her and I had the transfer order all laid out in front of me until Bishop came up to my room and convinced me to let it sit for a day until things died down).” His words had an effect and Lucretia visibly grew more relaxed. “Mi ha anche detto che stavo andando con lei per incontrare sua madre. Siamo stati prelevati più tardi da sua sorella e i suoi amici e tutti noi abbiamo fatto il nostro modo di Sudbury. Ha incontrato Minnie Bishop, e in un primo momento, le cose non sono andate bene, ma hanno ottenuto meglio. Finito per ottenere cordata in una partita di calcio di beneficenza a Layer Road a Colchester. Abbiamo finito per vincere la partita e siamo tutti tornati a Sudbury per festeggiare. Durante quel periodo, stavo ballando con Lynette e lei inciampò, mandandoci entrambi a terra. I miei occhiali è
venuto fuori e (She also told me that I was going with her to meet her mother. Got picked up later on by her sister and her friends and we all made our way to Sudbury. Met Minnie Bishop, and at first, things didn’t go well, but they got better. Ended up getting roped into a charity soccer match at Layer Road in Colchester. We ended up winning the game and we all went back to Sudbury to celebrate. During that time, I was dancing with Lynette and she tripped, sending us both to the floor. My glasses came off and)-” Aaron paused turned away, wincing at the memory.

“Cos’è successo dopo (What happened next)?” Lucretia pressed.

Divale sniffled and blurted, “Una di quelle puttane al bar mi ha chiamato un mostro. Appena mi ha infranto dentro e ho lasciato senza una parola o addirittura ottenere i miei occhiali indietro. Non volevo essere lì più a lungo. Volevo essere da qualche parte dove non sarei stato considerato un mostro (One of those bitches at the bar called me a freak. Just shattered me inside and I left without a word or even getting my glasses back. Didn’t want to be there any longer. I wanted to be somewhere where I wouldn’t be thought of as a monster).”

“E hai fatto la scelta giusta Aaron (And you made the right choice Aaron).” Lucretia said, holding his face in her hands and and wiping away his tears with her outstretched fingers.

“Mi odio così tanto per essere me (I hate myself so much for being me).” Aaron went on, beating himself up verbally. “Odio indossare quegli occhiali ogni volta che esco in pubblico, odio fingere di essere qualcosa che non sono, odio (I hate wearing those glasses whenever I go out in public, I hate pretending to be something I’m not, I hate)-”

“Smettila, Aaron (Stop it Aaron).” Lucretia forcibly interrupted. “Non ti stai facendo alcun favore, abbattendo te stesso. Invece di lamentarsi di quello che non sei, Guarda cosa sei. Sei un brav’ uomo che ha fatto molto per quelli intorno a lui, e se la persona media non può vedere che per se stessi, al diavolo con loro. Chi sono per giudicarti senza tanto cercare di conoscerti? Prendere conforto nel fatto che non sei solo e ci sono persone nel tuo angolo disposti a difenderti. So che non ti piace fare affidamento su altri per combattere le vostre battaglie per voi, ma non fa mai male sentire una voce amichevole o avere un paio di mani in più una volta ogni tanto (You’re not doing yourself any favors by knocking yourself down. Instead of moaning about what you’re not, look at what you are. You’re a good man who’s done much for those around him, and if the average person can’t see that for themselves, to hell with them. Who are they to judge you without so much as trying to get to know you? Take solace in the fact that you’re not alone and you have people in your corner willing to defend you. I know you don’t like relying on others to fight your battles for you, but it never hurts to hear a friendly voice or have an extra pair of hands once in a while).”

Aaron stopped crying and sighed, putting on a smile for the first time in almost two hours. He shook his head side to side in wonder. “Non ho idea di come lo fai Lucrezia (I have no idea how you do it Lucretia).” he marveled. “Non capirò mai come si può mettere in su con il mio relitto emotivo di un asino e dire le parole giuste per farmi sentire meglio con me stesso, alla fine della giornata, ma sono molto grato si fa (I’ll never understand how you can put up with my emotional wreck of an ass and say the right words to get me to feel better about myself at the end of the day, but I’m very thankful you do).”

Lucretia gave him a kiss on the lips and smiled back at him. “Perché ho imparato ad ascoltare la cosa più importante che una persona ha, il loro cuore, perché è lì solo dove si può trovare ciò che veramente li affligge e come trattarlo (Because I learned to listen to the most important thing a person has, their heart, because it’s only there where you can find what truly ails them and how to treat it).” she explained. “Stare la notte il mio amore (Staying the night my love)?”

“Tipo di non avere scelta in questo (Kind of have no choice in that),” Aaron affirmed, pointing at his
Eyes. “Non torno fino alle otto del mattino o giù di lì (I’m not due back until eight in the morning or so).” At that point Lucretia leaned in, allowing her body to rest against his. Instead of resisting, Aaron let himself fall back along the sofa, his head resting up against one of the arms, looking into the green eyes of the woman he’d come to love, running his right hand through her hair, his left on her upper back. “Ti amo (I love you),” he uttered, getting lost in her eyes.

“Ti voglio bene anch’io (I love you too).” Lucretia answered. She put on a devilish smile and asked, “Hai fame di una primavera (You hungry for some primavera)?”

Aaron returned her smile with a grin of his own and answered, “Ah, la tua primavera. Posso mangiarlo per ore (Ah your primavera. I can eat that for hours).”

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Despite being under the trees in a small wooded patch next to a small creek behind the hanger proper, Lynette winced in pain as the sun caused her head to hurt. Knew I should’ve stopped earlier that night before bed. Least I held my own better than Beurling did. The drunken sot stumbled and bumbled into the wall so many times, her face resembled a bulldog’s after a while. She looked up into the blue morning sky again and frowned, taking another quick glance at her watch. Oh seven thirty hours. I did tell him this morning at seven that he’s expected back soon. Hopefully he arrives in time or else Minna will not only kill him, but me as well. Leaning back against the willow she was standing under, Bishop looked over the scene. This area was regarded by many among the groundskeepers as the oldest patch of earth on the castle grounds, having been kept as it was well over a thousand years ago. It was peaceful here, a few dozen willows protecting from the harsh glare of the sun, the air thick with the scent of their budding leaves and the rustle of the branches. A gentle creek flowed through the thick of it, running for a good few hundred feet into the woods beyond the hanger limits, bordered on the sides by large flat rocks. Every so often Lynette came here when she was in need of a pick me up from a hard day. Became my personal place of healing during the Blitz, when my chances of staying here looked bleak. It helped get me through. Suddenly, a shadow passed overhead, one too quick to be a passing cloud, and Lynette turned around just in time to see Aaron swoop down and land gracefully, retracting his wings as he did so, still looking dapper in the clothes he wore yesterday.

“Hopefully I didn’t keep you waiting too long.” Aaron apologized. He looked at Bishop and inquired, “You okay? You look kind of rough.”

“I’m perfectly fine.” Lynette lied. After Divale crossed his arms and cocked his eyebrows did she admit, “My head hurts a little though.” Aaron chuckled at the admission as he walked up next to her, looking at the grove.

“It truly is a beautiful place here Lynn.” he agreed, remembering what she told him of it in the morning as he got up to leave Lucretia’s flat. It wasn’t easy to get out of that place. Didn’t want to leave without making her some breakfast. Least I could do after what we did last night. Poor girl was so beat that she could hardly sit up. Note to self: go easy next time, no matter what she says. His brow furrowed as he caught something that shouldn’t be there, an edge to a box that lay behind a rock near the creek.

Lynette noticed it and remarked, “Something that my mother left for you as a farewell present.”

“I’m a bit surprised that she’d leave me anything considering what happened.” Aaron replied as Bishop quickly jogged over to pick it up from it’s hiding place.

“She understood why you left believe it or not.” Lynette explained, picking up the box and walking back to him. “Told me to leave you be and that you’d be alright.”
Aaron nodded to himself. *Smart of her to do that. Probably would’ve caused a scene otherwise.* “So what did she give me?” he asked when Lynn was close enough.

“Open it up and see.” Bishop urged, fighting back some excitement as she handed him the box. Aaron cracked it open and saw a bathrobe that was white as Siberian snow with the Sudbury Lions patch on the left breast. Within one of the folds was a small note that read: ‘To the best number one that I’ve ever seen. Sincerely, Minnie ‘The Lioness of Flanders’ Bishop. March 16th 1944. P.S. I’m deeply sorry about what happened last night. If there is any place you need to go or anyone you need to talk to, my door is always open. And by the way, thanks for the dance and your glasses are underneath.”

“Oh, you all shouldn’t have.” Aaron simply said, fighting back those sentimental tears that he knew were lurking.

“Don’t you ‘oh you shouldn’t have’ nothing.” Lynette scolded, wagging her finger. “You deserve it. And she got it at the same place that she got your uniform.”

“And hopefully with a bit leeway in the groin area.” Aaron quipped with a laugh.

Lynette chuckled as well, but stopped as she remembered something important. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the transfer order. A sad look came over her face as she held it out to him. “You still want to go?”

Aaron slowly took it with his right hand and looked at her, wanting to tell her otherwise, but instead settling for muttering, “I honestly don’t know. I don’t know.” With the order secured in his right hand, the arm hanging loose at his side, Aaron made his way to the creek and planted his rump on one of the rocks, trying to form a way to explain his decision. *God how do I do this without breaking her heart?*

“Is there room for one more?” a voice from behind them asked. Both turned and gasped as the form of Perrine Clostermann stood in the sun, dressed in Aaron’s gift and holding a blue parasol. None could say a word as she strolled towards them, her face bearing none of the sadness or anger that she displayed yesterday.

“My goodness Perrine.” Lynette gaped. “That is so-”

“Beautiful.” Aaron finished, holding his hands up in mock gesture of defeat and letting them drop to his side, the palms clapping against his thighs. “Just perfect as I knew it would be. Blue is your color and you wear it well.” Perrine answered with an approving nod and Aaron gestured with his left hand to an empty stone top. Taking that as a yes, Clostermann sat down, taking care not to mar the sundress while Bishop sat down on Aaron’s right. “So,” he began after clearing his voice, “I take it you found out who told me about it?”

Perrine nodded and answered, “Gertrude and I talked about it when you left and I’m glad she did.” She looked down at the sapphire blue silk and added, “It may not be the genuine article, but I never expected in a million years to be holding it much less wearing it.” Then she looked up at Aaron and stated sincerely, “Thank you for doing that for me. It means a lot.”

Divale’s world started spinning faster than he ever thought possible and his mouth went dry. *Mother of God, she’s come around!* “You’re welcome.” he replied with a hint of shock.

“I also want to apologize for what happened yesterday.” Perrine addressed further, not averting her stare for an instant. “I really have been beastly to you for no reason other than my shortsightedness. You didn’t deserve that at all. I’m sorry.”
And the words I’m sorry? This is unbelievable. Someone please pinch me because I think I’m dreaming. “I-” Aaron stammered, the whole experience catching him completely off guard and causing his heart to beat erratically, “I’m sorry too for what I did and said.”

“I know.” Perrine assured. “You may be the first person in the room to say something, but you’re also the first to apologize when you’re in the wrong, at least that’s what Minna says.”

“Speaking of the commander,” Bishop brought up, politely interjecting between the two, “did she reprimand you in any way?”

“I’m grounded for a few more days due to illegally firing my gun within the base confines and have to report to Yoshika for psychological evaluation so that I can actually use real weapons again.” Clostermann illuminated, her distasteful emphasis on Miyafuji’s name making Aaron grimace on the inside. “Other than that, she and the major understood why I acted the way I did, and allowed me to roam freely on the grounds pending improvement in behavior, one that I intend to correct today.”

Aaron smiled at finally seeing common sense prevail. “So how do you propose we do that?” he queried, cocking an eyebrow.

Perrine looked down and replied shamefaced, “I was hoping that you’d have a suggestion for that.”

Aaron furrowed his brow, stroking the bottom of his chin in thought before having a eureka moment. He bent over and reached for two small stones near the base of the rock he was sitting at. Handing one to Perrine he began, “Imagine the stone as something that weighs heavily on you, something that drags you down and gives you pain. Name that pain and hold the stone close to your heart as you say it.”

Taking the rock from Aaron’s left hand, Perrine held it to her heart and said, “My mother.”

“Larissa.” Aaron intoned as he copied the gesture. “Now, imagine the creek as the waters of forgetfulness, a balm that soothes those pains. Cast the stone into it and let it wash it down the way.” With a flick of his wrist, the rock left his right hand and it fell into the creek, causing a tiny geyser of water to come up before falling back down, ripples emanating from the impact. Perrine did the same, her rock landing right askew of his shot. “How do you feel?” Aaron asked after the stone hit the water.

“Surprisingly good.” Clostermann admitted. “But what if we need to talk about those things later on?”

“Then we fish them out and ask about it. If we both agree to talk, we talk.” Aaron answered. He then gave her a strange look and stated, “You know, you’re a lot easier to talk to when you’re not so angry all the time.”

“And you’re easier to talk to when you aren’t on the defensive all the time.” Perrine retorted. She was about to say something else when her eyes caught the transfer order still in Aaron’s hand. “So you still want to leave?”

Both witches looked on as Aaron held the paper close to his face and squinted his eyes so much that they almost disappeared. After a few seconds he asked the both of them, waving the paper in their faces, “Does this look like a valid signature to you?” Before either Lynette or Perrine could answer, Aaron ripped the paper up, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it into the creek. “Because it doesn’t look like it to me.” he said.

“Yes!” Bishop shouted at the top of her lungs, lunging forwards from her stone seat and driving
herself into Aaron, taking him clean off his perch and sending him into the ground, her on top. “Thank you for staying! You have no idea how happy that makes me feel!” she added while she buried her face into his chest, hugging him tightly.

“Watch it tiger.” Aaron managed to blurt out. He turned to Perrine and gestured to his predicament with his head. “You’re my wingman. Aren’t you supposed to watch my back in case I get ambushed like this?” Clostermann smiled and began to laugh heartily. *She looks like an angel when she smiles. She should do it more often. It suits her.* Ignoring the chortles from Perrine, he eased his way up and pried Lynette off of him politely and carefully.

“Say Aaron,” Bishop remarked while getting up off the ground, “did you eat an orange with cinnamon for breakfast, because you smell like it.”

Aaron went silent and red as he got up, thinking of an excuse that he could use to obfuscate how he spent last night. “That’s something for another time,” he managed.

Lynette caught it in an instant and stroked her right index finger over her left one and scolded, “Shame, shame.”

“Oh shut it.” Aaron shot back.

“I think breakfast is definitely in order.” Perrine announced. “Let’s go and get something to eat before the rest of the crew eats it all.”

“Second that.” Aaron agreed, and he joined Perrine and Lynette as they walked back towards the castle, grabbing the box beforehand. He looked over at Clostermann and asked, “Why the parasol?”


“So you can’t use guns until you get cleared eh?” Divale asked.

“No. Nor can I participate in air maneuvers either.” Clostermann clarified.

“But the commander didn’t say anything about conducting ground drills with training weapons.” Aaron added with a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

“Can’t do those as that exercise we did was a combined operation.” Perrine pointed out.

“Then I guess I’ll have to make one for you.” Aaron deduced.

“What do you mean by that?” Clostermann asked with a hint of fear in her voice.

“Nothing bad at all.” Aaron assured. “Just something that Ismenoth put me through time and time again, something she liked to call ‘Survive’, but which I like to refer to as ‘Breach and Clear.’”

“Speaking of clear Sergeant Divale,” Minna rattled over his ear communicator, “we need to discuss some rather choice photographs we found in your locker during the inspection today.” *Fuck. My. Life.*
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

After a frantic training session and giving someone their just desserts, Aaron is summoned by Shirley to help with modifying her replacement Strikers. They both succeed in boosting their output and they adjourn for the day, but a careless bump by Lucchini causes one to break open. In an attempt to not get in trouble, Francesca puts it back together as best as she can, without knowing that her decision could have dire ramifications for not just her, but her friend as well.

Chapter XXVIII: Lack of Communication

People may sing its praises, but few if any take the time to really look at what forgiveness really is. Many simply say that it is something given or found and leave the explanation at that. Fools, the whole lot of them. True forgiveness is earned, paid in actions that take one down a long narrow obstacle filled path fraught with peril, dangers so immense that many just give up before the journey even begins. Regardless, if one wishes to find redemption, inner peace for all time, it must be done.

Believe you and me, that first step is hard, for you have to admit that you’re weak, that you can make mistakes, and that even you need help sometimes, but after that, you feel emboldened to go on, knowing that no matter how heinous the act or unforgivable the sin committed, there’s always a way back.

Diary Entry May 17th 1943

Perrine winced in pain as she flexed the fingers in her right hand, trying to get the effects of the painball out. This time I will get through this exercise and make good time while doing it. For the past two hours, Clostermann had been attempting to pass through Aaron’s training simulation, the exact one that his demon put him through many years ago, without much success. Thought it would be cardboard cutouts and paper targets. Never expected him to actually implement walking talking magical constructs that used the same training guns we do with equal efficiency. First time through, didn’t even last five seconds before the first two peppered me. Getting her mind out of the doldrums, she checked for the third time to see if she had her pistol secured, four grenades fastened to her bandolier, and a full load in her Bren, flicking the safety off in the process. Sounds could be heard past the starting point, a door which had to be kicked down or barged through. Looking up in the warmer March air, skies clear and blue, she saw Aaron move his hands this way and that, eyes glowing with concentration. Getting everything in place and possibly changing things up just to make it that much harder. Well guess what, no matter what you do, this time I’m getting through that low tech terror you’ve constructed. Suddenly, Aaron stopped what he was doing and took out the silver whistle from his front right pocket. Regarding her, he asked, “You ready lieutenant?” As an answer, Perrine placed herself a fraction of a step closer near the door, readying for a hot breach, planting her right foot down. Content that it was an affirmative, Aaron blew the whistle, the shrill
sound carrying far and wide. By the time a fraction of a second passed, Clostermann pushed off her right foot and lowered her left shoulder, hitting the door hard and knocking it open. Inside was a short hallway with a T intersection leading left and right, and two Legionarys on patrol, backs turned towards her. Noticing the sound, they tried to turn around to face her down, but Perrine had the drop on them and had her gun firing. A quick spray brought them both down, their white death clouds starting to manifest.

Clostermann was still on her feet and running down the way, not even pausing to admire the splendid accuracy. Detaching a grenade from her belt, she pulled the pin out and waited for two full seconds before casting it at an angle off the right turn at the T. Remembering what lay on the left, the lieutenant did a power slide, getting as low to the ground as possible to avoid the inevitable return fire as the concussive boom of the explosive went off, sending smoke and debris in all directions. Pain balls flew mere inches over her head as three Legionarys let loose with their beamers. While the danger in the front was apparent, Perrine noticed that there was no incoming fire from her rear. She smiled as her right index finger pulled the trigger to her machine gun. None of the two behind me made it. That’s means just the three in front are all I need to worry about for now. Minding her ammunition count, the Legionarys spun and twirled to their deaths as the bullets riddled their bodies. Her legs hit the far wall and Clostermann pushed off with both, throwing herself into the air, landing on her feet a split second later. Resuming her run, she spied the door where she knew a possible Legionary would pop out. Without hesitation, another grenade was plucked from the bandolier and cooked, this time for three seconds, coming awfully close to detonating in her right hand. Come on you bastard, come on out. I got a present for you. Like a servant answering his master’s summons, the Legionary made it’s appearance on the battlefield, cracking the door open just a sliver. However, that space ended up being all that Perrine needed to exploit as she cast the grenade through the air, the ovoid explosive sailing true through the air and exploding, taking the enemy soldier out and the rest of the door into the bargain.

It would’ve been simpler to race through the opening, to take advantage of the momentum, but that would’ve been a huge mistake. Even now, they’re recuperating from the initial shock and preparing a defense. So we have to flank it. Looking over to her immediate right, she saw the bulge of a hastily constructed false wall, one that was cleverly disguised as an architectural defect, or so Aaron said. Sensing the opportunity, Perrine drew her pistol from the holster with her left hand and flung herself head first into the barrier, crossing her arms in front of her to protect her head and face. The wall caved in easily, a full section falling backwards and pinning a Legionary down underneath its bulk. Whipping her head around, the witch saw that the tactic worked as the remaining three guards had their attention squarely fixed on the door where their friend had met an untimely demise. Clostermann sprayed the room, expending all the rounds in her Bren, knocking the Legionarys off their feet. As for the sole enemy remaining, Clostermann moved her right leg over, aimed down, and fired two rounds into the center mass, the spasmodic convulsions from the enemy letting her know that the hits were fatal. Throwing the now useless Bren aside, she clasped the pistol in both hands and ran across the room, where a door was wide open.

It was empty the last time if I recall correctly, but don’t let your guard down. I smell a trap. She put her back against the wall and inched herself to the right side. Taking a quick peek, Clostermann saw a long narrow hallway that terminated at an closed door, with four sets of niches, within which an enemy soldier might be lurking. Now this is going to be tricky and it’s going to cost me precious time. Calm down and relax, don’t think about what could be there and instead focus and what is there. “The way on the right is clear Perrine.” Aaron called down from above, surprising Clostermann to the point where she almost pulled the trigger to her pistol. “There are two on the left, the first in the second niche, and the last one at the end.” Why is he telling me this? Is he trying to mislead me? Perrine looked up at Divale with a puzzled stare and the warlock looked down impassively, making himself as expressionless as possible. Running forward and deciding to not look
a gift horse in the mouth, Clostermann shifted her position to the left and right, zigzagging with her pistol trained on the left side of the corridor in the hopes that the enemies lying in wait would miss their shots. After the first pair of recessed chambers where passed, the first Legionary shifted around the corner of the second niche on the left, just as Aaron pointed out. Double tapping the trigger, two shots went downwind and buried themselves in the chest of the enemy, the body falling back into the niche and dissolving into white shards. The moment the second shot rang out, the last Legionary came rushing out of it’s hiding place and bounded down the hallway towards her, twin beamers blazing. Perrine had enough sense to duck into the niche, narrowing avoid the shots that screamed down the way, burying themselves in the room she came out of or embedding themselves in the wood near her position.

Listening to the chaos, Clostermann could hear the Legionarys heavy steps getting closer and closer, the beamers unrelenting in their fury, showering the outside of the niche with suppressing fire, pinning her down. A lucky shot bounced off the floor and blew a good chuck of wood away from the opposite wall of the niche, daylight shining through. It was at that point, that Perrine had an idea, a risky one, but the only one she had. Jumping up at the far wall, the toe of her right shoe managed to fit in the hole that the ricochet created and used it as a point to launch herself high up into the air, over the incoming fire, twirling her body and bringing the pistol to bear. Time seemed to slow as the pain balls from the Legionary continued to emanate from the beamers, their trajectory slowly starting to get closer to her skull as Perrine fired the remaining shots in her pistol out of desperation. Her shots sailed true and stitched a diagonal line starting at the chest and ending askew of the neck. The beamers fell silent and the Legionary teetered on the brink before collapsing in a heap, turning into white. She landed in a crouching position and quickly got up, sprinting towards the closed door, ejecting the empty clip to her pistol and loading another. *I never got this far, so this is going to be interesting.* As soon as the slide was racked, Perrine lowered her left shoulder and barreled into the door. She broke it open and nearly went blind as the early afternoon sun blazed overhead, causing her to throw up her hands to shield her eyes from the harsh glare.

A gentle slow clapping was heard and as her eyes adjusted, she saw Aaron walk towards her, applauding her with a smile on his face. “I did it?!” Perrine cried out, hoping that she passed the test.

“Yes you did.” Aaron replied happily. “After the ninth run, you’ve successfully completed my course in ninety seven seconds. Well done.”

Unable to contain her joy, Clostermann jumped up down like a child that just got what they wanted under the Christmas tree. “Yes!” she screamed, throwing the training pistol back through the opened door. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Then Aaron put on a serious face and stopped clapping. “Yet alas look.” he intoned, gesturing to the ground she was standing on. Puzzled, Perrine looked down and her mood quickly soured as she saw that she was essentially dancing over a landmine, one that was not even buried and fully exposed to the elements.

Feeling cheated of her victory, Clostermann retorted, “That’s not fair Aaron!”

“Is it Lieutenant Clostermann?” a voice spoke up from the right side. Both individuals turned and saw Major Sakamoto make herself known, having been watching the pair interact for a good minute now, hand on her katana hilt. “From the looks of things, I believe he’s trying to teach you a lesson.”

“Huh?” Perrine inquired, clearly confused. She looked at Aaron and queried, “What is she talking about?”

“The lesson is something that every soldier learns the first day and forgets the next.” Aaron explained. “A soldier, no matter how well trained and experienced, is at their weakest immediately
after a fight. Win or lose, a battle exhausts an individual physically and psychologically, making them vulnerable. All enemies, the Neuroi included, know this. So lesson learned Perrine: Never let your guard down after a battle until you can verify that you’re in friendly territory and among friends with your own two eyes, or else something bad will happen to you or your squadmates.” *Lord knows I learned that lesson the hard way.*

Clostermann thought about it and nodded, concluding that the reasoning behind it was sound. “Makes sense.” she acknowledged. “I’ll remember that next time.”

“Plus, I’m also proud of both of you when it comes to building up trust.” Mio added. “A good wingman trusts his partner to point out where danger could be lurking.”

“Are you sure you’re Major Sakamoto?” Aaron joked. “Because I think that Eila’s talking right now.” The three of them laughed a decent while before Mio turned and walked towards the hanger, located some five hundred feet away to the right of the structure proper. He watched the major go and turned to Perrine. “Want to have another go?”

Clostermann waved her hands side to side and shook her head no. “I think I’ve had enough for today. We both need a break.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Aaron uttered, “Suit yourself.” With that, the pair followed some distance behind Mio, making their way to the hanger as well, taking their time. Divale looked back at the testing grounds and deduced, “Not too bad of an exercise area. Far from perfect, but not bad for the two days I spent building it.”

“Speaking of bad,” Perrine ventured in a way that made it clear that she was very hesitant to bring up the matter, “how was your experience with it.”

“Well, it wasn’t bad in that sense of the word.” Aaron illuminated, combing through the tangle of memories. “It was more like pure hell. Ismenoth took away my ability to use defensive magic, put a revolver in my hand, and said, ‘Survive or die’.”

“What did she use as targets?” Clostermann asked.

“Those that were slated to be disposed of by the project heads.” Aaron deadpanned. “Armed and disarmed the same way as I. The whole thing was a gigantic free-for-all. One of the most horrible fights I ever had.”

Perrine stopped dead in her tracks and gasped. “They made you kill each other!?” she said in terror and shock that such a thing was even allowed. A bright light and the walls extend as far as the eye can see, curving this way and that with no pattern to them at all, thick and bullet ridden with blood flowing down the sides like crimson waterfalls, drawing attention down to the earth, soil that gushed out red brown moisture with every step. Bodies litter the narrow corridor, all young men, probably not much older than twelve, in various states of dismemberment, some missing heads, other limbs, and a few had met their end through the barrel of a gun, the entry wounds wide and deep. A pair of eyes doesn’t spare them a glance, instead remaining fixated on the next opponent, another youth just like himself. Quick threat assessment is made in a feverishly working brain. Target is shorter than him, making him faster than him, but lacking in muscle. No weapon on the side that could be seen. Determination is one of an uneven fight. Elimination procedure requires close quarters. A vitae slick right hand grabs the revolver, the fingers clasping around the cylinder, the pinky finding purchase in the trigger. The bullets were spent long ago, the weapon useless as a ranged instrument of death. Legs hunker down, readying for the sprint. The other boy reaches down to a nearby corpse and wrenches the head clean off, the sinewy muscle stretching and snapping with the effort. The prize secured, the right hand is shoved into the bottom of the severed neck, making the cranium a macabre
meat puppet at best, a still very lethal cestus at worst. Sands of time flow slowly as the two run towards each other, feet churning up the blood soaked ground, the fist sized mud balls splattering into the walls. Roars of desperation, of anger, of hate, of despair, of sorrow, echo for hundreds of feet as the combatants clash in the center and two hands thrust at the other. One misses with the all important first strike, aiming for the head, trying to end the fight quickly, while the other goes for the center mass, shoving the gun barrel into-

“Only if you were low on the pecking order like I was.” Aaron replied, coming to a stop near the hanger door. “The fights ran night and day as I got older, when they actually had time to gauge who was going to make it or not based on the projections. I remember some days that I went into the arena back to back, the list of disposal candidates was so long. That exercise back there was one of the areas I fought in. Cleared that place out in twenty four seconds.” He turned around and looked at Perrine who was standing in front of him, shaking her head at the sheer level of cruelty that Aaron endured during his days of captivity. “I’ve forgiven myself for my crimes, reasoning it as a simple case of them or me.” he assured, his best attempt at trying to put a silver lining on a lead delivery.

“I’m sorry Aaron. I never knew how much you had to deal with back then.” Perrine apologized.

“Most don’t.” Divale said, reaching for the hanger door knob. “And I count them as lucky.” He turned the knob and pushed open the door, letting Clostermann enter first before he followed behind her and closed the door respectfully. Inside, the hanger was just bustling with activity, most of the squadron, sans Shirley, running weapons checks and doing simple maintenance on their Strikers. They gave them nods as they entered and the duo returned them, making their way to a platter stacked with ham, lettuce, tomato, and mustard sandwiches, little frill picks sticking out of their centers.

Minna moved her hand along the inside of her right Striker towards the bottom and smiled. Finally got that little rough spot smoothed out. It was giving me a nasty blister on the sole of my foot. May have to put in an order for the quartermaster to do a thorough inspection of all emergency replacement Striker units before they ship them here, especially if they’re the older models like this one. Getting up and noticing the newest pairing she called out to Perrine, “Congratulations on passing that test. Good job.”

“Thank you commander.” Clostermann replied, beaming with pride before munching hungrily on the sandwich she took from the platter.

“There will need to be a few more runs to shave off some time.” Aaron added, running his left index finger along the side of the bread crust lest an errant stream of mustard fell to the hanger floor. “If we can get that time to less than sixty seconds-” He let the statement fall at just that, making people think about what could happen in regards to their chemistry.

“Keep at it then.” Mio quipped from a ways away, sharpening her katana with a whetstone, the grinding low and rhythmic. “You’ll only get better as a team.”

“Speaking of team,” Perrine brought up, looking around at the gathering, “why is almost everyone here?”

Erica popped her head out from behind her Strikers, a phillips head screwdriver in her right hand and announced, “Minna says if we all get our replacement Strikers in tip top shape, we all get to go to the beach today. We have another wing taking over patrol duties so we don’t have to worry about a thing. So don’t stand around and get it done!”

Clostermann immediately wolfed down her meal and ran to her locker to get her tools while Aaron merely shrugged and took his time savoring the sandwich. After taking his last bite, rubbing his
hands free of stray crumbs, he turned and asked Perrine, “You want me to help you out?”

The lieutenant had just opened up her locker and was fishing out her toolbox when he said that. His offer made her look towards Minna with a puzzled look. “His authorization for Striker repairs and maintenance just came through today. He’s in the clear.” Wilcke reported. She then regarded Aaron and pointed a finger at him, stating with emphasis, “However, I still want you to use the manual they provided until you get familiar with the inner workings.”

Resisting the urge to groan and roll his eyes was a herculean effort on Aaron’s part as he replied, “Understood commander.” Walking over to his locker, Divale rose his arms up over his head and stretched. “I’d rather have Shirley with me. She’s a walking talking manual in her own right, just like Moses was, however, unlike him, Yeager never wandered off and got lost all those damn times. I hate that Striker Repair Handbook. It’s too wordy and complicated, like a drunk trying his best to take a piss. I know the damn thing front to back anyways once you pay attention to the important parts and ignore the rest. When he got close enough, he started to reach for the combination dial and paused. The light of the hanger opening in the roof was bright and it cast a strange reflection off the dial that shouldn’t be there considering the matte finish. Looking closer at it, he nodded as his brain processed what he was seeing. **Axle grease.** He craned his neck towards Erica and mocked, “The slippery bandit has failed.” Hartmann pouted and stuck out her tongue in frustration that her latest prank had come to naught. Aaron reached into his back pocket and pulled out a bobby pin. **Never thought I’d use one of these things, but they seem to do the trick with most locks around here. Note to self: Look into getting a dead bolt for the room.** He inserted the tiny metal clip into the keyhole and fiddled it around, listening for the pins to latch. When he was convinced that he had them all, he twisted sharply and the release latch came up from within the locker. **Jackpot.** A tiny piece of the door came out and Aaron put his right hand on it, using that to open the door instead of the grease stained dial.

Before he could react, his world became dark and viscous as something shot forth from the inside of the locker and nailed him dead center in the face. The whole hanger started laughing as the object fell from his forehead, nose, lips, and jaw, and splattered to the ground. Cautiously licking his lips and breathing in, his senses registered a sugary taste, one that was tart but not uncomfortably so with more than a hint of heavy citrus. **Lemon.** Looking down, he saw his assailant, the remains of a lemon meringue pie lying on the ground. **That black devil used the greased dial as a feint to lure me into a false sense of security while the real trap lay just beyond. Well played Erica, but two can play this game.** Erica was hooting with laughter as Aaron wiped off his face. “So what do you think of my baking?” she managed to chuckle out before becoming overcome with humor again. In response to the question, Aaron looked at her, extending his left hand, and raised his middle finger. “Oh don’t be mad.” Erica joked. “You should be glad for you’re the only one to get dessert with their lunch.”

Aaron smiled in a way that made Hartmann stop laughing. “I’m not mad,” Aaron intoned. Suddenly, his left hand started to glow with an eerie red light. “I’m merely letting you know how many seconds you have left to run.” Needing no prompting, Erica turned and started to run, the screwdriver falling from her hand to the concrete with a metallic clatter, but before she could even get two steps away, Aaron uttered, “Capio Erica.” Hartmann’s retreat was halted by the magic and she sped backwards towards Aaron, screaming in fright.

“It was only a joke!” she implored, trying to break free of the hold he had on her but failing. Ignoring her, Aaron moved his left hand up and Erica shot up into the air and hovered a good ten feet above the floor.

“I find it better to look over one’s work after a good prank from a distance.” Aaron absentmindedly quipped, walking over to a nearby chair with a cleaning rag draped over it and picking up both items with one hand. “How’s it looking?” he asked.
“Fine!” Erica blurted out. “Perfectly fine, now please put me down!”

“Alright.” Aaron said, wiping off the leftover pie filling and topping from his face and uniform top and picking up the rest of the ruined pastry with the rag while sitting down in the chair. “You’re short, your bellybutton sticks out too far, and your pranks as so simple that a toddler could recreate them.”

The hanger chuckled at the play on words, but Erica didn’t share in the sentiments. “Ha ha ha.” she mocked. “You’re so funny. Now put me down Aaron! I mean it!”

Divale gathered up the last of the pie and got up from his seat, sighing, “Fine. Be a party pooper why don’t you?” With a devilish grin, he placed the pie remains on the chair and looked up at Erica. “You look like you could use a seat.” He pointed at her with his left hand and extended his thumb up, looking like a Roman Caesar deciding the fate of a noble gladiator.

Erica’s eyes bugged out as she understood what he was about to do. “Don’t you dare!” she warned. “Don’t you fucking dare!”

“Someone looks like they need a time out.” Aaron observed, his grin getting wider and wider. He then turned his hand downwards, the thumb pointing at the ground. “Have a seat lieutenant.” Yelling in protest, Erica flew downward and landed square on the chair, her rump squishing itself into the lemon merengue with a squelching sound, filling and topping flying through the air. Not done, Aaron maneuvered his hand like a corkscrew, causing Erica’s lower body to grind into the seat before ending the spell, Hartmann’s body falling over the right side and landing softly, exposing to everyone in the hanger her yellow plastered bottom. “Now that is what we call a sticky hot mess.” Aaron explained, his observation causing everyone to laugh hysterically.

Erica’s face turned beat red in embarrassed anger as she got up, pulling down her black uniform as far as it would go to hide her soiled panties. “Aaron Divale, I will get you back for this!” she swore as she ran towards the hanger door, her posterior dripping pearl sized drops on the concrete.

As if finished with a task that required a lot of dirty work, Aaron rubbed his hands clean of the matter and turned his attention to back to Perrine. “Now where were we?” he asked.

“Not so fast.” Minna’s voice commanded drawing his gaze to her. “You will clean all that up before you even think about lending a hand, is that clear? I’ll not have the janitorial crew in an uproar.”

“But of course commander. It will be done.” Aaron replied, wilting under his superior’s intense stare. He immediately went to work, walking to and fro collecting rags to wipe up the debris. The splash radius went far and wide, and Divale cursed himself for being a bit too gung-ho. It was worth it.

Suddenly, his ears picked up some beeps.

That’s morse code.

His mind quickly deciphered the message.

(Aaron, it’s Shirley. I heard you got approved for Striker repair. Come see me in the garage as soon as you can. I need to teach you some things and maybe learn something from you into the bargain.)

With a sandwich clenched firmly between her teeth, Yeager threaded the last screw loose from the main power panel to her left Striker, exposing the complex interwoven blue green aetheric fibers that gave half of her emergency replacement its power. She gazed at the pair fondly, knowing that Aaron will soon arrive and lend whatever expertise he had in the back of his mind to increase the power of her unit even further. He’s really too modest in terms of his accomplishments. That bike he has is generations ahead of its time and he passes it off as a half assed construct? If he can do that with a
motorcycle with little to no training or know how in terms of how they work and how to make them work, what can he do with a pair of Strikers with training? The thought almost made her lose her meal and she quickly caught it before it fell into the circuitry. Whew, that would've been disastrous. Shirley took a few bites and swallowed them down, looking around the garage. Save for her standing in front of her favorite workbench, the one with the painted picture of Bonneville over it, and the Strikers lying on top of it, she was all alone. Then again, she preferred it when she was doing tune ups, liking the quiet, for it allowed her to concentrate solely on the task at hand. Not to mention it gets me out of sight and mind from Minna. I understand she means well, but the Neuroi are adapting month after month and concocting new schemes to destroy humanity. We need to be on the bleeding edge when it comes to our Strikers too. Who cares if it isn’t the ‘right way to do things’ or ‘orthodox mechanical thinking’ if it saves our lives in the process?

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard hurried footfalls come through the open garage door. Turning around and smiling she said, “I guess someone’s in a-” but the sentence failed to finish as Shirley saw Erica straining to keep her uniform pulled low over her rump, trailing yellow and white splotches behind her, face as red as her hair. Hartmann noticed that Yeager was in the room and stopped, the remains of the lemon filling cascading down her legs like running sun colored maple sap and into her soaked shoes, the soles making a sticky ripping sound as she fidgeted about. “The fuck happened to you?” Shirley asked, perplexed beyond reason.

“Don’t look at me!” Erica shouted, not wishing to explain, and darted away behind the vehicles, using them to shield herself from any more prying eyes. “I’m going to fucking kill him!”

Minding her own business for the time being Shirley shook her head and looked away. What did Aaron do to her? “Hmmm.” she heard a masculine voice deduce in the distance, “if this is any indication, the way to the garage must lie in this direction.” Regarding the door again, Yeager saw Aaron walk in, looking at the floor in a way that made him look like that he was admiring his handiwork. “Seems like the black devil has been through here.” Divale muttered. Looking up at Shirley, he added, “And it looks like you’ve seen her.”

“For a few seconds.” Shirley admitted shrugging her shoulders. “What was her ass covered in anyway? What did you do to her?”

Aaron put on a mock shocked face. “I do something bad to one of our own?” he stated facetiously. “Her trap, a spring loaded lemon merengue pie she set for me in that hanger backfired on her, that’s all. To say that she got her just desserts would be an understatement.”

Yeager laughed, remembering Erica talking about that yesterday. “I almost forgot.” she replied.

Aaron stared at her and cocked an eyebrow. “You telling me that you knew about this and you did nothing to warn me?” He took several steps forward. “I may have spent the first fourteen years or so in a hole, but believe you me captain, I don’t like being in the dark.”

“Oh get over it.” Yeager retorted turning to her Strikers. “It was an innocent prank. Now get over here so we can worry about the practical instead of the theoretical.”

Taking her advice and letting it go, Aaron walked to the workbench and looked down at the pair of Strikers. “So what are you going to teach me about these things?” he asked anxiously.

Grinning at his enthusiasm, Yeager remarked, “Instead of you being the student, you’re going to be the teacher. Have you looked over the manual yet?”

Aaron sheepishly answered, “I’ve skimmed over the important stuff. Power supply, rotors, coolant lines, and such. Nothing really intricate.”
“Well, you’re going to have to go more in depth.” Shirley advised with a hint of a warning in her voice. “Everything about the Striker is interconnected. All parts serve a purpose. A change made or damage suffered affects the unit as a whole.” She pointed at the exposed wires inside her left Striker and queried, “What can you see?”

Aaron leaned over and held the Striker firmly in his hands, gazing at the wires and metal with a clinical eye. “I see the wires leading from the main power supply, sending magic to subsidiary systems. Even now, despite it being powered down, I can feel it moving through them. Basic set up for a Mustang P51D model am I right?.”

“Correct.” Yeager observed. “What else?”

“Well,” Aaron began licking his lips, thinking deep, “there might be a way to boost the power to auxiliary systems without compromising overall performance.” He looked at Yeager who gave an approving nod for him to continue. Carefully, reached in with his right hand and grazed his fingertips over the wires, making sure he didn’t snag them lest he ripped them free. He did this for several seconds and Shirley was about ready to ask what he was doing, when suddenly, his hand glowed purple and the wires started floating, some of the metal plating around them beginning to quiver as if were pulsating veins. Watching in awe, the strands of plastic covered copper split into quintets, like miniature hydas that lost one too many heads, and swerve this way and that, burying themselves into the liquid like plating or disappearing across the way to somewhere else. When that was done, the metal began to revert back to its original state, but parts of it looped over some of the wires, fastening them down. Slowly, Aaron’s hand went back to normal and he looked over the job he just did, nodding.

“What did you just do?” Shirley asked, taken aback by the inner transformation.

“Moses once told me that supplying power to a machine should be done as if it were a human body. Having a mainline from the energy nexus to the corresponding parts is okay, but what happens if that connection is severed? The machine fails to operate and becomes useless. There needs to be a back up, or in this case, several backups that if they get damaged, won’t detract from the aetheric flows. These wires that I split, some have retreated back to the power supply creating new junctions and plug in points.” Aaron began to illuminate.

“Like a strength in numbers kind of deal.” Shirley stated, the reasoning behind the pattern becoming ever more clearer.

“Exactly.” Aaron answered. “From there, they have split again, going to the auxiliary systems, doing the exact same thing. Now, you can get these things riddled with beam fire and they’ll still get you from point A to point B, without sacrificing speed or maneuverability. Several could get severed and it won’t even matter. Overall, this could increase output by anywhere from one to two percent.”

*That’s incredible! May not seem like much to your average joe, but that extra boost could be the difference between life and death.* “Now what about the fasteners?” Yeager asked, pointing at one with her right hand as an example. “I understand that is an extra layer of protection, but what if I need to go in there to remove a damaged wire?”

“Simple.” Aaron explained. “Along the bottom is a pin, like the kind you find on grenades.” He gestured to one with his right index finger and sure enough, Shirley saw a tiny circular ringlet, just wide enough to insert the tip of a needle nosed plier through along the left side. “You pull that and it rolls back, like the way those revolving desks do. To put it back into place, just stick the pin back in.”

Nodding in wonder and victory, Yeager turned to Aaron and gave him a hug. “For someone who
doesn’t know much about machines, you are just like me, what the Germans call a wunderkind, a genius.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Aaron deadpanned, not thinking in the slightest that what he just did was anything special. “Plus, we have no idea if it even works without testing it. I hear we have to get that cleared through the commander.”

Shirley’s mood darkened a tad. Yes we do, and given how many of my alterations she’s shot down over the many months I’ve been here, I wouldn’t rate the chances as high on getting it past her. Suddenly, she perked up and stated, “We can notify her about this modification tomorrow. We’re going to the beach today so that will give us time to look it over while we’re there.”

Aaron looked at her with a quizzical mien to his face. “You want to take a complex and extremely expensive piece of equipment to the one place that you don’t want said equipment to be, just to work on it?” he asked.

“Sunlight is better than what you find here.” Shirley explained. “A lot less shadow play along the edges. Plus, it’s a bright day out.”

“And if something happens?” Aaron conjectured, bringing the conversation into the realm of the serious. “If a Neuroi gets past the patrols that are taking over for us today, you’re the only one with Strikers that can intercept, and you know Minna will let you go first because you have the speed to do it.”

“And you as well.” Yeager retorted. “Stop worrying so much Aaron and calm yourself. What you’re talking about has a one in a million chance from happening.” She looked at he watch and uttered with a smile, “Since we’re done for the day, that gives us time to get our bathing suits and patch this boy up before anyone else even gets here. What do you say?”

I’d say better to be safe than sorry and leave the damn things here. “Fine.” Aaron replied and followed Shirley out of the garage and into the castle interior. As soon as the door closed behind them, Lucchini came bounding into the garage, having gotten her replacement Strikers stowed away before anyone else back at the hanger. Eager to get to the beach for the first time in months, she sprinted the entire way and she looked it, huffing and puffing like a locomotive engine at maximum burn. Her mouth was dry from breathing so hard and often out of her mouth, her tongue feeling like over dried leather straps as she tried to get some moisture out of her salivary glands, every movement grating as sandpaper.

I knew I should’ve done more physical training during my free time. My legs feel like jelly and my lungs are burning like hot coals. Deciding to catch her breath for a few seconds, she staggered to the workbench and looked at the Strikers, or at least tried to given that Yeager had elevated the table, making Francesca that much more at a disadvantage, her head barely cresting the edge. Those must be Shirley’s judging from the model. I wonder what she’s done with them. Her curiosity got the best of her and she stood on her tippy toes, strainring to catch a glimpse of the Striker’s inner workings, knowing that her reach was too short. When that wasn’t enough, she gripped the wooden bench edges tightly and tried to hike herself up. The maneuver failed miserably and she lost her grip, falling on the floor with a thud. Unfortunately, she tried to arrest her descent by kicking out with her left leg, the meat of her foot connecting hard with the workbench, causing the entire Striker unit to fall to the floor alongside her, the shock of the impact sending pieces of the inner drive train workings scattering this way and that.

Though pain registered within Lucchini’s mind, it paled in comparison to her overbearing sense of dread as she saw what she’d done. Oh no! If Shirley finds out about this, I’m as good as dead! Maybe I can patch it up and make it look and work just like new. Getting up off the floor, Francesca darted around, picking up all the pieces that she could see, and collecting them near the ruined
Striker. She looked inside the exposed panel and her mood went from bad to worse as some of the wires got severed from the components coming out of it. **Oh this is even worse than I thought and I have no training in repairing these things, but I have to try. I don’t want to get in trouble and miss going out to the beach.** Going off of what her Strikers interior looked like, Lucchini frantically shoved, screwed, pressed, and jammed whatever looked like was its natural place within the grand scheme of things into the Striker and did the best she could for the broken conduits, tying them and lacing them into whatever bored hole looked promising. Content that she’d done her best, she picked up the Striker and placed it back on the table before doing the same with the metal panel plate, taking great care to make it look like it was never disturbed in the first place. As this came just in the nick of time as everyone else started to pile. Realizing that she looked guilty, Francesca put on a smile instead and walked away to the door, graciously opening it for the rest of her friends, getting a few thank yous into the bargain. When the last one departed past the threshold, Lucchini breathed a sigh of relief. *That was a close one Francesca. Another few more seconds and you would’ve been caught red handed. No one suspects anything from my spontaneous act of generosity and good manners, the Striker looks alright in its proper position on the table, and I didn’t miss anything that came out of it, not even a stray speck of metal. Everything is all a-ok. I’ve surely gotten out of that jam. Surely.

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Aaron made sure to keep his distance from the transport truck that Shirley was driving so that dust wouldn’t get on his white robe that Minnie Bishop gave him, the fabric catching every bit of the sunlight and reflecting it to the point that looking at him would cause blindness, which was why he made it a point to take a pair of aviator sunglasses with him rather than his normal glasses to combat the glare. The ends flapped like pennants as he hit the accelerator, exposing parts of his bare chest and legs, his feet squarely on the foot rests, the cool metal pressing into his flesh. A white sash kept the robe from flying off him, one that he tucked the ends of into his swimming trucks, the same ones that the Dover Castle garrison tailors had tried to make for him and the same ones that he modified in his off hours, making them far more comfortable to be in. Sliepnir was chugging along, the engine thrumming clean and hot. Divale rolled his shoulders, feeling nothing tugging or stretching out to the point of ripping and smiled. *Fits like a velvet glove. Have to hand it to that tailor she went too, that Mabel woman. She knows what she’s doing. Might have to see what else she can do.*

His peripheral vision took a quick survey of the countryside as the whole squadron made their way down to the beach, one that stood in front of the famous white cliffs, lending stark contrast to the yellow brown sand and the occasional grey rock. *Strangely warm out for this time of year. Clear skies and there’s no breeze whatsoever. Whatever. I’ll take a good day to go out over a crappy one.* The surrounding area was green and lush, the fields to either side wooden fenced fallow farmlands that went on for acres in all directions, the grass up to the ankles and budding plants exploding in patches of violet, white, and red. “Shouldn’t you be paying more attention to the road?” a voice called out to his lower left side. “It gets very winding through here.” Divale looked down in the general direction of the sound with the slightest turn of the neck. The voice was that of the occupant in the side car of his motorcycle, Perrine, who thankfully for all involved wasn’t as scared anymore about riding with him, left arm crossed over her pink two piece swim suit top and the right hand holding the parasol.

“We’ll be okay.” Aaron assured, taking her suggestion and focusing on the road in front of him. “I’ve navigated far worse trails before and under a lot worse circumstances.”

“Never hurts to be careful.” Clostermann replied. She adjusted herself in her seat and breathed. “Have to admit, I don’t know why I was so scared of riding with you.”

“Probably because it was out of your element.” Aaron surmised while turning into a right corner and leveling out. “How often have you ridden in one of these things.”

Perrine thought about it real hard and answered, “Not many, and I hated every trip. They were
bulky, noisy, and smelled terrible, like trench foot wrapped in spoiled bacon.”

Now that’s a scent I hope never to catch a whiff of. “Thankfully, you don’t have that problem with Sleipnir here.” Aaron pointed out, tapping his right hand on the front panel really quick. “Made doubly sure that those problems wouldn’t happen.”

“For which I’m deeply grateful.” Perrine sincerely stated. “You’re also a very good driver. Who taught you?”

“The streets of Kiev.” Aaron explained. “The enemy flanked the Russians faster than we though possible and in their haste to get out, left behind all their tanks as most were out of fuel at that point. Some of my boys snatched them up and drove them through the streets. I ended up getting behind the wheel of a T-28 and drove that all over creation trying to find a way out of that hellhole. Got into a few scrapes here and there and at some points I honestly thought that we were going to get surrounded and crushed. Thank God Moses was with me for he did some work on the engine while all that was going on, boosting our speed from roughly 20 miles per hour to 44. That interior got really toasty and I was sweating buckets as the engine was located right behind me, glowing like my eyes.” He paused and grinned before adding with relish, “Passed the course with flying colors with a nasty first degree burn on my back.”

“But that’s a tank.” Perrine retorted. “How does that translate to a motorcycle?”

Aaron just shrugged and sheepishly offered, “Maybe it’s all connected. True the machines are different, but the basic mechanics are the same. Once you learn those, everything else just comes to you.” He lowered his speed as he turned into the sandy beach, the tires adjusting to the change in terrain well and came to a stop near the cliff side. Divale got off the bike, the engine dying immediately as his rump left the seat. Perrine hopped out and stretched her legs, opening the parasol and letting her feet dig into the sand, the residual warmth feeling welcome. Off in the immediate distance, she saw the transport came to a halt as well and Shirley came out of the drivers side, Lucchini getting out of the passenger side and running out to get behind the truck and lower the gate. Some of the squadron didn’t wish to wait the few extra seconds and leapt out of the rear, treating it like a fire escape drill. Erica and Eila shot out and landed firmly on their feet, making a furious beeline for the ocean, one that looked far more blue than grey, the current gentle and welcoming. It’s always now now now with those two. Francesca lowered the gate and the remaining members of the 501st disembarked with much more subdued feeling of excitement. Lynette and Yoshika each carried their Strikers with them, passing them into the hands of the waiting Lucchini as they got out. Though we have coverage in the defensive perimeters, Minna doesn’t like being unprepared and chose them to bring their units in case of emergency. Doesn’t make too much sense though as Shirley has her replacement ones as far as I remember.

“Just going to stand there looking at the ocean or are you going to get into it?” Aaron asked, coming up next to her. “Let’s go and join the throng.” The pair made their way towards the waters edge and it was Lucchini who spotted them first and she pointed the fact out to her nearest companions, namely Eila, and Erica, all of whom were hip wading. “Look like the slow pokes finally made it.” she remarked. “With one looking ready to enjoy the day and the other looking like they’re about to hit the hay.”

“Ehi ora (Hey now),” Aaron defended, holding up his hands, “Mi piace viaggiare con stile (I like to travel in style).”

“More like in disguise.” Eila pointed out. “Maybe trying to divert attention away from something?”

“If I was that close to a woman in such clothing, I’d be covering up something too.” Erica joked, the
comment drawing laughter and making Perrine cross at such a crass comment reaching her ears.

“You’re just jealous that you didn’t ride side saddle this time.” Aaron shot back with a grin. “Had you asked first I might’ve let you come along. Sans the pie even or maybe a different flavor perhaps. I hear raspberry is quite divine. Gotta watch the seeds though for they get stuck in the damnedest of places.”

Hartmann put on a serious face and glared at Divale with a venomous stare. “I will get my revenge Aaron.” she swore, remembering how difficult it was to wash herself clean of the lemon merengue. “And don’t you forget it.”

“Bring it on you black devil.” Aaron dared, crooking his right index finger repeatedly. “I have a wingman now who might make that difficult.”

Erica regarded Perrine and scoffed. “She can’t protect you all the time. Even the best have to sleep eventually.”

“Speaking of sleep.” a voice interjected, killing the present train of conversation. All turned and saw Minna advance on the group in her one piece black bathing suit that she wore when she and Mio helped Aaron get over his fear of being underwater at the bathhouse. “I would like to do that as much as possible without having to be rudely woken up during the night just to hear one of you two complaining to me about who did what to whom. Keep this civil or I’ll make you both keep it civil. You got me?” she added with clear emphasis at the end. Both Erica and Aaron nodded, though deep down Wilcke took their deference with a grain of salt. “But let’s relax ladies and gentleman. We’ve earned it.”

“I heartily agree.” Aaron admitted and turned to an empty patch of sand next to him, extending his left hand out. He snapped his fingers and up came a long pole of the stuff, shooting up from the ground like a daisy before coming to a stop around the tips of his shoulders. Now to address the hungry masses. With a faint grin on his face, Aaron slowly walked across near the waters edge, making sure that he had the attention of three quarters of the four mischievous horsemen and started to pull the ends of the robe’s white sash out of his trunks. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that it was having an effect. Three pairs of eyes were glued to him as he fished the last bit of fabric out and let it drop to the sides. Erica started to whistle the opening tunes to a cabaret song, but was having trouble concentrating on two things at once. Things got even more difficult for her as Aaron turned around and rolled his shoulders, the top of the robe coming halfway down his back and coming to a rest over his strategically crossed arms, arresting the descent. He turned around slightly and gave a seductive wink, the kind that a striptease dancer would give before delivering the audience what it wanted.

“Do you have to encourage them?” Perrine stated, a touch annoyed as she found a place to stow her parasol and sit down.

“Sh-sh-sh.” Eila hastily barked, waving her hands at her without looking, her attention preoccupied with something else. “Don’t mess up the show.” Suddenly, Aaron turned to the side, his right, and let his arms slowly drop down, the robe slipping off with the speed of glacial ice. The whistling stopped from Erica who started to get a little flustered on the inside, more than her companions who were just enjoying the scene, though deep down she could see the rapacious hunger in their eyes from ogling the eye candy. With a twirling flourish, Divale caught the memento from his idol with his left hand and spun it around, turning a one piece evening wear into a white rope that after a few revolutions, causally tossed at the pole, the raised collar catching the top and staying there. Reaching for his sunglasses, he took them off and flung them in the same direction, the aviators finding purchase within the robe’s front left pocket. For the grand finale, Aaron then regarded each of the trio in turn
with a look that melted their hearts like a blowtorch being applied to butter, an expression that if he so desired, could get him anything he wanted and more from the opposite sex. The stare was too much for them as Lucchini’s jaw dropped, Eila sank to her knees, and Erica’s legs simply gave out and she collapsed backwards into the lapping waves, water splashing in all directions.

“Three up and three down.” Aaron quipped with a smile, walking into the water, the ocean feeling cool but not uncomfortably so as it rolled up his toes and ankles. “And I haven’t fired a shot.”

Hartmann got back up, hair sopping wet and muttered with a stuttering breath, “You really know what you’re doing don’t you?”

Aaron passed the three of them and shrugged his shoulders as he made his way deeper into the water, looking for a place to dive under the waves. “Wouldn’t have lived this long if I didn’t.” he answered. Then, his body disappeared with nary a ripple to mark his passing. Minna turned away rolling her eyes, but failing to contain an amused smile. *Oh you are just something else aren’t you sergeant? Just make sure to don’t push the envelope or the only dance you’ll be doing will be out the door.*

She walked over to Perrine and sat down next to her.

“So how are you two getting along?” she asked the lieutenant, wanting to get a gauge as to how much progress was being made.

“Much better, thank you.” Clostermann thanked, lying down, arms crossed behind her head, tilting her face towards her superior to avoid looking at the sun. “It’s like what happened in the past never occurred between us. Hatchets have been buried.”

“And not into each other’s backs.” Minna remarked happily. “I’m glad and proud of you both. Can’t wait til you get cleared and you both can start flying mock sorties together.”

“Speaking of cleared,” Perrine brought up in a low voice, sitting up and gesturing towards the opposite end of the beach. Wilcke turned and saw Yoshika and Lynette kneeling at the water’s edge, Bishop pointing out shells that washed up on shore and occasionally picking on up to show her wingman, their Strikers parked feet down into the sand a small ways away. “is there anyway you can expedite the process?”

Minna inwardly grew uneasy at what Clostermann was suggesting. *You’ve gotten better with one sergeant but not the other. Why is there such friction between you two? “I meant what I said,” Wilcke replied firmly, defending her decision, “you go in for psychological evaluation until deemed fit to wield a firearm.”

“But I’m perfectly fine.” Perrine protested, holding her right hand out like some desperate beggar looking to score some change from a good samaritan. “I’m not becoming unhinged or suicidal if that’s what you’re worried about commander. That episode is over, past me. Trust me, I’m okay and I want to get back in the air again to be of some benefit to the squadron. Help me out here, please?”

Wilcke thought about it and looked deep into Clostermann’s fox yellow eyes. *There’s no deceit there at all and you mean what you say. Maybe I can loosen up the red tape a tad. “Alright lieutenant, but any such incident occurs again and I will make your evaluation time double. Got it?”

“I understand commander.” Perrine beamed, giving her superior a razor sharp salute. Minna got up from the ground, returned it and walked away, making a trek across the sands towards Gertrude, Mio, and Sanya who took shelter from the sun’s glare under an overhang. The major and captain were double checking weapon load outs that they brought with them under her orders while the lieutenant flicked some dials on a portable radio, listening in on the patrol chatter.
Sakamoto noticed Minna approach and reported, “Everything checks out just fine and Litvyak says the skies are clear.”

“Good work you three.” Wilcke congratulated. She then thought of something and furrowed her brow. “Have any of you seen Captain Yeager around per chance?” she asked.

“Last I remember, she’s in the back of the transport with her Striker’s.” Gertrude remarked pointing to the vehicle.

Minna’s mood soured and something roiled within her. *I can only imagine why that is.* “Can you call her out please?” she ordered.

Barkhorn breathed in and yelled, “Hey Shirley! The CO wants to talk to you!”

Quick as a flash, Yeager hopped out of the rear of the transport and jogged over to Wilcke would stood there expressionless, looking over her subordinate’s body language. “Yes commander?” she asked, not knowing what the fuss was all about.

“You seem to be less interested in the beach and more infatuated with your Strikers.” Minna commented. She leaned in and gave the captain a hard look. “Care to explain why?”

Shirley grew uneasy and tried to form a plausible excuse but it never came as Sanya heard something over the radio that caused her to jerk her head up. “Commander we have a situation!” she relayed, eyes darting back and forth from Minna to the radio in the attempt to separate the important from the unimportant. “A full three squadrons have been encountered in grid B2 and one lone craft managed to squeeze through the perimeter! It’s a big one from what they’re saying and fast, bearing in on Dover roughly eight miles up and will be over the airspace in nine minutes!” Wilcke let her question fall by the wayside as she ran out from the overhang, finding a space where she could look out over the horizon without obstacles in her way. Mio ran after her and flipped up her eyepatch, using her magic to pinpoint the Neuroi intruder.

“Right there!” Sakamoto shouted, pointing her right hand south, slightly more east than west. Nodding in thanks, Minna then turned her attention to the enemy and focused her magic, allowing her to enhance her vision many times, painting the Neuroi in all of it’s inhumaness. It truly was massive, easily close to a kilometer long and half that wide. A long neck like protrusion took up the majority of the craft, tapered like the flat of a knife that terminated at what looked to be a front canopy, four red marks acting like evil eyes staring at her soul. The main body had two wings angled near the back, each one having a massive bulge in the middle that bristled with beamer blisters, their red marks scanning the skies for threats. At the end were four thrusters that powered the Neuroi ever onwards. Surprisingly, the bottom looked relatively flat with little to nothing in terms of defenses.

“Yoshika! Bishop!” Minna screamed, the duo stopping what they were doing and looking at her with a start. “Get in the air and intercept that fighter!” Quickly turning to Yeager, she added, “You will support them!”

“The core is located right in the center.” Mio reported, scanning the Neuroi more closely and dodging out of the way of Shirley as she ran back to the transport. “Right between the bulges.”

“Thank you major. Get everyone to the overhang and have them stay put!” Minna curtly replied. Sakamoto saluted and began yelling for everyone to rally to her. “Where’s Sergeant Divale?” Wilcke demanded, looking around but failing to locate the warlock. “I want him here now!”

As if his name were the key to dispelling an enchantment, Aaron’s body erupted out of the water, whipping his head back to get the most of the ocean off his form. “What’s the situation?!” he
anxiously asked with concern in his voice, seeing Yoshika, Lynette, and Shirley race to their Striker locations and don them.

“We have a bogey inbound.” Minna explained. “The captain will lead the attack in an attempt to head it off and distract it long enough for the perimeter defense elements to link up and kill it. I want you to ready yourself for immediate deployment in case something happens and wait with the rest of the group.” Immediately, Aaron put out both his arms and snapped his fingers simultaneously at the robe and at his motorcycle side car. The white evening wear ripped itself free from the sand pole, the makeshift coat hanger disintegrating into its constituent substances while something spun and rocketed out of the side car interior, moving so fast that even Minna couldn’t tell what it was until it collided firmly with Aaron’s right hand at the same time the robe did on his left.

Quick as a flash, Aaron donned the robe and racked the bolt to his machine gun. “Never leave the hanger without it.” he quipped as he ran at full speed to the overhang where everyone else was gathered, Minna right on his heels. By the time he got underneath the rock roof, all three of the 501st intercepting team took off, the rotors sending clouds of sand spinning like miniature whirlwinds as they ascended into the skies and started their runs. He located Perrine within seconds, tucked into the far back with Lucchini and Sanya who was still working the radio, passing valuable intel to Gertrude by her side who collated the information in her head with breakneck speed. “So much for a bit of R&R huh?” he surmised as he walked towards them. He didn’t get much of a response from anyone, but he noticed something odd about Francesca who was eyeing the skies intently, face distraught and her hands clenched together in high anxiety. Concerned and wishing to help alleviate her stress, Aaron strolled toward her and place a reassuring left hand on her shoulder. “Relax. Shirley and them have got this. They’ll be fine.”

“It’s not them I’m worried about.” Lucchini blurted out softly, still looking at the three witches becoming smaller and smaller before looking little more than specks of pepper in a soup of blue. “I’m worried about Shirley’s-” She suddenly stopped mid sentence and clammed up, putting her hands to her face.

Aaron’s face erupted in shock. She knew of the modifications? What did she see? Did she tell anyone? “Perché sei preoccupato per i suoi scioperanti (Why are you worried about her Strikers)?” he anxiously asked her in a low voice. “C’è qualcosa che non va (Is something wrong with them)?”

Shirley whizzed on ahead, shouldering her BAR as she quickly took a look behind her, making sure that her wash wasn’t getting in the way of Yoshika or Lynette. Sure enough, the pair were spaced out perfectly, avoiding the turbulence that could shut down their Strikers if they followed too closely, but they were close enough to cover each other or peel off out of danger.

Good to see. They both have been practicing correct techniques. Despite her good mood about the second newest pairing coming along nicely, deep down she was nervous. It feels strange going up without Lucchini. It’s like going for a walk on a gravel driveway with one boot off. Plus, even with the time I managed to get with them, I couldn’t correctly diagnose the power levels of the Strikers back at the transport with the equipment I brought with me. If only I had more time, I would feel more confident about being up here. Now, here I am with one standard Striker and the other one modified and untested. Calm down there Charlotte. Relax and concentrate. You’re the CO. You need to be an example. The last thought made her look down at her weathered BAR, a weapon that was totally out of place considering what most everyone else was packing. Containing only twenty rounds a clip, Yeager had the lowest hot loaded ammo capacity in the squadron. Even with Perrine loading 28 rounds in her Bren to make it not jam had more capacity that she did. Such a low count precluded her from the front line and forced her to pick her battles wisely, relegating her to flanking hit and run attacks on exposed core points. Still suits me though. Low weight and these babies can take an absolute
beating. Gertrude still chastises me for not caring for it better, but I don’t care.

A low inhuman roar caused her to divert her attention to the Neuori infiltrator, one that was getting closer by the second, peeling off left and gently rolling into a head on attack run. “Alright ladies!” she addressed to her wingmen. “I want you both to go max throttle and peel when it starts to commit! Stay with me and try to squeeze the left out of the equation in order to force it right! That way it will bleed off that speed and we can catch up and hit it!” She quickly thumbed her ear communicator and winced as nothing but high pitched feedback filled her ears. What is this? A malfunction? That can’t be. I checked it this morning and the modifications by Aaron did nothing wrong to the on board communication filters and boosters. Putting her immediate concerns on the back burner, she turned her head around at Miyafuji. “Yoshika!” Shirley ordered. “My comms are a no go. You have the radio for this one! All go max throttle on three, two, one!” A few split seconds before the countdown ended as Shirley was upping the power levels to her engines, something felt out of place, a feeling that Yeager had never experienced in her Strikers before. Something’s not right here. I should be feeling the flows getting stronger, more concentrated. While that’s indeed happening, I feel it way more in my left than the right. Get a grip. It’s just the new setup that Aaron created, nothing more. The feeling gave her little comfort as she threw the throttle as high as it could go and the sentiment went away just as quickly as the overbuilt up aetheric charge caused her left side to rocket forward more than her right, causing her right Striker to get caught in a massive wash and die out. She screamed briefly before her cries were drowned out by a massive boom that ripped the air like a thunder clap, a wall of concussive sound as the speed broke the sound barrier, the reverberations visible even from the ground. Both Miyafuji and Bishop got caught in the wash and both tumbled to and fro like leaves in a fall gale, trying to prevent their Striker engines from cutting out.

Yoshika struggled mightily against the winds, gritting her teeth in concentration and leveled off, shifting her position to Lynette’s general area, keeping an eye on her wingman as she too weathered the unexpected storm. What was that wash? Where did it come from? Where’s Shirley? Scanning the skies, Yoshika gaped in shock as Yeager got smaller and smaller as she flew towards the Neuroi at a speed that she’d never seen before. Lynette put her right eye to the anti tank rifle’s scope and saw bits and pieces of metal winking in the sun as they fell from her superior’s Strikers. “Her flaps has come off!” she relayed curtly, doing the numbers in her head and theorizing where her path was taking Yeager. Without her flaps she can’t maneuver! She’s going to collide with it! We have to help her! “She’s lost all control and she’s on a collision course! We have to help! Let’s go!” Bishop barked, flying forwards, Yoshika followed suit, holding her Type 99 cannon tightly.

Remembering what Shirley told her, she thumbed the communicator to the frequency used by the portable radio and reported, “Mayday! Mayday! This is Yoshika calling ground! Captain Yeager has experienced some sort of malfunction with one of her Strikers and she’s in an uncontrollable intercepting path with the Neuroi! Her ear communicator is not functioning and her flaps have sheared off! She can’t evade and we’re trying to get to her now!”

“Rodger that!” Sanya relayed back, a small pop of static interrupting the exchange towards the middle. “Get up there and help out! The commander has already dispatched Aaron to group up with you! ETA twenty seconds!”

In the meanwhile, Yeager had stopped screaming and was trying frantically to cut the power to her left Striker. Come on damn you shut off! Shut off! Try as she might, her efforts came to naught as the rotors continued to whine and glow as the sheer acceleration cooked the metal and nearby integral systems. I’ve already lost my flaps. This goes on anymore the internal batteries will go and those are so near the fuel cells that- She didn’t want to think about ending her life as a fireball in the sky and came up with a plan. If I can reach the emergency manual release- Another high pitched wailing from the Neuroi reached her ears and she look at the enemy fighter. Apparently it too had been caught unawares by the change in events, not thinking that a witch could go that fast, and was
attempting to evade, turning hard to the right. *It's not going to be enough. I'm going too fast.* With gritted teeth, Yeager started to bend her left leg so that she can reach the release latch, but the momentum kept it locked into place. Pain shot up her body as the knee buckled and the tendons started to stretch and twist into unnatural places and angles. With that strategy a no go, Shirley tried to reach for it with her left arm, the red and yellow bar so tantalizingly close yet so far away. *Just a bit more. Just a bit more.* The sky in front of her began to darken and she knew with grim clarity that she was at the point of no return. Knowing that there was nothing more that she could do, Yeager threw up her hands in front of her, activating her shield and putting everything she had into them. Looking forwards as she did so, forgetting the release latch forevermore, the ebony underbelly of the Neuroi coming closer and closer, her mind became filled with images of her past, flashing by in spits and spurts. *Mom. Dad. Lucchini. I'm sorry. So stupid. Such a stupid way to d- She never finished that thought, as witch and Neuroi collided, and Charlotte “Shirley “ Yeager knew nothing more.

With the robe hanging and flapping like a wind sock around his waist, the sash the only thing keeping it on, Aaron sped forwards as fast as his magic allowed him. Determination was etched in his face as the head winds whipped against it, his wings that of liquid fire as strenuntas flowed through his veins. His spirit was leaden as he knew as well as Wilcke did that even if he had a head start, he couldn’t get to Shirley fast enough to save her. *The calculations are just not going to allow for a happy ending here Aaron. You know that. All you can do is mitigate the damage, get this thing killed, and do recovery. This is going to hurt me, though not as bad as Lucchini. Poor girl will be a wreck afterwards, may even have to leave the squadron considering what she told me. Minna will find out about it eventually, but I won’t think she’ll courtmartial her. That would be too cruel. Please spare her commander.* He quickly caught up to Yoshika and Lynette just as the ever shrinking figure of Shirley Yeager struck the underside of the Neuroi at a speed that Aaron could only guess was at or near the velocity of sound. Her forward momentum was so great that instead of pulping on impact, she went through the thing, piercing the core location like a tank shell would a brick wall. After that, the Neuroi gave a horrible cry and the red chevrons on the head started to fade away to nothing. “Brace for explosion!” he called out, slowing down and positioning himself ahead of the pair. Shortly afterwards, another boom was heard followed by a rush of air filled with the Neuroi’s death cloud, a fake storm of white shards that resembled snow in winter. It buffeted his wings, but Aaron held firm, standing his ground in the air as surely as if he were on land. Once it ended, Aaron looked out at the scene, keeping his eyes peeled for Yeager’s body. “You see anything?” he called behind him without looking, jetting forwards into the shimmering miasma.

Yoshika feverish panned her head left, right, up, down, and all around, Lynette doing the same except directing her attention underneath, making sure that Shirley didn’t slip past them. *Come on captain. Where are you? Her shields may have taken the worst of the impact. There’s a chance that she could’ve survived. Wait… There! Suddenly, a brief flash of red registered in her brain and Miyafuji rocketed forwards, acting on her instincts alone. She moved through the cloud, Neuroi death fragments floating all around her, reminding her of the votive candles at a shrine back in Japan, but she forcibly kept her thoughts on the here and now. After another second, Yoshika had located Yeager’s body tumbling upwards, even this long after collision, most of her form shrouded in white save for her red hair that glowed like the Neuroi’s beamer blisters, a beacon that made her stick out. “I’ve found her!” she called out to Bishop and Divale, and raced to her, arms outstretched. Aaron and Lynette turned in the direction of Yoshika’s cries and moved in closer, seeing if they could help and watched as Miyafuji waded through the sea of fragments. Squinting their eyes, a gale came up and swept the death cloud away. Their questing gazes soon fell upon a pair of figures caught in positions that many would say were borderline scandalous if not lewd. Miyafuji had indeed caught Yeager by the waist, her head buried into her bust, one that was bereft of any clothing, Yoshika’s hair and well placed right leg the only two things from exposing the captain to the world.
Immediately, Aaron averted his gaze, turning completely around as Lynette raced in to help her wingman, knowing that Yoshika didn’t have the strength to keep her secure for long.

Joined by Bishop, Yoshika adjusted her grip and position and looked over Shirley’s body, her bare chest moving up and down as she shallowly breathed as if she were in deep sleep. *She’s in one piece and breathing?! Remarkable! Bruising all up and down the arms, probably from the impact, maybe broken bones. No other visible signs of injury, no bleeding. Unconscious with a concussion most likely.* “Come on now Yoshika,” Aaron quipped, drawing her attention away from her cursory examination. His back was still turned as he propelled himself backwards towards them, the robe in his left hand, holding it out to the pair. “At the very least buy the girl a drink before you bury your face in her t—”

“The captain is alive!” Bishop relayed back to the rest of the squadron, interrupting Aaron’s little remark. “We’re getting her back now!” After making the report, she grabbed Divale’s memento and placed it over Yeager, swaddling her like an infant. When that was complete, all three flew back to the beach, where even from such a far distance, they could see the rest of the squadron gathering, setting up an impromptu triage.

“I still can’t believe there’s still a body in your hands, much less a living one.” Aaron admitted, shaking his head in disbelief. “At that speed, she should be paste.”

“A witch’s shield can take a pounding,” Lynette started to explain, “but I have to agree with you. I’ve never seen or heard of anything like this, with Yoshika being the sole exception of course.”

“Regardless, the captain is alive. That’s all that matters.” Miyafuji intoned. She peered down at the gathering and smiled. “They have my first aid bag there and ready. Help me set her down carefully Lynn. Aaron, you run interference. If Lucchini is anything like Hartmann was when Gertrude got injured, I’ll need you to stop her.”

“No problem.” Aaron replied as the trio began the descent. Within moments, they landed, cutting their Strikers and laying Yeager flat on the sand, far away from the water’s edge. Divale tucked in his wings and sought out Francesca who, as Yoshika predicted, came sprinting towards them, her red fearful yet thankful face brimming with crystal tears, trying to see if her dearest friend was alright.

“Rimanga la sua andatura Lucchini. Yoshika ha bisogno di lavorare qui (Stay your gait Lucchini. Yoshika needs to work on her),” he stated, holding out his right hand, palm up and fingers splayed. “Fuori dalla mia strada (Out of my way)!” Francesca cried, but she stumbled into the sand, her right foot catching on a divot of sorts. Sensing that he had to compromise, Aaron took two steps over and knelt down, gently helping her up. Lucchini dusted herself off and tried to run past him, but Divale reached out and caught her by the right wrist.

“Ti prendo il più vicino che posso permettere (I’ll take you as close as I can allow).” he offered. His words seemed to have an effect as Lucchini nodded, and together they advanced on the ministrating pair, the rest of the squadron ringed around them. Mio and Minna parted, allowing them to see what was going on. Yoshika had her healing magic up and running, moving her hands up and down Shirley’s bruised arms, stemming the blood loss while Lynette had a vial of smelling salts ready in her left hand, using her right to tilt the captain’s head from side to side, checking for bruising there as well.

“No real signs of cranial impact and there’s been no change in pulse or breathing.” Bishop relayed to her friend who finished up what she was doing. She shook the vial and Yoshika nodded, giving her permission to wake her up. Unstoppering the smelling salts, Lynette hovered it near Shirley’s nose and counted silently to herself. By the time she got to four, Yeager began to stir, eyes fluttering.
Shirley’s world was filled with strange foreign noises that faded in and out like echoes in a cavern. One was a whooshing sound, while the other seemed like a gaggle of geese honking with all their might. *What in the world are those sounds? Wait a second?! I can hear myself think! I’m alive!* *How?* Slowly, she opened her blue eyes and saw the blinding rays of the sun. She squinted in pain and soon, a pair of fuzzy shadows blocked the harsh glare. It took a moment for her brain to clear up the pieces of the puzzle before she recognized the faces of Yoshika and Lynette looking down on her with relief. “Welcome back captain.” Miyafuji congratulated.

In shock that she’d survived the impact, Yeager tried to move arms behind her to help herself sit up, but she cried out in pain as the bruises registered their presence. “Don’t try to move Shirley.” Lucchini called from the circle, Aaron at her side. “You took a nasty hit, but you killed it good. Rammed right through the damn thing. Lynette, Miyafui, and Divale got you back here”

Shirley turned her head and faced her friend who was much relieved that she was okay, the redness around the eyes slowly dissipating. A small breeze picked up, but Yeager didn’t feel much of it. Curious, she looked over her body and saw that she was wearing Aaron’s bath robe. “The impact sheared off your bathing suit.” Aaron explained. “More likely than not a total loss. Didn’t want you to wake up in nothing but your birthday suit.”

“I appreciate that very-” Shirley began to say before she was rudely cut of by a violent metallic crump that caused most everyone to yell in fright. Looking through the forest of bare legs, she could make out what remained of her left Striker, the front panel shorn off from the impact, revealing the work that Aaron did. *Hold on a minute. That wasn’t like that at all if I remember correctly. The components are rearranged.* Her eyes strayed to Lucchini who returned them with a shameful gaze, looking away. “What the hell happened?” Shirley absentmindedly asked.

“What indeed.” a voice replied, anger evident in the tone. Knowing who it was, but not wishing to look guilty, Yeager looked up and saw Minna eyes glare a hole through her soul, hands at her side and pressing so deep into her flesh that it looked like she was about to crush her innards. Wilcke’s stare ventured from Shirley to Francesca and then Aaron, an explanation as to what really caused what happened forming in her mind. “Major Sakamoto,” she ordered without as much as looking at her friend, “warm up the transport. Me and these three have few things to discuss back at the castle.”

Minna steepled her hands in front of her face and looked at the three guilty culprits in front of her as they sat in the chairs facing her as she sat at her desk in the hanger office. All of them changed out of their swim wear and engaged in rather heated conversation for the better part of an hour, Wilcke drilling them relentlessly with rapid fire inquires, demanding to know what happened and when, striving to get to he bottom of the matter. Divale didn’t so much as move a muscle, his expression that of a statue. Shirley was slightly doped up, resulting from a morphine shot that Yoshika gave her before she was placed in the transport, but her eyes were full of fear and dread. A likewise emotion prevailed over Lucchini, who rightfully declared herself the true guilty party at the onset, a tremor overtaking her body, making her shake uncontrollably in her chair, the legs grinding against the concrete floor. She eyed each one in turn before taking a deep breath. “As far as I can figure from the testimony you’ve all provided, this is what I’ve come up with.” Minna started. “Shirley radioed Aaron via morse code to come over to the garage and help her with modifying her replacement Strikers, a request that was perfectly in line with code. After arriving at the garage, Aaron did work on said unit, the left Striker, and you both adjourned to fetch your swimming gear.” She leaned in and looked vehemently at both Divale and Yeager. “As the superior officer captain,” Wilcke continued, “you should’ve made an example of proper conduct and protocol by informing me of such modifications, and as for you sergeant, you should’ve went ahead and told me anyway when it became apparent that the captain was set on not telling me.” Regarding the quivering Francesca,
Minna stated again, “Now, sometime between then and now, Lucchini enters the garage and becomes curious as to what you both did. She overextends herself in trying satisfy her curiosity and causes the Striker in question to fall to the ground, the inner workings coming loose. Not wanting to get into trouble with either her friend or me, she, without being trained or cleared in Striker maintenance and repair, cobbled it together and put it back on the workbench. You should’ve left it where it laid and told me right then and there, Francesca. Your ‘repairs’ caused an inverse polarity to form, causing the fuel cell and batteries to go into overcharge and stripping her of the ability to communicate. Had it not been for a fantastic amount of luck, Captain Yeager wouldn’t be with us and I would have you.” Wilcke paused and leaned back, catching herself from saying what she would’ve done, not wanting to reveal how far she would go. “All three of you have greatly disappointed me. As of his moment, all three of you are grounded and Sergeant Divale’s and Captain Yeager’s Striker repair and maintenance certifications are henceforth revoked until further notice.”

Shirley’s mind crumbled on the spot and she started to cry, tear running down the side of her face upon hearing the sentence. Lucchini saw her friend losing it and took her left hand into her right, giving it a squeeze, letting her know that it could’ve been a lot worse. Aaron shifted in his seat and put his right hand to the side of his head, tilting it and furrowing his brow, looking down at Minna’s desk in deep thought. “What are you thinking about there Sergeant Divale?” Minna sharply asked, not in the mood for his fun and games.

“The last three words you said.” Aaron answered without emotion, mind churning away. “Until further notice. There was no real emphasis place on either one. Very strange of you to do that. From what I’ve seen from our conversations together and between others as well, you state your will with force when you mean it, which makes me believe that there’s a possibility that we can get back into good graces with you.”

Shirley’s sobbing stopped immediately and she looked at the commander with a desperate imploring look. “Whatever you want me to do I’ll do it! Anything to get my certification back and fly again! Just name it!” she blurted, hands moving this way and that, Francesca’s grasp rudely stripped away.

“As will I!” Lucchini added with force. “No matter how you may feel commander, I hold myself personally responsible for all of this! This situation came about due to me!”

Minna looked at the pairing, outwardly showing no emotion, but inwardly cursing Aaron for springing what she was about to do too early. *He’s too good at reading people. Me especially.* “What about you?” she asked, looking at Aaron with a quizzical look.

Aaron reverted back to his original posture and nodded. “If my acceptance will speed matters along in properly addressing the wrongs that we’ve all committed today, I’ll do whatever is necessary.” he admitted without hesitation.

“Might want to not feel too comfortable in that sentiment.” Minna warned, reaching underneath with her right hand, pulling open a drawer. After a few seconds, she fished out a large blank folder and placed it on the table. “Because if you all want to get back in good graces with me, you’re all going to have to earn it.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Sentenced to community service, Aaron and company discuss their future plans at lunch with Minna. They manage to find a loophole in the commander's orders, and find themselves the newest deputies of the London Metropolitan Police Department. Upon assignment to their superior, all three soon come to the realization that the job could be more than they bargained for.

Chapter XXIX: A Friend In Need

When the last emaciated soot covered child was transferred to the proper authorities, an old man came up to me, dressed in an old faded coat with copper buttons and a white cap that belonged more on the open seas than an office. He thanked me profusely for my help and informed me that he was the one all along that sent out the message and not the prefect. Didn’t know much about him then, but I felt this sense of goodness within him, unlike the one who led Lille who gave off this uncaring aura, using his status to indulge his own desires. We both went to Lucille’s and talked about something which I never thought I would hear: a regime change. The man, Leclerc, produced evidence that was irrefutable and I agreed to ‘correct’ the current situation. I just hope this isn’t some ghost light leading me astray for I don’t like being made a fool of.

Diary Entry October 17th 1943

The messhall was, under normal circumstances, only changed around on special occasions such as when guests seldom arrived and had to be entertained. Though far from celebratory, an exception was made to show the rest of the squadron what happened when you messed up. Towards the far side of the room, many feet away from the main dining table was another one pulled from storage, this in the shape of a square, rough hewn and in a bad need of some sanding and polishing, small strands of old cobwebs still fluttering in and among the recessed joint pockets underneath. Seated at this new addition to the room, was Aaron, Shirley, Lucchini, and Minna, all in silence as they waited for lunch to be served. Divale looked around and caught the sight of Perrine looking at him with a concerned look, not sure what the trio had talked about with the commander. To reassure her and anyone else that she wished to tell that everything was fine, he put up three fingers on his left hand, symbolizing the three of them, and gave a thumbs up with the right hand. Clostermann sighed with relief and nodded in thanks.

Turning back to the table, Aaron cracked his knuckles and clasped his hands together. “If I may say so,” he began, breaking the quiet, “community service was not something I expected as a punishment.”

“It’s not meant to be.” Minna illuminated from his front. “The purpose of that is to make you understand that while our duty is noble in purpose, we have to take from the citizenry in order to do
For over five years we have taken their food, their money, even their sons and daughters. It’s only right that we give something back to show them that their sacrifices are for the greater good and we’re thankful.”

“Wow.” Lucchini muttered to the left. “I never thought if it that way.”

“Still going to be hard though.” Shirley remarked from the right. “We all have to be able to fully contribute at a certain site, and I really haven’t a clue where we should start looking.”

“I have the folder in my front pocket. We could start looking now and see what we can come up with.” Aaron offered, gesturing to where he placed the folder that Minna had given him.

“Not until we get some lunch.” Lucchini demanded, rubbing her belly. “I’m starving.”

Aaron chuckled. *Good thinking there Francesca. Thinking on an empty stomach is like pondering while needing to take a piss; it just doesn’t work well.* He looked at Shirley who was still shaken up from the dressing down she got and looked positively worried sick. “Hey,” Divale called out softly, getting her attention, “I’d rather be punished by doing community service than what I would’ve done if this was the old days.”

Minna took an interest and asked, “What would you’ve done differently?”

Aaron eyed the commander and leaned in. “Had she lived or died?” he riposted.

Wilcke suddenly had a bad feeling about where the conversation might go. *Stepped into a bear trap looks like.* “Either or.” she ventured, steeling herself for any possible answer.

“At absolute minimum,” Aaron explained, taking his time, “dishonorable discharge. Had the worst come to pass both me and Francesca would have to be prescribed some happy pills.”

Mina’s eyes widened in shock as the import of what he was saying started to make sense in her mind. “Cyanide tablets?!” she hissed in as low of a voice as possible. “You’d force suicide?!”

“Either that or the firing squad.” Aaron countered. “Such an incident demands severe punishment, and considering that this is wartime, I think we can do the math.” The entire table went silent as they all contemplated how far it could’ve gone. *Better thank your lucky stars that we have Minna as the commander here. If it were anyone else, she and I would be staring down gun barrels.* “It wouldn’t be the first time I thought of doing such things.”

“You dealt with stuff like this in your unit?” Lucchini inquired, jumping on the statement. “What happened?”

*Oh boy, this can of worms.* “I had a coterie commander by the name of Gabriel Hyacinth, head of the VIIth, the Doomdivers, who I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him, we’d be butting heads. Whosoever was the woman who birthed him must’ve been the angriest in all existence. If liquid rage could be extracted from the soul, distilled several times, poured into a mold in the likeness of a man, and left to harden for nine months, out would pop him. Everything about him exuded violence and barely contained ire. Very muscular and tall, roughly my height, and wore his red hair in a top knot all the time, even when he slept. Thank God he wasn’t part of my coterie for he would never be one for stealth. The man had eyes that were such a deep brown that you would mistake them for black. Moreover Gabriel never smiled unless he was killing the enemy and never wasted an opportunity to do so, throwing his weight and might around with no regard for human or warlock life. Totally reckless with a capital R-E-C-K-L-E-S-S, bold and underlined with an exclamation point at the end stretching to infinity and his unit embodied that to a T. As their name implied, they dove at the
enemy and concentrated their shields and magic at their heads during the descent. When they hit the ground, their shields protected them, but they would shimmer a tad like a puddle of water being pelted by a sole raindrop. That movement set off a chain reaction that caused all that built up magic to erupt in a blast of aetheric devastation equivalent to a block buster bomb. Very effective and dangerous as that attack couldn’t tell friend from foe. To that end, I made doubly sure to tell him that he and his coterie couldn’t use their powers unless I gave them permission or if an emergency came up that had to be dealt with right then and there.

The last part of that agreement came back to bite me in the ass at Odessa, when the Russians had their backs against the wall inside the last few bastions they ever would defend in their native land. They were holding their own for a fair bit in the beginning, giving a good account of themselves, when this veritable armored corps worth of Strategos came out of nowhere, no support at all, and starts to advance, shooting at the front lines. Caught me completely off guard and I tried to raise Gabriel to tell him to hit the enemy from the rear to disorient them, but he was already up in the air with most of his coterie, preparing to dive in on them. At first I was very pleased, but then I took a closer look at what he was doing, taking the positions of the enemy, the Russian’s, and his own forces into account. The crazy fucking bastard was going to dive right on top of the Russian lines, taking them and the Neuroi out.”

“Did you try to stop him?!” Shirley anxiously asked.

“Like hell I did.” Aaron replied vehemently. “Even going so far as to try to get in his way as he came hurtling down from the sky like a meteor. Try as I might, I couldn’t get there fast enough to halt the inevitable. One second, the world resembled a battlefield, and the next, nothing but fire and death over a front of close to ten miles long. The explosion was so incredible, it blotted out the sun. Up until that point, I thought that I would never see that sort of devastation again after Stalingrad. I was wrong. After the fog of war lifted and I saw what became of all thirty five thousand brave Russian soldiers, another haze descended on me, filling my heart with hate. I sought out Gabriel and found him at the camp, perched on a rock like a town crier on a pulpit, boasting of his accomplishments to all who cared to listen. He sees me approach, liquid fire in my eyes, and realizes with a start that I was angrier than anyone had ever seen before. Everyone else turns and looks and immediately get out of the way, fearful of what would happen if they didn’t. Even David took a few steps back and nothing filled that man with dread. Gabriel defended himself by repeating, ‘We had a deal’, to which I replied, ‘Never again’. I flew into him, driving him off the stone and into the ground right in front of his men and the rest of the unit. Pinning his arms down with my legs, I sat on top of him and started to throw punch after punch at his face, driving my fist into his skull again and again and again as hard as I could. After the first dozen blows, I had cut him, broke him, mangled him, disfigured him. It took the combined efforts of all the rest of the coterie commanders and a few from my unit just to pry me off of him. Though the whole beat down lasted less than two minutes, the damage was done. Gabriel’s face was nothing like it was before nor would ever be after. It was hamburger consistency with his skin so puffed up that you couldn’t see his eyes, his jaw was broken and dislocated, his nose shattered to oblivion, and more than a few of his teeth were missing. I didn’t get out of that scrum unscathed either. I beat the hell out of him and the fear of God back in so hard that I broke or dislocated seven of my fingers and cracked four knuckles. Not quite done, after I was pulled off him, I pointed my left index finger, pretty much the only one that didn’t get damaged and told him that from now on, unless I gave the word, he didn’t dive. If he ever disobeyed me again, I would rip off his wings and crucify him with them.”

Minna listened to the story and was speechless. Thirty thousand dead from collateral damage from a soldier so confident in what he was doing was right. He deserved to be punished but not in that way. “Did you ever think that you went too far with Gabriel?” she inquired.

Aaron took a deep breath, the memory causing him to feel residual stress and anger. “Looking back
on it, maybe.” he admitted, flexing his fingers. “But at that time I was beyond mad. I lost it and the only things that came into my mind at the time were three words: full contact management. Over the next few months him and I talked about it in my more lucid moments and it was only then that I realized that underneath all that ire and hate was fear. For some reason, Gabriel took the reality our situation too seriously, to the point where he almost couldn’t effectively cope with it, using his anger as a cover for his own insecurities. He told me that he wanted out of this war more than any of us and I believed him. Told me that he would do anything to get us out, even at the cost of his own life. He ended up paying that price at Toulon, after the French managed to get most of what remained of their fleet out. Some ships were still there, so they took all the ammunition and fuel out and tried to rig a bomb that would wipe out a good chuck of the advancing Neuroi. They almost got it done when the enemy attacked, diverting their attention. Given what was there, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place; I couldn’t let them die but I also couldn’t jeopardize the lives of my men for if one stray shot hit that jury rigged charge, we would be living permanently in the clouds. Gabriel then came up to me and asked if he could dive when the defenders either retreated or were wiped out. At that point in the battle, he was beat up and his shields were low. I at first wanted to tell him no, but he takes me by the arm and repeats his request. Just like with Esau at Bratslava, I tried to stop him, knowing what he was going to do, and like Esau he sucker punches me and dives.” He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes as if he was tired and needed sleep. “He didn’t have to do it, and he knew that. I’ll never understand why.”

Suddenly, the doors to the kitchen opened and a cart came rolling out, pushed along by Eila and Sanya. “Just a few more seconds!” Sanya called out. “The dumplings took a little longer than I thought they would, but rest assured, they will taste amazing.”

“Yes!” Lucchini cried out, rubbing her hands in eager anticipation. “I thought I was going to keel over for a bit there.”

Shirley took a whiff of the air as Eila and Sanya got everything onto platters and started moving around the messhall, serving the large table first. That is most peculiar. I smell a lot of vegetables, garlic, and something else. Something sweet yet sour. What could it be? Aaron followed in Yeagers footsteps and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. My God! After all this time, I get to eat…

“And here we are,” Sanya announced, placing the serving tray into the middle of the table, “borsch with traditional uszka and pampushky.” Everyone looked down at their lunch and were mesmerized. The porcelain bowls of beet red borsch were piping hot, steam rising into their faces and noses, making their mouths water. In the center was a dollop of sour cream topped with a bit of dill and around it were beet roots, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, onions, and hard boiled eggs. Also floating around in the near tomato red broth were little ear shaped dumplings, the contents of which were a mystery to all but the server. On the side, a separate platter on the serving tray held over half a dozen rolls glazed with a garlic oil and herbs. Four glasses of cold milk completed the meal.

“Naslazhdat’sya (Enjoy).”

“Thank you.” Minna replied with a smile and the tiny Russian nodded and walked away. The hungry quartet grabbed a bowl, napkin, spoon, and a roll and began to chow down, except Shirley and Lucchini who were still trying to figure out what it actually was what they were eating.

“What is this?” Francesca asked, poking some of the uszka with her spoon and watching them bob up and down.

“Some of the most wonderful things Russia has to offer.” Aaron answered between heaping mouthfuls of borsch and uszka. He wiped his mouth with the napkin and purred as he let the soup and dumplings go down. “Just the right amount of sour.” he added. He furrowed his brow and ran his tongue around his mouth for a split second. “A bit strange that she used wild mushroom for the
“Well then Mister Connoisseur,” Shirley remarked, directing his attention to her bowl, “what is in this?”

“For starters, that is beet root. That’s what gives borscht its color. Obviously you know potatoes, onions, cabbage, and the eggs. As for the sour they make it by mixing crushed beet root with water and rye and let it sit for a few days so it ferments.” Aaron explained, leaning back in and gesturing to everything with his open right hand. He noticed Yeager giving him an odd look like she was about to be sick, but he hastily added, “They don’t use a whole lot of it. Tastes kind of like pickle juice, but it’s not overpowering. In case it is, the sour cream, uszka, and pampushky cancel it out. Try it and you might like it.”

“I’ll do it if you do.” Lucchini suggested, holding her spoon in her right hand. Shirley reluctantly grasped the lone piece of silverware and held it firmly as she looked down at the cornucopia of ingredients. I never like trying new things. Even Yoshika’s cooking put me off my appetite when I saw it for the first time.

Swallowing deep and closing her eyes, she spooned up a piece of hard boiled eggs and a few slices of carrot and popped it into her mouth, the same time that Francesca did, except she nabbed mostly cabbage, beet roots, and sour cream. Minna and Aaron watched both chew the ingredients and gulp them down. A few seconds went by before Yeager admitted, “That’s not too bad at all.”

Lucchini nodded in agreement and took another spoonful. “It’s actually pretty good once you get past the sour.”

“Just goes to show that good food is good food, no matter what it looks like.” Minna pointed out, blowing a bit on the bit of soup she spooned up before putting it into her mouth. She looked at Aaron who while eating heartily yet slow enough so that he didn’t look like he was in a rush, seemed to have a distant look to his face, his eyes not really focusing on any particular point of reference. He’s lost in his memories again. “You with us sergeant?” Wilcke asked.

Aaron snapped out of it and apologized. “Sorry commander. Old memories of the first and last Russian Christmas party I ever had.” Try as he might, he couldn’t shake himself from that night, one which was as bittersweet as the borscht that he’d eaten. “But enough about the past,” he proclaimed, mentally throwing the past back into the far flung reaches of his mind and physically taking out the folder, “let’s concentrate on the future.” Opening it, he saw the beginnings of an alphabetized listing of business locations with all sorts of pertinent contact information. German efficiency at its finest and thankfully without the damned triplicate. He skimmed through it with ease, speed reading the entirety of the seventeen page document in less time than it takes to fill up a glass of water from the tap. Aaron placed the papers back into the folder with care and set it on the table.

“So what’s the verdict?” Yeager asked, nibbling on one of the pampushky rolls.

“Bad, ugly, and very ugly.” Divale admitted with a grimace. “For starters we have street sweeping. Not the most glamorous, but an integral part of the sanitation program they have at Dover.”

“Do the words hell and no mean anything to you?” Francesca piped up, wiping a milk moustache off her face with a napkin. “If the streets are anything like the ones back in Rome, what you could find can get you killed.”

“Next there’s doing impromptu song and dance acts for local orphanages and soup kitchens. Obviously unpaid due to the nature of the establishments, but probably the most gratifying. I can do the singing and you all can be background. Easy peasy, one two threesy.” Aaron continued.
“I have no tonality at all there Aaron.” Shirley illuminated, shooting the plan down in flames. “Singing even the simplest of lullabies sounds like a strangled cat. No go.”

“Okay,” Aaron acquiesced, searching for another possible site they could all be a constructive part of, “that eliminates the church choir, so I guess that leaves us with milk delivery.”

“I’m saying no to that right now.” Minna countered sharply. “Given the way the captain drives, she’s liable to be a menace to law and order.”

Aaron was about to step in with a comment of his own when the last three words echoed in his head repeatedly and he stopped what he was doing, going back to that vacant expression on his face earlier. “Law and order,” he muttered softly. With a start, he picked up the folder and fished out the papers, thumbing through the pages frantically. Minna saw him seemingly come to the one he was looking for and leaned in his chair towards Shirley. The pair exchanged looks and silently came to an agreement with a nod. Divale did the same thing with Lucchini, both parties concurring with whatever it was being suggested. “Just so we’re all clear on this,” he reiterated, looking at both Francesca and Shirley, “everyone here agrees? We have the training at least.”

“Plus, we do have the skills in terms of driving aptitude, effective time management, proper notation of incidents, and working within a hectic environment.” Yeager added.

“And we have good people skills.” Lucchini expounded. “And we all can be quite good at the whole being there but not routine.”

“What are you three talking about?” Minna inquired while leaning forward in her chair, both eagerly anticipating what they decided on, but also a bit cautious. Aaron simply turned the page over in his hand so that she could look at it. Over his right thumb, in bold lettering, were the words **Local Law Enforcement.** Nodding, Wilcke leaned back and stated, “That I will accept. I’ll be sure to call the Dover-

“First,” Aaron politely interjected, “we need to discuss what the definition of ‘local’ is.”

Minna cocked an eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes there Sergeant Divale?” she asked with a hint annoyance.

“Never.” Aaron answered sincerely. “You see, under the English definition of the word ‘local’, it means any area within a fifty mile radius. While working closely with the Dover police department would be very helpful to the community at large, I feel that we’d be wasting our collective talents in stopping bar fights and getting kittens out of tree tops. Going from memory there is a place where not only can we expand our horizons, make our impact more meaningful, and serve out our sentence, we’ll also be close by to help out with the defense of the city if the Neuroi decided to attack in forces large enough to overwhelm the perimeters.”

“I’ll decide if this so called definition is permissible if you tell me where you all wish to go.” Minna informed.

Aaron looked over at his comrades and asked them, “Go for it?” He ended up getting enthusiastic nods from the both and he regarded the commander. “What’s the address of Scotland Yard?”

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Aaron took the corner slowly as Sleipnir’s engine thrummed up a storm, tires kicking the dust off the road. Again, he felt the sensation of fingers wriggling across his stomach and he gave a quick look at Lucchini who sat right behind him. Ever since the ride started, she had an absolute devil of a time
trying to get comfortable with her grip. Just like with Shirley’s Strikers, her height put her at a disadvantage, restricting her reach considerably. The only things she could even get at was his sides, his barrel chest making it so that she couldn’t clasp her hands together. “We can stop if you want so you can get into the sidecar.” he politely offered, leveling the bike out.

“I’m okay.” Francesca replied, resolute in her decision to stay put. “I’m sorry about that. I really don’t mean to.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it.” Aaron assured.

“Or does she truly?” Shirley quipped from the sidecar, looking up and giving them both a sly wink.

Lucchini looked at her with an expression of revulsion. “Yuck!” she exclaimed. “That’s disgusting! I’d never do that!”

As Yeager burst out laughing, Aaron resumed concentrating on the main road that led into London, keeping an eye out for traffic. *It definitely has picked up the last time I was here. More transports being ferried this way and that. Wonder what’s going on. Could it be that they’re about to invade the continent? To liberate France? Boy that would be something to see.* His mood dimmed as he thought about how costly such an endeavour would be, but he shook his head clear of that and again brought up the address, 4 Whitehall Place. *That’s awfully close to where Lucretia lives, just a block away from what I remember.*

“Plus,” Francesca continued, not done with fervently denying that she would do any funny business with Aaron as he drove them, “he’s a taken man. Aaron has enough hands to mind his stomach.”

“Amen to that.” Divale remarked, not looking back at the arguing pair. “Though to be honest, I’ve had a situation happen to me once when I was in Saint Nazaire and there was this woman who-”

“Okay. Not listening.” Lucchini stated flatly, burying the left side of her head into Aaron’s back and plugging her other ear with her right index finger, the left arm firmly looped more or less around Aaron. “La. La. La.”

“Hey, did you forget the memo? Christmas has been over for about three months. Get with the program.” Aaron joked with a slight chuckle.

“Speaking of get,” Shirley began, thinking about their proposal to Minna at lunch, “I’m still surprised that Minna even allowed something like this, especially given that if she really needed us to come back at a moments notice we’d be-”

“A touch far away for her liking?” Aaron finished. “I’m also shocked that she agreed, but I figured that she knew that if shit did hit the proverbial fan, the combination of flying and driving like demons would get us back in respectable time.”

“At least it gets us out of her cross hairs for a bit.” Lucchini added, taking her finger out of her ear. “She scared me.”

Aaron was about to reply, but the increased traffic of the city came into view, practically bump to bump confines for as far as the eye could see. He quickly did the numbers in his head and frowned. *This will take us far too long to navigate.* “You ladies ready for some excitement?” he suddenly asked.

“Of course.” both the Italian and American witch answered simultaneously.

“Then hold on.” Aaron advised, gunning the throttle hard, sending the motorcycle screaming down
the road. “Obscurum.” Both Lucchini and Yeager felt a strange warmth come over them as Divale’s magic cloaked them from view and the warlock maneuvered this way and that, deftly blazing through the jams like a student at an improvised aggressive road course. It was hard for them not to squeal with joy at whizzing past cars and pedestrians alike at paint scratching distances and at speeds that no respectable individual would even dream of going. Divale craned his neck around a corner to see if he was in the right place and pointed out, “Ah. Here we are. Scotland Yard. Home of the London Metropolitan Police Department.” As he made the turn left, Shirley and Lucchini looked up and saw a pair of large red brick buildings, each with two chimneys perched on the highly slanted dark gray roof, puffing white smoke into the March air. All of the windows were curtained with a thick white fabric and barred with steel rods in a crisscross pattern. A high wall surrounded most of the compound, made of gray mortared stone. Police cars were parked nearby with officers either making their rounds or standing guard near the red painted gates.

“This houses the entirety of the London police force?” Lucchini asked, clearly puzzled.

“Of course not.” Shirley answered. “From what I recall, they have several addresses all over this street, plus garages.”

Aaron adjusted his glasses, making sure that there wouldn’t be a repeat of what happened at the Admiral Benbow Inn at Sudbury, and killed the spell, the motorcycle, its driver, and passengers rematerializing back into the real world. He slowed down, just in case there was a limit, and came to a respectable stop at the gate. On his right was a booth, one made of large panes of glass and painted blue, manned by a rather stout officer who got up from his seat and walked out of the open door, eyeing them up and down. “Coming with something to report, looking for directions, or personal business?” he asked with authority.

“We’re here to see the chief inspector.” Aaron explained. “I’m sure our commander has informed you of our coming?”

“If you three are indeed here to see the chief inspector than it’s certainly news to me.” the officer replied rather gruffly. “May I see your papers please, all three of you?”

Obediently, all three produced their military identification papers and held them out to the officer who craned his neck and looked each of them over carefully. Satisfied that they were genuine he stated, “Please wait here while I get confirmation from inside.” With that, he retreated back into the booth and closed the door. Strangely enough, he didn’t reappear near the windows. The phone must be attached to the door. Seeking to pass the time, Aaron looked around, watching the officers on patrol go about their business. Every so often, one would come from across the way, eye all three of them suspiciously and then depart without saying so much as a word.

“Why are they doing that?” Shirley wondered out loud, feeling uncomfortable at being scrutinized. “Haven’t they’ve seen witches before?”

“Don’t really know.” Aaron muttered. “Whatever it is, we’re spooking them something fierce.”

“Well I’d wish they stopped.” Lucchini stiffy uttered, not caring if she was heard or not. “They’re making me feel very uncomfortable.”

Now you two know what it was like for me when I came over in December of last year. Wasn’t especially fun then either. After that thought passed his mind, the booth attendant came out and tipped his hat. “Terribly sorry my dears, lines have been very busy for the last few hours and our operators didn’t get your commander’s forewarning until just recently. My apologies. Please enter and park your vehicle to the side of the entrance. Normally, all visitors are to be searched for weapons, but your commander has vouched for you all. Have a pleasant day.” he stated sincerely.
“You as well officer.” Aaron replied kindly, and small whistle was heard from just beyond the gate. Shortly afterwards, the wooden barrier opened and the trio slowly revved their way past the gate booth and into the grounds of Scotland Yard. The ground was completely level and the lawn was a vibrant green, showing tell tale signs of being well kept by grounds crews. No tree were to be found here, just a flattop processional that led right up to the stone steps of the main entrance, a massively wide area buttressed by three faux marble columns with the vacant black iron benches arranged at selected intervals along the way. Even more officers were within the confines than outside, moving around in trios and quartets, either going into the building, coming out, walking and talking, or leaning up against the walls and eating sandwiches from lunch pails, fingers dribbling with greasy corned beef and mustard. However, many more stood at attention near the entrance and at selected intervals around the walls, shouldering rifles and shotguns and not the civilian kind either. Those are military issue. I know the Lee Enfield anywhere from having seen it so many times when I was in captivity for three months and those shotguns are Winchester 87’s. This is some serious firepower, what the hell do they need it all for?

“I would hate to be the one stupid bastard who tried to bust out of this place.” Shirley muttered as Aaron maneuvered the motorcycle to where the officer at the gate told him to park. “You probably wouldn’t get seven steps worth of freedom before you got taken down.”

“Or gunned down.” Lucchini deadpanned back. “Look at those pieces they’re toting around. I thought they just had service revolvers and batons.”

“So did I.” Aaron quipped, slowing the bike down as he parked it and killed the engine by getting off the seat. “We must’ve picked a hell of day to volunteer here.” I just hope this doesn’t get any worse. He waited patiently for the rest of the group to dismount and together they walked up the steps, with Divale opening the door to let his friends through before him. After he crossed the threshold, Aaron found himself in an interior that reminded him of the London Metropolitan Hospital that he, Gertrude, and Erica went to when they saw Christiane, but instead of nurses going about with medicine, there were police officers with folders walking briskly to elevators or up some large wooden stairs in the back of the main greeting area, their lead lined boots thumping loudly. Despite the endless clopping of soles, no one spoke, making it even quieter than the hospital. Far above were open tiered levels each manned by three officers, looking down at the hustle and bustle below, holding rifles and shotguns close to their chests. Other than that, the place was welcoming with just the right amount of heat to knock the late spring chill out of the bones and that gave the place the scent of smoldering wood, and the receptionist, an older lady with white hair who looked older than the dirt the building stood on and dressed in a shabby yet still professional looking one piece blue, got up from her desk a small ways away from the door and walked across the floor, crossing over a large picture of the crest of Scotland Yard, two lions holding up a blue shield with a iron gate etched on it, a knight’s helmet placed on top of it with a royal crown hovering above all.

“You must all be here to see the chief inspector.” she presumed, giving the three the warmest smile that a crone her age could. When they nodded back at her in silent approval, she turned and barked at two nearby officers, “Sean! George! Please escort these lovelies to the chief inspector please.”

“Yes ma’am.” one of them answered briskly and gave a salute. “Please come with us. Mind the foot traffic.” Taking the hints, all five made their way to the back of the room and took the right hand stairs, the wood well worn but still strong as the day they were nailed in place. After scaling that for the next two floors, they found themselves traversing down a long hallway upon reaching the fourth and final floor with numbered offices along either side, the standard frosted glass with the thin black crosshatching and stenciled tin name plates, snuggled so close together that one could easily mistake it for the innards of a sardine can. One stood out from the rest, a lone office at the end of the passage, a navy blue painted door sans glass and featuring only the name plate, this in polished bronze that read: CDI I. Fleming.
The other officer who took up his position at the end of the troop, lightly knocked on the door and received a muffled reply. “Enter.”

At that, the officers stood at attention to either side of the door. “The chief inspector will see you now. Have a pleasant day.” All nodded in thanks and Aaron placed his large hand on the door knob and turned it. The moment he had the portal open just a crack, the strong odor of tobacco and the swirling smoke that went along with it wafted through and made everyone nearly step back at how overpowering it was. Even Divale had to restrain himself from backing away. Holy fuck that’s potent! Looks like he didn’t have the window open either judging by the wisps of smoke coming out with it. He gestured to Shirley as if to say, after you, and she grimaced slightly as she mustered up the courage to enter the office, Francesca moving in behind her as if she were a tower shield that would protect her from the olfactory based slings and arrows. Aaron moved in after them and closed the door respectfully behind him. Inside, the room was covered in a thick haze of cigarette smoke that billowed and rippled like water as they moved around. However, it wasn’t to the point where it covered the rich green carpeting, the white wallpapered walls with the occasional picture of some big wig posing near the building front, the once white curtains that shielded the office occupant from prying eyes, the large mahogany wood desk, the right hand wall that featured a map of the entirely of the city of London in full detail and the surrounding environs, and a series of bookshelves that stretched from one side of the left hand wall to the other, filled to the point of bursting with books and papers.

The chief inspector took the black cigarette holder from his mouth and expertly tapped the remaining ashes into an almost overflowing lead crystal ash tray, eyeing the new arrivals clinically before standing up to his full height. He was short, maybe around 5’7”, thin and lacking in muscle, but straight backed and looking like he was a touch older than his mid thirties age due to his habit. Dressed in the uniform of a high ranking officer, one with no decoration or medal on the dark blue cotton, save for the crest of Scotland Yard emblazoned over his left breast and near the tip of his right shoulder, he filled it nicely, his cap resting on the top of the desk. Blue were his eyes, light like a robin’s egg, and his skin was slightly tanned, a rarity for people stuck in offices much of the day. A hawkish nose dominated the long face, directing attention away from a strong jutting chin and a forehead so lengthy and wide that one could watch a cinema feature on it. After a few seconds of gauging his guests, he politely ventured, “Welcome ladies and gentleman. I’m Chief Inspector Fleming, at your service.” He gestured to two empty seats in front of his desk and added a touch apologetically, “Please have a seat. I do wish there was more, but I don’t really get a lot of company.” Yeager and Lucchini sat in the chairs while Aaron stood behind them, crossing his arms. I can see why. Anymore than two and people might start choking to death. Fleming then went back to his seat and sat down. “I received word of your arrival not too long ago from Phyllis downstairs along with your personal files.” he stated, tapping a drawer on his right hand side that no one else could see. “All I have to say is that you all must be as daft as a village idiot to think that with such a history that I would even consider letting you lot volunteer here.” He leaned forward and clasped his hands. “Convince me otherwise within five minutes or I’ll have you cast out of this establishment by your ears.”

Shirley was the first to offer her two cents, stating. “We all made mistakes in the past because we were stupid and didn’t know any better. I myself was a country girl who was largely ignorant of the outside world. My service in this war changed that and me for the better. Yes, I have a streak of being disobedient when it comes to my Strikers, but other than that, I’ve always been there for my friends and fellow squadron members. If they were in trouble, in the air or on the ground, I was there for them. I plan on making amends and I’ll do whatever it takes to do it.”

“I grew up in Rome and saw firsthand the bravery of fellow police officers in the field as they combated organized crime.” Francesca added immediately after her friend had finished. “Some of them were my neighbors, proud fathers to girls and boys that I went to school with, proud husbands
to wives that my mother and father were friends with. They risked everything to protect theirs and others around them. I was there for more than a few funerals, trying to console their children as they were laid to rest. Living in law and order is the same as living in freedom, it’s never free. I would be an honor to serve here and set an example that others would be proud of.”

The chief inspector took a gander at his time piece and noted the time. He looked up at Aaron and inquired, “What about you?”

Divale looked Fleming dead in the eyes and answered, “I can tell just by your body language and tone of voice that this posturing of yours is a clever disguise that you’re using to hide that fact that deep down, you desperately want our help.” Shirley and Lucchini whipped around in their seats and looked on him in horror while the chief inspector cocked an eyebrow and stiffened, silently daring him to complete that thought. “From the moment we arrived, every officer we’ve seen has acted strangely towards us, even coming from across the street to gawk at us so closely that I could smell what they had for breakfast this morning on their breath. Within these walls are more cops than I’ve had guards when I was ensconced below London herself. Those weapons they’re all packing can’t hide the fact that every one of those men out there are afraid of someone or something. Fear is detrimental to a unit such this, just like any you find within the military. Whatever it is that’s giving your men in uniform the willies, we can do something about. We three have seen fear, we have seen horror, and we all have cast it back, howling and screaming. You take us in, we will get everything back to normal so that officers can walk the streets again with confidence. There’s a mess here chief inspector and we’re here to clean it up if you’ll allow us to do so.”

Fleming simply sat there for a brief moment before again glancing at his watch. The seconds seemed like an eternity as he stood up from his chair and placed his hands behind his back. He gave everyone a deep piercing stare down before asking, “If I take you all in, will you all swear to serve and protect? Will you all swear to conduct yourselves in a manner befitting of your ranks and of this department? Will you all swear to follow orders obediently?”

“We do chief inspector! We swear it!” all three exclaimed, Francesca and Shirley both standing up from their chairs and joining Aaron in a simultaneous salute.

The chief inspector reached down with his left hand and opened a drawer, pulling out three badges that despite the gloom, shined brightly. “By the authority invested in me by the City Council of London and His Majesty the King, I hereby deputize you three as officers in good standing within the London Metropolitan Police Department.” Fleming stated proudly and solemnly, placing them down on his desk carefully and pushing them across the wood towards them. “Your service sidearms will be downstairs with Phyllis. Congratulations.” He watched all three pick up their badges and shook Aaron’s hand when he offered it. Then he saw Francesca starting to pin the badge to her uniform and quickly ordered, “You might wish to not do that Flying Officer Lucchini.”

Lucchini looked at him as if he were speaking in a another language. “What do you mean?” she asked. “I consider this an honor and it should be shown as such.”

Fleming smiled wistfully and bade them all to sit back down with a simple lowering of his hands, Aaron again left standing. “While I do commend you for the due respect you show for the office, Sergeant Divale was correct when he said that something has us running scared. For the longest time, crime in London has been relatively constant and minor. Course you have the nasty bits from time to time, but they’re always sorted out quick. Since January of this year, the number of violent crimes has risen to the tune of forty five percent.” he started to explain.

“But that should be par for the course during wartime.” Aaron pointed out. “People get scared themselves and act out when their lives or the lives of their loved ones are in immediate danger.”
“Indeed,” Fleming agreed, “but that number mostly involved civilians. This current conflict has seen more fellow officers get injured or killed in the line of duty than ever before. The numbers are absolutely horrific, eclipsing eight hundred percent. Just last week alone, I attended the funerals of four brother officers, with the last one,” Here the chief inspector paused and walked slowly towards the window right behind his desk. With his left hand, he parted the drapery so that just a sliver of a street corner could be seen if any of the three wished to squint their eyes. “was killed right there on that corner. Poor boy was not much older than you lot and wore that badge with pride for not even sixteen days before he was found dead, stabbed in the back.”

Lucchini’s eyes bugged out at the mention of such an act within such a close proximity. “Did anybody see anything?” she inquired.

“Not a bloody one.” Fleming answered, fuming at the memory of the fruitless interrogations. “Least officially. Unofficially, I believe they’re being frightened into compliance.”

“That’s certainly plausible.” Shirley remarked. “Where my wingman and I are from, organized crime is hitting law enforcement like a tidal wave. Unlike the gangs of the past, these are all like minded individuals who are not looking at some brief time in the sun, but full fledged careers and legacies that extend decades. To realize that end, they’re merciless and methodical, either killing anyone who stands in their way or threatening them to do what they want.”

“In addition to the war surely drying up the recruit base you depend on for survival, they know as well as you do that there are not enough officers to patrol the streets effectively, allowing them to commit crimes that are bigger and more brazen while instilling in you and the citizenry fear.” Aaron observed.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you folks have been tapping my phone conversations.” Fleming joked with tiny smile. “What I do know is that I’m going to be assigning you all to an operative that I feel shares your sentiments and willingness to get this problem under control. It will take time to get in contact with him along the proper secured channels, so in the meantime, please find lodging as we have unfortunately no place for you all here. When you find it and get squared away, give us a ring, number 1212, and ask specifically for Phyllis. Out of everyone in this station, she’s the only one that I trust to inform me.”

“Why?” Aaron asked.

“I would like to say that this is a figment of my imagination,” Fleming illuminated in a low voice, “but I feel that we have more than just the enemy at the gates to worry about here.”

“Crooked cops?!” Lucchini hissed, catching the hint first. “Are you sure?!”

“Never hurts to check and it has happened in the past. For security reasons, me, Phyllis, and the aforementioned operative have been doing this alone, scouring background checks, testimonies, records, everything. So far nothing out of the ordinary.” Fleming defended without hesitation.

All the while, Aaron stood behind the witches, thinking away. *Enemies from without and within. Oh Aaron what did you get yourself and your friends into?* “Still,” he suddenly said, interjecting a touch rudely, “I feel that you should keep doing it. If there are snakes in the grass, its only a matter of time before they slip up. Speaking of time, I feel that we should get to finding that lodging.”

“Understandable.” Fleming replied, summarily terminating the meeting with that one word. “Have a spot in mind?”

Aaron smiled and answered, “That I do chief inspector. I do indeed.”
“You sure this is wise?” Lucchini asked, this time riding in the side car of the motorcycle and looking up at Aaron. “I mean, this is out of the blue and you’re taking an awfully big risk by involving her.”

Aaron rounded the corner and saw an empty spot along the side of the road to park. “I know Francesca, believe me, I’m aware of the risk, but if we’re dealing with the English iteration of the Italian Mafia, the only commodity that matters now is not how many people you have, or how much money you can throw at them, nor what kind of weapons you can equip them with, but how many people you have that you can trust, and right now, Domino is the only one I trust to keep us safe while we do this.” he explained while coming to a stop and allowing Shirley to get off the back first before he dismounted himself.

Yeager stretched her legs and arms, looking like she was doing a workout in the middle of the sidewalk in front of Lucretia’s flat. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t care where we stay as long as I get a shower. That office of his made me feel dirty just by being in it.”

“Be sure to ask first.” Lucchini reminded her friend with a slight finger wag. “We may be friends of hers, but we’re the guests.”

“Amen.” Aaron intoned as he looked up at his lover’s apartment, a literal definition of a hole in the wall type dwelling, painted white with curtained windows one on either side. Never was much to look at, but the outside doesn’t matter as much as the inside. He shifted a tad, the service side arm, a Webley Mk VI revolver, a brutish top breaker that fired .455 cartridges feeling uncomfortable in even his large front pockets. Powerful gun. Completely capable of knocking you on your ass if you don’t set your feet right or breaking your wrist if you try and fire it one handed. Divale reached down and picked up a small pebble from the sidewalk with his right hand. After placing it between the tips of his middle and thumb, he snapped his fingers, sending the stone hurtling at the left hand window pane. It struck true with a sharp tack sound. After a few seconds, the curtain parted revealing the inquiring face of Lucretia Domino. Aaron waved and both Shirley and Lucchini saw first puzzlement and then joy spread over Lucretia’s face and her twinkling green eyes. Quick as a flash, her head disappeared and the door opened, the woman running out on to the sidewalk and into the outstretched arms of her man. Aaron took her by the pelvis and gently lifted her up into the air lest he mar her doctors uniform, pirouetting in place.

“Aaron!” Domino yelped, as she wrapped her arms around his head. “Sai che odio te altezze bastardo (You know I hate heights you bastard)!”

Divale graciously lowered her down and kissed her fully on the lips. When he was done, he sheepishly asked, “Amami ancora (Still love me)?”

“Sempre e per sempre. Sei fortunato che sono appena tornato dall’inventario del quartier generale, altrimenti mi avresti beccato mentre ero sotto la doccia (Forever and always. You’re lucky I just got back from doing inventory at the HQ or else you would’ve caught me in while I was in the shower).” Domino answered with a smile, giving him a soft slap on the side of his face with her right hand. She turned and looked at Shirley and Francesca and cocked an eyebrow. “Più ospiti (More guests)?”

“Ospiti e inquilini per un po’ di tempo (Guests and lodgers for a bit of time).” Aaron reluctantly replied, sucking in his teeth. “Me incluso (Myself included).”

The happiness that emanated from Domino soon became unease. “Quello che è successo (What happened)?” she queried with concern.
“Lunga storia (Long story).” Aaron admitted. “Uno che ti dirò quando entreremo (One that I’ll tell you when we get inside).” Realizing the urgency in his voice, Lucretia led everyone into her flat and closed the door behind them.

Shirley whipped off her shoes and placed her uniform jacket on a peg before asking, “Do you mind if I take a shower Doctor Domino?”

“Of course.” Lucretia answered. “Up the stairs and it’s the first door on the left.”

“The only door on the left.” Aaron quipped. “And try to be quick about it. The hot water doesn’t last very long if I remember right.”

“Posso solo immaginare come lo sai (Can only imagine how you know that).” Lucchini playfully mocked as she walked into the living room, sans shoes and sat on the sofa, nearly disappearing into the cushions. Letting that sly comment go without a witty comeback of his own, Aaron slightly gestured with his head towards the kitchen and Lucretia nodded, taking him by the right hand and leading his there.

“Potrebbe dover parlare in toni più ovattati considerando che ora ci sono tre persone che parlano italiano (May have to speak in more hushed tones considering that there are now three people here who can speak Italian).” Aaron advised.

“Che cosa è successo ad Aaron? Ho sentito che c’era un attacco, ma i Neuroi sono stati distrutti e nessuno si è fatto male (What happened Aaron? I heard that there was an attack, but the Neuroi got destroyed and no one got hurt).” Domino asked.

“Ufficialmente no (Officially no),” Divale clarified, “ma qualcuno lo ha quasi fatto. Uno degli Striker di Shirley ha funzionato male dopo aver apportato alcune modifiche e Lucchini li ha rotti e ha cercato di coprirlo, il tutto senza dirlo al comandante. Se non fosse stato per lei a sollevare il suo scudo in tempo, il Capitano Yeager sarebbe stato in una scatola di pino invece di questo appartamento. Inutile dire che ci siamo arruolati, ma fortunatamente il comandante Wilcke ci ha dato un'uscita per trovare la strada di casa. Stiamo facendo un servizio alla comunità a Scotland Yard. (but someone very nearly did. One of Shirley’s Strikers malfunctioned after I did some modifications and Lucchini broke them and tried to cover it up, all without telling the commander. If it wasn’t for her raising her shield up in time, Captain Yeager would be in a pine box instead of this flat. Needless to say, we got grounded, but thankfully Commander Wilcke gave us an out to find our way back home. We’re doing community service at Scotland Yard).”

“Che cosa (What)!” Lucretia gasped, backing away from him and unwilling to believe what she just heard come out of his mouth, old painful memories coming back. “Sei pazzo?! I poliziotti sono stati uccisi quasi ogni giorno e voi tre siete volontari ?! E tutti voi siete qui e mi state preparando per-”

Aaron closed the gap between them with half a step and looked into her eyes after taking off his glasses. “Lulu, ascoltami (Lulu, listen to me).” he pleaded, using his pet name for her and taking her hands into his, trying to assuage her fears. “Non sarei venuto qui se non pensassi per un secondo che non potrei proteggerti se accadesse il peggio a me o a loro. Pensi di essere spaventato? Potrei non sembrare, ma sono più spaventato di chiunque altro in questo posto perché ti sto coinvolgendo, ma in questo momento abbiamo bisogno di qualcuno di cui possiamo fidarci. Posso fidarmi di te (I would not have come here if I didn’t think for a second that I couldn’t protect you if the worst happened to me or them. You think you’re scared? I may not look it, but I’m more scared than anyone in this place because I’m involving you, but right now we need someone we can trust. Can I trust you)?”

Lucretia swallowed deeply and nodded, looking into Aaron’s swirling orbs with her own. He
embraced her and held her tight and close. “Non ti succederà più niente. Quello che è successo a febbraio non tornerà a perseguitarli. Lo giuro su Dio (Nothing is going to happen to you again. What happened in February will not come back to haunt you. I swear this to God).”

“Ti credo (I believe you).” Lucretia sincerely said with a weak smile. Aaron kissed her on the forehead and withdrew away from her.

“Lucchini!” he called out as he walked into the living room. “Can you dial the station’s number and hand me the telephone please?”

“Once I get free from this monster sure.” Francesca grunted as she attempted to get out of the sofa’s clutches. With a mighty push, she flopped out onto the floor and got up, dusting herself off. Damn thing is like quicksand. She spied the rotary phone on a nearby coffee table and picked up the receiver, dialing 1212. Once she got dial tone, Lucchini handed it off to Aaron who nodded in thanks.

“London Metropolitan Police.” an operator’s voice briskly announced. “Is this an emergency or a tip?”

“This is Officer Divale speaking. I need to get connected to a one Phyllis please.” Aaron said.

“One moment please.” the operator informed. Aaron waited as the switchboard plugs got rearranged and the signal was sent through.

“Phyllis Moneypenny.” the old woman’s voice scratched over the speaker, making Aaron wince.

“Hello Phyllis, this is Officer Divale speaking. I need to talk to Chief Inspector Fleming please.” Aaron answered.

“Excellent timing Officer Divale, he’s right next to me.” Phyllis stated with pride.

A second passed before Fleming voice came on. “Is this line secure?” he asked in a demanding tone.

“It is secured sir and we have secure lodging as well.” Aaron replied without hesitation.

“Excellent work. I managed to get in contact with my man in the field and all is set to arrange a meeting. You’ll find him at Piccadilly Circus in a bar called The Royale, which doubles as a get together and hideaway for our undercover detectives. The bartenders are undercover officers that I’ve personally vetted. Ask for the White Room and they’ll direct you to it. Knock on the door and tell the attendant, another vetted undercover officer, that you wish to go to the Cormorant Suite. From that point, it’s all in your hands. And Officer Divale?”

“Yes sir?” Aaron asked.

“Be sure to suggest to your companions that they should consider wearing more attire.” Fleming warned. “The locals might get the wrong impression.”

“Black is not your color.” Shirley told Lucchini as they walked next to Aaron who decided to leave the bike over at Domino’s rather than drive it. Don’t know why he did that. Piccadilly Circus was several blocks away. Could’ve saved ourselves a good twenty minutes.

“Oh yeah?” Francesca retorted, gesturing at Yeager’s attire. “Least mine isn’t as gaudy as that purple.”
“Instead of bantering, you both should be thankful that you have them at all.” Aaron stated, slightly annoyed and trying to get the two to stop. In line with the chief inspector’s advice, he had Lucretia give the witches some of her old one piece dresses that she planned to donate to the local thrift stores. Since Shirley and Lucretia were roughly the same height, finding a match for her was easy, though the color, a plum purple, looked terrible on her. Moreover, the difference in bust size necessitated him doing some quick alterations. Ever the gentleman, he had Domino ask her rather than him. Lucchini’s predicament was in height, but thankfully Domino had kept her old prom dress that she wore at her first ever school dance. The black was still dark as pitch, but Shirley was right in that it didn’t look good on her, giving her complexion a shadow that made her normally tanned complexion look unhealthy.

“I still don’t understand why we have to wear these.” Lucchini remarked, smoothing out the skirt for the hundredth time. “We walk around half naked all the time anyway and no one really bats an eye anymore.”

“You’ll understand when we round this corner.” Aaron explained, slowing up as the turn came into view. He stopped and turned to face them both. “Stay close to me and don’t eyeball anyone you see. Got it?”

Both of them nodded, but Shirley asked, “Why not?”

“Follow me and be prepared to find out.” Aaron stated. With that, he advanced into Piccadilly Circus, Lucchini on his left and Yeager on the right. As the trio moved towards their intended destination, Shirley and Francesca found themselves in a large city square with minimal traffic on the road, a circular cul de sac that really wasn’t for it split into very narrow side alleyways, but an overabundance of foot traffic. There were people everywhere going into any number of pawn shops, pubs, grocery stores, nearby motels, and retail outlets, all made from brick with the occasional chimney puffing away. The newsboys called out their extras and drew large crowds as folks threw in their pennies and took a paper, eager to read up on the news. While seemingly normal, the duo started to notice that the ration of men to women was very much skewed in favor of the latter, ladies who wore short dresses that had more ruffles and wrinkles than one would expect. Everyone one of them had makeup on, red lipstick, rouge on the cheeks, and enough foundation that one could scrape it off with a knife and claim to some unawares person that it was peanut butter. They all walked along the sidewalks in pairs or triples, a gait that was made to draw attention to their overly exposed legs. Every so often, a serviceman would come out of one of the shops and lean against the walls of the establishment and be mobbed by the ladies, like rats racing to a scrap of bread that was dropped down a sewer grate. The whole spectacle made Shirley sick to her stomach while Lucchini just swallowed deep and moved in closer to Aaron, clearly uncomfortable. “Welcome to Piccadilly Circus ladies.” Aaron announced softly as he searched for The Royale. “You’ll never find a more wretched hive of depravity and debauchery this side of the Thames.” Suddenly, their objective came into view, a red brick building just like the rest of the establishments that dotted the area, but this one was the only one with a covered roof before one got to the door that extended into the sidewalk. The Piccadilly Commandos seemed to avoid the place like the plague, giving it a wide berth, some even walking into the road itself.

Nodding in the direction of the bar, all three ventured into the circus, making a beeline for the place. Some of the locals uttered whistles and a few catcalls in the direction of the witches at Aaron’s side, but Shirley and Francesca weathered it well, keeping calm and letting it all slide. Divale for his part kept his head on a swivel, noting the location of all the men in uniform that ogled his companions and the call girls that tried to pry him away. His intense stare shut some of them up on the spot while others just silently got the message and walked the other way. Fucking pigs. Every last one of them. Women should be treated like women not objects. Find someone else to lust after you degenerates. After a very tense three minutes, they got under the awning of The Royale and he saw a man near
the door, standing in front of a sign that read in big black lettering Members Only. “Hey handsome.” a voice called from behind him. Regarding speaker, Divale turned and came face to face with a woman in her thirties, one that wore a short pink dress with white hems on the bottom and less makeup than your average lady of the night. She twirled her short back hair with her left index and middle fingers, a color that was clearly the result of being dyed, and strutted towards him, pursing her shiny lipsticked lips. “The one on your left seems a bit young for you.” she continued, gesturing to Lucchini. “Why not settle for a real woman? One that can handle you better?”

Aaron cocked his eyebrow and gave a sly grin. “I don’t know. Judging by the amount of gray I see, I think I’d rather see darker drapes than what you’ve got.”

The woman’s face grew red and she hissed, “Well I never!” before turning around and stomping away in a huff. Content that he did good, he turned around and saw Shirley and Lucchini with their hands near their mouths and the gentleman near the sign shaking his head and looking away at such a vitriolic verbal beat down.

“God damn Aaron.” Francesca breathed as he walked up to them. “And I thought the worst you ever said came at Perrine’s expense when you first met her.”

“What can I say, I never miss an opportunity.” Aaron quipped with a shrug. He then looked at the bouncer, a tall man in his mid thirties who looked like he was good with his hands, a name tag that said Timothy on it pinned to the left side of his chest. “We good to go in?”

“Papers please.” the door man requested, holding out his right hand. One by one, the three produced their identifications and handed them over, Timothy going so far as to take them out of their wallet windows and turning them over in his hands before placing them back in with care. “You all check out.” he declared, handing Shirley her wallet. “The gambling hall is to the left and the bar is to the right. Two drink minimum per hour unless you’re finished for the day. Any guff, you’re out. Enjoy your stay and have a pleasant day.” He then graciously opened the door and allowed all three to cross the threshold. Inside, the main greeting area was empty save for two long wood coat racks with cubby holes above the hangers, like the ones in the Admiral Benbow. Some rather shabby looking jackets and overcoats hung on the pegs, roughly seven in all. The carpet was a vivid red that led from there to a fork in the hallway further down, the sounds of slot machine arms being pulled and the cycling of the reels emanating from the left hand side.

Seeking to pass the time as they walked Shirley brought up, “Have you ever had dealings with women like that Aaron?”

“Not by choice.” Aaron answered without looking back. “Only once, though it was purely coincidental.”

“How do you figure that?” Lucchini asked, taking a small interest in the conversation.

“It was at and around Saint Nazaire, shortly after the battle of Bordeaux in the early parts of ‘43. I found myself up and around that area trying to gather intelligence on where the enemy was looking to strike next, disguised as a French officer. Whole road was clogged with refugees all looking to get to the major ports up north in whatever could get them there, looks of fear and desperation in their eyes. Some of them came up to me, asking if they knew so and so and if they were alright. Told them I couldn’t say due to the nature of my responsibilities. Many got heated at that, but they understood and wished me and mine luck. A few miles down, I see this opened top car on the side of the road, open engine hood smoking hot. I see around four heads, all women and dressed like those outside here. One of them saw me approach in the rearview mirror and hopped out, running towards me like a sprinter, waving her arms high in the air. It was at that point that I knew what these women were and that realization was further solidified when the lady, a brunette with teacups for a chest in a
red dress with a black sash came close enough for me to smell her.” Aaron explained. He paused and added with emphasis, “You can always tell a woman from a whore by the way they smell. No matter how much perfume they spray on, you can’t mask the odor of cologne nor the scent of a man unless you have a shower. Trust me. She pleads with me, saying that they need to get to Pornichet to see a friend that could get them to safety, but the car had a problem and needed repairs. Hands clasped tighter than a priest’s while giving an exorcism, she practically gets on her knees begging me to help them. All the while this is going on, I say to myself, ‘This has got to be the most pitiful scam in the entire sad pitiful history of prostitution’ but I went with it, walked over, and gave the engine a look see. Turned out that the radiator had cracked. Using a bit of know how, I fixed the leak, but now the problem was that there was no water. It was at that point that one of the ladies in the car suggested pissing in it instead.”

“Gross.” Lucchini spat out, disgust written all over her face.

“I didn’t have to go, so I found an empty oil can, ripped off the bottom and part of the top with the aid of a knife, and created a makeshift funnel, placing it over the radiator hole.” Aaron went on.

“Three of the ladies actually got out of the car and proceeded to empty their bladders, with me taking off my coat and using it as a blind to allow them some privacy. When that was all over, I screwed the cap back on and threw the soiled oil can as far as I could away. I was about to leave them when the brunette asks me to drive them to Pornichet. At first, I thought about politely declining, but then I realized that Pornichet was very close to Guerande, a town where I knew from preliminary reports was the new HQ for the Twenty Fifth Division who was tasked with setting up a defense along the Loire. So I agreed and drove them up the road west to Pornichet. Decided to go slow for I didn’t know how bad the engine got cooked before I got there. Didn’t want to seize a piston or crack the block. No less than three minutes into the trip, the brunette, who was sitting in the passenger seat, leaned over, bypassing the gear box, unzipped my pants, and proceeded to, how should I say, display her gratitude.”

“And you didn’t get into an accident with that much of a distraction?” Shirley asked with a cocked eyebrow.

Always cool under pressure. “No and when we finally got to Pornichet, one of the ladies in the back hands me a few hundred francs. I politely wave it away saying, and I quote, ‘It’s perfectly fine ma’am for your friend already got my tip.” Aaron finished. Yeager laughed heartily while Lucchini chuckled in an uncomfortable way. It was then that they rounded the corner and walked into a small room with the same colored carpeting that was dimly lit by a series of electric chandeliers hanging from a ceiling of white tile. The wallpaper was white as well with a raised floral pattern in eggshell, the lighting truly bringing out the shapes of roses and tulips. Two seater tables were spread out in three lines of four, all empty and leading to the bar itself on the far wall, a fully stocked massive wooden construct manned by two bartenders who were polishing a rack of rocks glasses. They both looked up at the same time, one of them taking the glasses and putting them under the bar while the other moved to the center, patiently waiting for them to arrive.

“Afternoon folks.” the bartender greeted. “I’m Pierce and this is my partner Daniel. How may we serve you today?”

Aaron leaned in on the wood, reaching inside his uniform front and pulling out his badge, Lucchini and Shirely doing the same. “We would like to go to the White Room please.” he said, tucking it back into his pocket.

Taking the hint, Pierce gestured behind them to a small narrow hallway that ran counter to the main drag. “Go down the hall to the only white door you’ll see. Can’t miss it. Have a pleasant day.”
“Thank you.” Aaron replied and walked away. Following a small ways behind him, Francesca turned around just in time to see Shirley eye the bartender they’d just spoken to a little too much for it to be a polite farewell courtesy. Lucchini tapped her on the shoulder and smiled broadly, clicking her tongue.

“Are you serious?” Shirley uttered in a low voice as they caught up to Aaron. “No way in hell! The man’s so old, he could be my father!”

“Never underestimate the allure of an older partner.” Aaron suddenly commented. “Take me and Lucretia for instance. She may not look it, but my madonna is twenty seven.”

“Whoa there!” Lucchini stated, clearly taken aback at such a proclamation. “Twenty seven?!” Aaron turned and nodded. Uttering a low whistle, Francesca added with wonder, “She looks a lot younger than that.”

“Well, I help in that.” Aaron quipped with a smile, at the while searching for the white door. The corridor was small, so much so that had he wished to walk down with his arms outstretched, Divale could touch the white floral patterned wallpaper with the palms of his hands. Doors lined either side, all either natural wood brown or green. Didn’t take long to find it as they traversed the path, the paint job making the portal stick out like a sore thumb. Striding up to it with confidence, Divale rapped his knuckles in the center, but instead of the knocking of wood, it was the sound of bonging metal that reached his ears, making him consciously back away on instinct. Well that’s new. Shortly after making his presence felt the white door opened from the bottom, rising up to reveal the inside of an elevator, populated by an attendant who bowed respectfully.

“Name’s Rodger. Which floor my friends?” he asked as the three all squeezed into the small lift.

“The Cormorant Suite please Rodger.” Aaron answered, adjusting his position so that he didn’t crowd the rest of the occupants. He watched Rodger’s right index finger waver over a host of buttons on a panel near the the left side of the door and then hover over the emergency stop. Rodger pressed the button and the rear of the elevator opened up, surprising all inside save for the attendant who chortled that deep throaty English laugh that Aaron had heard so often.

“Enjoy and have a pleasant day.” Rodger stated with a nod. Aaron returned it and together with the rest of the group, turned and walked into the Cormorant Suite. The room was darker than the bar, all hardwood flooring and illuminated by a sole electric chandelier which dangled over the bar area, a wooden circular island surrounded by a host of nine metal swivel stools, a space where the tenth would be, which served as the way for the bartender to enter his station. Minding the bar was an older gentleman, easily in his seventies with hazel eyes and an upright posture, standing slightly askew of his sole customer, the back turned. He whispered some words to his charge and the figure swiveled in the stool, revolving around to face the new arrivals, slouching heavily with the hands on the top of his thighs. The figure belonged to a man in his early forties, face etched with small wrinkles along the laugh lines and forehead. His hair was a dark brown, an almost indistinguishable comma of a lock just hanging over the right eye. Steel gray orbs looked over them all as Aaron and company approached, a vacant thousand yard stare that felt like it was anything but. The top of the right hand carried a nasty scar, a puncture wound from some sort of stabbing weapon most likely. Dressed in a long brown trench coat with splashes of dried mud along the bottom hem lines and black boots that were in great need of polishing, he looked for all the world like some down and out drunk, but Divale could see that the fellow used his features to hide the fact that underneath that carefully crafted persona was a hardened soul, one which made him uneasy. The eyes look like mine after a battle, the look of having witnessed unspeakable acts evident. Man’s got power lurking within that coat judging by the shoulders. Hands are not far from where a concealed firearm would be. He doesn’t trust us. Feeling’s mutual. Best to play this safe and not make any sudden movements.
“Ian said you lot were young,” the man’s deep voice muttered, nodding up and down as he assessed each on of them and they stopped around four feet in front of him, “but bloody hell. You three are barely out of the cradle and you’re all soldiers!?” He scoffed as he put his hands to his face, rubbing his cheeks and letting his head go back. “Still, if he says that you all can help me, I’ll take what I can get.” Then, he stood up, the height change making Lucchini and Shirley gape in awe. He stood a little over six feet and gone was his slouch, the back ramrod straight.

You hear a phone ringing?
Why? Because I fucking called it! “Name’s Carmichael.” he stated, extending his right hand towards Aaron.

“Aaron.” Divale replied, taking Carmichael’s hand, feeling the calloused fingers and the sure grip that he surmised can turn vise like in a flash. “And these are my fellow squadron members Shirley and Francesca.” he added, gesturing with his head. Carmichael took each of their hands, shaking them gently but firmly in turn, and strolled back up to the bar. The rest of the trio followed suit, with Aaron sitting to Carmichael’s right and the witches all sitting to the right of Aaron.

“Your timing is quite good.” Carmichael remarked as he adjusted himself in his seat. “I was about to get my drink.” He looked over at the bartender and stated simply, “The usual Q” The bartender nodded and went about his business. Aaron watched him make Carmichael’s drink, a liquid refreshment that started with a deep champagne goblet and a hand mixer that he pulled from underneath. Next came two heaping scoops of ice followed by three measures of gin, one measure of vodka, and a half measure of vermouth. All this went into the mixer which the bartender closed and shook for a good fifteen to twenty seconds before putting on the strain and pouring it into the glass. Not quite done yet, he spun his nearby garnish wheel and pulled out a large lemon peel, placing it within the glass and against the right side and gently handed it to Carmichael who nodded in thanks. Done with that order, Q moved down the line. Divale thought about ordering but gestured with his right hand to Shirley and Lucchini. When he did that, Carmichael beamed, “Good show. A young lad like yourself being a gentleman. Someone’s mother raised them right.” Aaron simply smiled, but inwardly he was bittersweet. Something like that.

“If you have it, Kentucky bourbon on the rocks.” Shirley requested. Q nodded and proceeded to make her drink.

“Hopefully he actually gives you ice and not rocks.” Aaron joked. “The man looks like he takes his customer’s orders seriously.”

“Do indeed.” Q commented as he went about pouring two full measures in a rocks glasses. “In all my fifty five years of service, I’ve always gone above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that my charges are satisfied.” He then turned and asked Shirley with no hint of humor, “Do you prefer sandstone or granite?” Yeager’s mouth looked like it was about ready to hit the floor, but Q smiled as he scooped ice in the glass and handed it to her.

Q then turned his attention to Lucchini who was visibly struggling to come up with something to have. “Do you have wines from Italy?” she asked him.

“Sadly no love.” Q answered dejectedly, but his face perked up a tad when he reached under the bar and pulled up a corked bottle of wine with just enough left over for a full glass. “Of course I do. What kind of bar would this be if I didn’t have such wine from one of the best regions we have left to draw from?” he asked playfully as he took a red wine glass from underneath, opened the bottle, and poured justly before handing it to her. The moment it was in her hands, Francesca took a sip and her eyes bugged out. I know this taste!

“Can I see the bottle?!” Lucchini hurriedly asked. Q obliged her and her hands turned the bottle around until the label met her questing gaze. She breathed in deep before announcing in an
astonished tone, “It’s from my parent’s vineyard! My God in heaven!”

“We all learn something new everyday.” Q stated. He regarded Aaron and asked, “And for you sir?”

Feeling a bit adventurous, Divale looked over at Carmichael’s beverage of choice and pointed at it. “I’ll have exactly what he got.” he said.

As Q went about making the drink, Carmichael clapped softly. “Finally, someone who has a bit of daring when it come to having a strong drink. Hopefully you can handle the Vesper lad, for she’s a rough one.”

Aaron waited until Q was done, had the drink in his hand, and conducted his ritual before replying, “Rough or smooth, I’ve handled them all. Bring it on.” He then took a good swallow and let it wash down. “Damn that’s good.” he uttered, tilting the glass this way and that. “Definitely something you’d have as an after dinner aperitif for sure.”

“Or something that gets you through a rough day.” Carmichael added, taking a sip from his own Vesper. “So despite the chief inspector telling you how cocked up the situation is, you all still wanted to be a part of it eh?”

“It was eye opening for sure,” Shirley piped up, taking a sip from her bourbon before continuing, “but you all needed the help badly. We may only be in this to get back into bed with the commander, yet we won’t stand for good people suffering.”

“Well I can tell you that I, and every bobby that walks in here on a daily basis, give you our thanks.” Carmichael intoned, giving her an approving nod.

“Here-here!” Q chimed.

“So how much longer before you get your current assignment finished?” Lucchini inquired, swirling the wine in her glass before taking a drink.

“Ah, he told you that too did he?” Carmichael queried. “About two weeks ago, there was a jail break north of the city, around the area of Luton, and fifteen inmates managed to get out.”

“How did that happen?” Aaron asked.

“We’re still trying to figure that out, but what we do know is that a make shift bomb was used. Our boys at the lab concluded that it contained a great deal of ammonia and naphthalene, all shoved into a pipe and set off with a delay fuse, like the kind you find on military grade bombs. Caught security completely off guard, but they managed to get the rest of the inmates under control before more escaped. I’ve been systematically hunting them down. Some came back quietly, most didn’t.” Carmichael answered. He paused as he took another drink and sighed. “The last one I dealt with was today. Bugger took a woman and an infant child hostage, holding them at gun point at a little space out on the roof of an office building in Westminster before I got to him. I tried to talk him down, but he wouldn’t listen, demanding that he be pardoned for his crimes that he swore up and down that he didn’t commit. Managed to get the drop on him when the situation started to turn badly and plugged him good with my Webley twice. Unfortunately, he flailed his arms out to try to catch his soon to be dead body from falling off the roof, and he snatched the baby from the woman’s arms as he went over the side. Really bad mess.”

No one spoke as they all played the scenario in their heads, wondering what it must’ve felt like to feel helpless as a child was sent to it’s death by the hands of an escaped convict. “Was he the last one?” Lucchini hesitantly ventured, reluctant to break the moment of silence.
“No.” Carmichael flatly responded. “There is still one more, a sadistic killer by the name of Alec Buchanon. Man is a nutter and a psychopath, convicted of twenty nine counts of kidnapping, raping, strangling, mutilating, and masticating sixteen women and thirteen men over the course of twenty years. Though he’s an old man, he’s still a menace, and I intend to put his hat in the ground.”

“But what about bringing him back alive to serve his sentence?” Shirley pointed out, puzzled as to why a cop would flagrantly disregard the law. “Regardless of what he’s done, under the law, your responsibility is to—”

“Shove my responsibilities.” Carmichael rudely interrupted. “If the chief inspector wants to fire me, I’ll thank him for it. Men get a second chance, monsters like him get put down.” He leaned over, eyeing Yeager. “As your superior in this, I want to know right now if we have a problem with that.” Shirley turned away and continued to drink in silence, stewing up a storm. “That’s what I thought you’d say.” he concluded. “After that mess gets cleaned up, we’ll proceed with Operation Thunderball, the complete and utter eradication of the O’Bannon Gang.”

At the mention of the name of the primary target, Aaron coughed in his drink, the alcohol going up his nose and stinging his nasal cavities. He sniffled it back down his throat and winced as it burned all the way down, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. “Did you just say the O’Bannon Gang?” he asked with emphasis, looking directly into the eyes of Carmichael as he set his Vesper down.

Carmichael narrowed his gaze and in a hushed tone asked, “You know of the O’Bannon’s?”

Aaron swished his tongue in his mouth and moved his pursed lips in and out. “Let’s just say that since once of their members did something to someone I deeply care about, I’ve been itching for some well deserved payback.”

Nodding in understanding and wishing to not delve too deeply into the subject, Carmichael pressed, “That still technically doesn’t answer my question.”

“What would you say if I told you that the man in front of you had access to some of the most sensitive records you could ever imagine due to the conditions of his enlistment?” Aaron inquired.

Divale watched as Carmichael’s eyes lit up like fireworks going off in the night sky. “I would tell that man that either A) He’s a lying sack of shit that needs gets to get punched square in the mush or B) If he can possibly get access again.” he deduced. “I’m going to go on a limb and say the latter.”

Wise choice. “I can’t get access again unfortunately, but I can tell you what I saw.” Aaron admitted.

“You can remember all that? Perfectly?” Carmichael skeptically asked.

“He has the best memory of anyone that I’ve ever seen.” Lucchini stated from the end of the row. “If anyone can do it with close to one hundred percent accuracy, it’s Aaron.”

“And if memory does serve me right,” Divale recollected, “the O’Bannon’s numbers are right in the neighborhood of one hundred and thirty or so from when I was there.”

“It’s since dropped to one hundred and twenty five, but go on.” Carmichael politely interjected.

“In addition, they have made, pardon the expression, an absolute killing when it comes to pinching military hardware and supplies, smuggling them past inspection commissions, and selling them wholesale on the black market in Italy, Spain, and the United States. To that end, taking the O’Bannon’s on with so few boots on the ground is going to require some serious firepower. I have seen officers with Enfield’s and 87’s, but do you have more in the back?” Aaron went on, downing
the rest of his drink.

“From some recent busts we have managed to secure some of the weapons in question. Not much mind you, but it will even the odds until we find another cache. I’ll take you to the locker if you want right now.” Carmichael replied, becoming more and more impressed. “Can you recollect names, places, faces, anything really substantial? Any hard data?”

“Well,” Aaron acknowledged, squirming in his stool, “there’s nothing truly rock hard about the data from the evidence I managed to see. In fact, it’s pretty limp to say the least. Most of it was interrogation and eyewitness reports and you and I both know how reliable those are.”

“Better than nothing and they might just point us in the right direction.” Shirley suggested.

“Speaking of point.” Aaron brought up, slowly getting of his stool, “where’s the nearest loo?” Carmichael pointed to a door on the right side of the room and Aaron pantomimed tipping a hat in thanks. His boots made a deep clopping as she strode across the hardwood floor, but they didn’t didn’t reach his ears for the noise in his mind overrode such things. A bright light and Lucretia starts to back away into a corner, turning her head to the right. ‘Aaron please sit back down.’ she pleaded softly as to not alert the guards outside the steel door of the interrogation room. ‘It’s just a trick of the light.’ Domino’s figures and features become more detailed as an unseen body gets closer, eyes glued to her face, sounds of a concerned heart beating rapidly. Steps can be heard on the black and white checkered tiled floor, measured and shallow to avoid detection, clear evidence of being trained for many years in such matters. Again, Lucretia opened her mouth, but nothing came out as a left hand took her by the chin with the gentleness of a mother picking up her child from its crib, and turned her head to the left. There was no resistance from her, for she knew it was futile at that point. In the light, one made from an overhead lamp, one could clearly make out a massive bruise on the right side of Domino’s face, deep purple and blue around the edges, the skin puffed up, making the foundation she used to try to cover it up crack like egg shells. Part of the trauma spread to her eye, the edge closest to the cheek blood red from busted capillaries. It didn’t take much of an imagination to know what happened, or which part of the injury belongs to which finger. ‘My God.’ a voice murmurs in shock. The right hand lets her go and balls into a fist, the knuckles cracking loudly. Senses detect a jaw clenching and an increased heart rate, the tell tale byproducts of a temper about ready to overwhelm the levees that were made to stem it’s destructive potential. ‘Whoever did this to you is going to pay dearly. I can promise you that’

The door to the loo closed behind him, taking him back to the here and now. Inside the restroom were three sinks lined up against the left side of the wall, each with a mirror, a bar of soap, and a single towel hanging from a brass hook. Across the white tiled floor, one that was squeaky clean and smelled faintly of bleach, were a pair of urinals and a wooden stall. A duo of overhead lights inlayed into the white tiled ceiling served as the only sources of illumination. Aaron shook his head as he ran his hands through his hair, walking to the center sink. Don’t have to go at all. Just needed to get a moment to relax, to collect my thoughts. He placed his hands on either side of the porcelain sink and looked up into his spectacled eyes, ones that blinked only once as they regarded the reflection. So here’s the situation. Me, Shirley, Lucchini, and now Domino are neck deep in some very hot water, caught between the triad of cops, crooks, and Carmichael. A wise man in this situation would say to keep your friends close and your enemies closer, but fuck him. I’ll listen to my gut, one that’s screaming at me to keep your enemies close and your friends closer. I trust all three implicitly, but with everyone else, Carmichael included, the policy is now D.T.A. Don’t Trust Anyone. Be alert Aaron. Don’t make the same mistake that cost you the life of a dear friend in Austria.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Buchanon is found and killed, but his death raises more questions than answers as Aaron and his friends begin operations against the O’Bannon Gang. Later that evening, the patriarch of the enemy and his daughter receive an unexpected visitor who wishes to rearrange a few things, things that may force one of the two to make some hard choices.

Chapter XXX: Dredging The Waters

I had the mark in my sights, right in front of me. It could’ve been so easy to end it all right then and there with me shoving my fist into that bastard’s chest and ripping his corrupt heart out as easily as a child would pluck the wings off a fly, but I didn’t do it. Leclrec was furious, but when I told him why, he instantly understood that it was the right call. You see, just because you kill the queen bee, it doesn’t mean the rest of the hive dies with her. All it will do is create utter chaos which does far more harm than good. It’s far better to immerse yourself in their environment, to sift through the muck, and try to find out just exactly who’s in and who’s out. From there you know your enemy, and if you know your enemy, things get much easier to take care of.

Diary Entry October 19th 1943

Lucretia opened her eyes slowly as the faintest light from the morning sun shone through the shutters, it’s rays falling upon her face and the upper parts of her exposed chest. She breathed in the morning and sighed comfortably, feeling the warmth of the day on her skin mingling with the coolness of the sheets that covered the rest of her naked frame. Looking down near the ends of her ribcage, a right arm that wasn’t her own was looped over it, scars looking like off white tattoos. With her right hand, she placed her palm over the thick wrist and held it, feeling the furnace like heat emanating from it. Such warmth can only come from a pure heart, the heart of someone who deeply loves and cares. Suddenly, the bed creaks from behind her as the rest of Aaron slid closer to her, his chest pressing against her back. The feeling of another hand, a left, through her dark brown hair made her smile as Divale ran his fingers through it. “Buongiorno amore mio (Morning my love),” he cooed.

“È sempre un buon giorno con te in giro (It’s always a good morning with you around).” Domino replied sincerely. She felt his left hand go from the back of her head to the nape of the neck, moving her hair away. A second passes before she feels his lips against her flesh on her sweet spot, the sensation making her hike her shoulders up and scrunch her neck down like a turtle. “Aaron,” she moaned, “smettila. Sai cosa mi fa (stop that You know what that does to me).”

Aaron took Domino by the tip of her left shoulder and flipped her on her back gently, seeing her beautiful smile and green eyes look up into his. “Perché pensi che lo faccia (Why do you think I do it)?” he asked with a mischievous grin of his own.
Lucretia’s eyes flashed as she began to understand. They moved towards the closed door to the living room where Shirley and Lucchini made their bedroom, sleeping on the couch and floor respectively. “Davvero? Con loro nella stanza accanto (Really? With them in the next room)?” she queried, faking scandal like astonishment.

Aaron tapped the pillow she was lying on with his left hand and suggested, “Basta usare il cuscino. È per questo che è giusto (Just use the pillow. That’s what it’s for right)?”

Domino gave him a deep kiss that he returned with a smoldering passion. “Sei così cattivo (You are so naughty).” she whispered as she felt his lips on the side of neck now, moving slowly down.

“Imparo dai migliori (I learn from the best).” Aaron replied in a low voice as he took his tongue and licked a path from where her jugular would be all the way back to her lips with the tip. He was about to move his body on top of hers when they both heard a knock at the door.

“You two decent in there?” the voice of Lucchini asked through the thin wood. Aaron hung his head dejectedly, inches away from Lucretia’s face, and sighed. Domino gave him a reassuring kiss on the forehead as if to say, ‘Next time tiger’ and he flipped onto his back, making sure that the sheets were bunched up near his groin lest the witches saw what he felt like this morning.

“It’s open.” Aaron called out, waiting until Domino covered herself up. The door opened and in popped Lucchini and Shirley in their white T-shirts and panties, with Francesca holding a covered serving tray.

“Hope we didn’t disturb you.” Shirley said with a sly wink. “And I hope neither of you mind that we brought a few friends.”

As if it was the signal to spring the trap, Lucchini took off the top to the tray, revealing eight eggs benedict with ham and topped with hollandaise sauce, four forks on a stack of four napkins on the side. “For ease of memory, they’re all called Benny.” she stated with a smirk.

Though the joke was as dry as an overdone crouton, both Aaron and Lucretia laughed. “You two honestly shouldn’t have.” Domino scolded as the witches sat down at the foot of the bed.

“We know, but Shirley and I wanted to thank you for taking us in. Least we could do given the circumstances.” Francesca explained while taking a fork in her hand.

“Now let’s dig in. I’m starving.” Shirley ordered, staking her claim on one of the benedicts by stabbing it with her fork. The quartet began to eat happily, the meal hitting the spot. “So why are you two in your birthday suits?” Yeager later asked with a raised eyebrow and a mouthful of dressed egg.

“Meh.” Aaron muttered with a shrug. “Force of habit for me. Never could sleep with clothes on because they made me feel uncomfortable.” He paused and pointed his hollandaise stained fork at Shirley. “Not a word to Erica.”

“Even in Russia during that winter when you got there?!” Lucchini asked in shock. When Divale nodded she shook her head. “So that just leaves you.” Francesca commented, regarding Lucretia.

“He’s warm.” Domino simply answered, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “You might now have noticed but I didn’t leave the heat on in the room. Had I left it on and wore a nighty, I would’ve broiled to death.”

So that’s why it felt a bit chilly in here when we walked in. “Fair enough.” Francesca said, sopping up some of the sauce with a muffin before folding it between her fingers and popping it in her mouth.
That went better and less bawdy than I thought. Aaron took another slice of egg and was about put it in his mouth when he noticed that Shirley was looking at the phone right next to him, the one that was in the living room last night but had relocated in case Fleming called. “You alright there captain?” he asked.

Shirley’s blue eyes flicked back to his and she breathed in deep. “Is it bad that I don’t want that bastard to find him?” she inquired right back.

Understanding what she meant, Aaron nodded. “Can’t say I blame you after that little spat you two had.” he recollected.

Yeager shook her head. “It’s not just that Aaron.” she explained, putting her fork down and crossing her arms. “He may be a cop, but he certainly doesn’t act like it. I mean, come on now. What kind of lawman ignores the dictates of his office and due process? Granted the man he’s going after had done horrible things, but even a convict has rights. Doesn’t sit with me at all. Has the demeanor of a killer rather than a keeper of the peace. Don’t trust him.”

“I have to agree.” Lucchini added, moving her breakfast to the other side of her mouth as she spoke. “When he looked at us with that stare of his, I felt cold. There was no warmth to them at all. The man’s dead inside, and you can tell from the way he talked and acted that he had this cruelty to him, a ruthlessness. I’m with Shirley here in the sense that I don’t trust him either.”

After hearing their pieces, Aaron gave his. “I don’t trust Carmichael at all. Hell, I don’t even trust him to die properly.” he admitted. He leaned in, extending both his arms towards Shirley and Lucchini and said, “We need to keep the man at arm’s length, regardless of how much faith the chief inspector has in him. We have to look out for each other. So to that end, you two are now in my circle.” Both the witches took his hand and shook it, smiling at being counted as friends. Rudely interrupting the moment, the phone rang and Aaron picked it up with his right hand in flash. “Hello?” he said into the speaker, mimicking Lucchini’s voice perfectly and making Shirley squirm uncomfortably.

“This is Chief Inspector Fleming. Can I speak to Aaron please Francesa?” Fleming asked.

“Well, it’s done.” Aaron energetically replied, copying Lucchini still. He held the phone in his right hand for a few seconds before answering in his own voice, “Aaron here.”

“Carmichael has informed me that he’s found Alec Buchanon’s hideout, courtesy of a tip from a local. He’s in Kimpton, a few miles outside of Luton.” Fleming hurriedly explained. “Says to meet him back at The Royale, Cormorant Suite within the hour to get kitted for the job.”

“Understood chief inspector.” Aaron relayed, giving both Shirley and Lucchini the hand signal for roll out. The witches got the hint and quietly left the room, scampering off to get dressed, Lucchini closing the door behind them. “As an aside,” he continued as Lucretia slunk off bed, stretching her arms as she made her way to the dresser, “he told us last night that he intends to kill rather than apprehend the suspect.”

“Of that I’m well aware of.” Fleming answered. “He doesn’t like Buchanon due to some past encounters with the man. Not surprised in the least really.”

Past encounters? Now that he didn’t tell us. May have to get that sorted out real quick. “Out of curiosity chief inspector, does Carmichael know this number?” Aaron asked, his question making Lucretia turn around with some concern after putting on her white bathrobe.

“Of course.” Fleming illuminated to Aaron’s silent chagrin. “What I know about you three, he
knows, why?”

Which also means that he knows where we might be. Wouldn’t take a genius to track the phone number to the address. “Like I said, just curious. Thank you. Let him know that we’ll be at The Royale within the hour. Have a pleasant day.” Aaron informed. He hung up the phone and put his head in his hands. “Fucking hell.” he mumbled into his digits. A creak from the bed frame made him withdraw his palms and Divale saw Lucretia sit down next to him. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, trying to get him to calm down. It failed to do so, instead adding to Aaron’s ever growing anxiety. This place is no longer safe for her. When we leave, she’ll be all alone. Plan A is shot to shit. Have to go for Plan B. He looked into her concerned eyes and stated with emphasis, “We need to talk.”

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Shirley held the blade of her Bowie knife at the perfect angle so she could get the best look at her hair, one that was now done up in a bun, looking like a giant strawberry in the back of her head. She hated the sight of it, but the bug that Carmichael gave her was too conspicuous, so some sacrifices had to be made. He also gave her a disguise, a white dress with blue hem lines that ran slightly over the knee. Though nice looking, it was tight around the chest and the neck line ran low, and given Shirley’s ample assets, it left nothing to the imagination. Fucker probably got this on purpose. I’m so miffed right now I could kill somebody. “So how did I do with your hair?” Lucchini asked, bringing Shirley out of her thoughts.

“It’s nice Francesca,” Shirley admitted, putting the knife back into the sheath she had strapped to her upper right thigh, “if I wanted to look like I was in my thirties.”

Stung by her friends words, Lucchini put on a cross face. “Well I think it looks nice thank you very much.” she stubbornly retorted.

Yeager let her shoulders sag and nodded. “You okay?” she asked. Francesca looked behind her, eyeing movement behind a large rose bush, where Aaron had set up shop doing some work on a bicycle. She went over the whole scenario that Carmichael came up with in her head, his voice ringing between her ears. The hideout is up the road for about two miles along a winding trail. There’s not a lot of space to hide on the way up so we need to split up in order to get into the best positions to cover the greeter. Aaron and Francesca will be one and tasked with taking him down, and I will be the other, lending support should they miss. Yeager will act as the greeter and be in disguise, wearing a hidden speaker bug that will be connected to our comms. Her job will be to show up, making it look like her bicycle got a flat, and draw him out out hiding. Now Shirley, it’s absolutely imperative that you maneuver him into a position that not only puts him squarely in Aaron’s gunsights, but allows you some modicum of safety. Stay visible at all times, don’t get too close to him, and mind your surroundings. Stay calm and don’t worry, you’re in good hands.

“Hey.” Shirley called out softly, tapping her on the shoulder. “You with me?” Lucchini gave her a hug rather than answer and Yeager held her tight. “I’ll be fine.” Shirley said to her wingman, trying to calm her down. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I know, but I still worry.” Francesca replied, maintaining her embrace. “I don’t like this plan and I don’t trust the bastard as far as I can see him.”

“I agree that it’s not the best plan.” Aaron quipped from behind the rose bush. The pair looked on as Divale walked out from the thorny foliage, wheeling a simple metal bicycle, painted black with a tan leather seat and a tiny bell at the end of the right handle bar, the wheel spokes and chain well maintained and new. He had used some abrasive instrument to scour the front tire, so as to allow it to pop at the right moment, to lend some realism. “However, I see some merit in doing it this way. I
saw the ground from the air and Carmichael is right. Walking up to the front door isn’t going to do the job and Buchanon knows that he’s a wanted man so he’s not going to show his face if he can help it. He needs to be lured out.”

“Why didn’t you press the fact that you could do it yourself?” Lucchini countered, letting go of Shirley as Aaron kicked the stand on the bike and set it to the side. “Just cloak, waltz in, and end it?”

“He wants to see Buchanon get his.” Yeager explained, taking the bike and sitting on it. “Carmichael wants to know for sure that the job is done and be there for it. Sickening.”

Aaron wiped his greasy hands against the truck of a willow tree, black streaks lining the bark like char marks on a slice of meat that came off a grill. As they say captain, it’s not a confirmed kill unless you see the body. “Hold up.” he called to Shirley. “I want to give you something that I gave a few friends back in France.”

Sighing in slight annoyance, Yeager allowed him to venture up to her. “Like I just said to Lucchini, I’ll be fine, now please let me-” she started, but Aaron simply raised his hand, quieting her protest.

“I know you’ll be fine.” Aaron assured, taking her right hand with his left. “But you will want this. Locus.” Like before with Mio and Amelie, a rune appeared on Yeager’s hand, that of three black triangles arranged in a pyramid. He held up the first three fingers on his right hand and instructed, “You need me, tap those triangles three times and I will be there.”

Though in her mind it wasn’t needed, Shirley couldn’t help but feel touched by the gesture. “What are friends for huh?” she inquired with a meek smile. Divale didn’t answer and looked up the road where awaited her destination. Taking the hint, she kicked the stand back up and pedaled away, flicking the little bell on the right hand handle bar. The chiming gave little comfort to Lucchini as she waved goodbye not moving so much as an inch until Shirley returned it. She saw Aaron go back behind the growth and rummage around.

“So what took you so long?” Francesca asked as Divale reemerged toting a wooden case that was as long as she was tall.

“Had to piss.” Aaron simply answered, adjusting his grip on the case with his left hand as he walked back toward her. Holding out his right hand he asked, “You ready?” Lucchini looked at his opened palm and looked back up at him with a funny expression to her face. Knowing what it was about, Aaron rolled his eyes and explained, “I washed afterwards, I promise. Now you coming or not?” Satisfied with his answer, Francesca took Aaron’s hand and held on tight. Seeking to secure her further, Divale pulled her in closer to him, looping his right arm around her waist, and unfurled his wings. Two flaps and the casting of obscurum later, and the duo were in the air, weaving to and fro amongst the tree tops, mimicking the gusting of the winds. While navigating themselves to the convict’s hideout, Aaron felt less anxiety than his counterpart, and for good reason. Had no choice in the matter. I had to send Lucretia away to Dover Castle for a few days. Minna is saint for understanding and letting her stay. Takes a huge weight off my shoulders.

Suddenly, Aaron’s ear communicator buzzed to life. “Rook this is King. Status update over.” Carmichael’s voice ordered.

Since his hands were full, Lucchini graciously did the honors of radioing back, “King this is Bishop. Me and Rook are moving into position now and Knight is on route as we speak over.”

“Excellent work. Unfortunately, I’ve hit a bit of a snag coming down from the north so I might be late. Since you’ll get there first, do some scout work. Find out if he’s still there, and if so where, over.” Carmichael informed.
“Wilco King.” Francesca replied and was about to cut the communicator with the appropriate signal, but went on, asking, “King, why didn’t you tell us when we first met that you knew Buchanon?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Bishop.” Carmichael deadpanned.

“Come off it Carmichael.” Lucchini hissed, her patience with him nearing a quick end. “Fleming spilled the beans when he called us this morning, and now it’s your turn.”

“I fail to see how this affects the current situation.” Carmichael countered, holding firm.

“Considering that my friend is out their right now with her ass hanging the breeze, I think it affects a great fucking deal on the current situation.” Lucchini shot back, not giving up in the slightest.

Neither of them could see him from where they were, but both of them could almost hear the resistance break on the other end. “Fine.” Carmichael relented. “You want the truth? The bastard killed my partner. It was a few years back, towards what should’ve been the tail end of my career, up around Liverpool. Me and Leiter got a tip from a local at nine in the evening, saying that he saw a woman being abducted around the wharves, and gave us a description of the suspect. It matched Alec Buchanon from here to Sunday, no doubt about it. Got up there around ten thirty. Pitch black, howling winds, nasty weather. It snowed that night and a pair of tracks lead to a warehouse, one set of large feet, and the other smaller with numerous jagged lines, clear evidence of struggle and of being dragged. Whipped out our Webley’s and strolled in, checking our corners. Didn’t take long to see that the place was empty save for the abducted woman, tied to a chair and gagged with a thick cloth. Her jaw was broken and something was shoved into her mouth to prevent her from screaming or talking. Leiter goes to her and this woman starts kicking and grunting, but he ignores her, taking off the gag. It was then that we both saw and heard a grenade pin come off from the explosive that Buchanon had jammed into that poor woman’s mouth. Hardly had any time to react before it went off. Hurt my hand, but Leiter…” He paused and the line went silent for a good three seconds as the man pieced himself together. “Leiter didn’t make it. Then, I heard this laughter coming from up above me in the rafters. My blood went cold as I realized that the voice that was hysterically crowing it’s triumph above my head was the same one that gave us the tip. Buchanon had lured us in and like fat dumb idiots we fell into the trap. Could’ve killed me right then and there, but the hunter became the hunted. We both may have been stupid, but we were smart enough to not come alone. Leiter told Fleming about it and he sent half the Yard, surrounding the place. It was then and only then that Buchanon gave up.

I still had my gun in my hand as I watched him come down from the roof. Could’ve plugged him right there and no one would even think twice about it, not even the greens. Should’ve done it now that I think about it, would’ve saved us all the trouble of having you three deal with him now. Believe me, I wanted to kill that sack of shit, but something within me wanted it to be my last assignment, to finally retire in peace, and it won out that night. I hope Shirley is listening in on this because you’re only going to hear this one time from me. I’m sorry that I didn’t have the strength to do what should’ve been done years ago.” Carmichael went on.

“Why did you stay on if you wanted to retire?” Shirley inquired, evidently having been listening for a good while.

“Wanted to see justice done for not just Leiter, but all those victims, those sundered families, to finally put away forever those sleepless nights of lying awake in bed hearing nothing but the cries of ‘Why? Who did this? What are you doing to stop this madman?’.” Carmichael answered. “And after today, I’ll sleep soundly for the first time in a long time.”

Lucchini digested all of what was being said and felt sorry for the old man. Now that he’s come clean, I really can’t fully hate him now. I actually pity him. “Carmichael I’m so s-” she began to
state, but the officer on the other end cut her down.

“Didn’t ask for it, don’t want it, and never needed it.” Carmichael snapped. “All I ask for, want, and need right now is for this job to get done. You see the hideout yet?”

Francesca looked out and through the leaves of a passed oak was a large flat expanse, about three acres worth, with two small hills topped with long grass in the middle, one far north and the other south, acting as a boundary of sorts. Near the dirt road, the same that Shirley was now riding on somewhere behind them, was a wooden house, painted blue, a dormant brick chimney on the roof. A fair distance behind that, snuggled neatly between the two hills, was an enormous red barn with a shingled roof and a rusty wind vane in the shape of a rooster. “That’s an affirmative King.” she said, regretting feeling sorry for him.

“Get tucked into the long grass on that south hill and get a bead on where he is. Find anything, update me and Knight. I’ll let you know through morse when I’m in position. King out.” Carmichael ordered and cut the link.

As their destination got closer with every passing second, Aaron started to slow down, concentrating on where to land and what he just heard. Makes you a bit more relateable, but it still doesn’t make me trust you that much more.

“Did you see anything?” he asked Lucchini as he set down behind the hill, the acme a few dozen feet up, tucking in his wings, ending the spell, and letting her go.

“Not that I saw, but we will when we get closer.” Francesca replied, hunkering down despite the fact that they were fully hidden. She saw Aaron kneel down and open the wooden case he had. Craning her neck to see what was inside her jaw dropped as her eyes rested upon a rifle of massive proportions. The barrel was thin and long, with a stabilizer rod over it and a large bulbous counterweight at the muzzle. A bipod was tucked underneath the pressed steel body, the grip and stock all made of lacquered wood. It had no scope, just a simple iron sight. Divale fished out that monstrosity as well as a pair of binoculars, gently tossing the latter to Francesca over his right shoulder as he got up with the gun in the other hand. “What in the world is that thing?” she asked in awe as she caught the binoculars with both hands.

“A Soviet PTRS-41 anti-tank rifle.” Aaron expounded. “From Russia with love in the form of roughly a .50 bullet fired at over three thousand feet per second with an effective maximum range of over fifteen hundred yards.”

“But that’s against tanks and such. This is a person we’re talking about. That’s a little overkill isn’t it?” Lucchini responded with a raised eyebrow.

“I went for this weapon due to take down value.” Aaron countered as he locked the bolt back, the magazine release catch flinging open. He reached into his front pocket and pulled out a five round clip of 14.5mm ammunition. “I want to make sure that if the first shot didn’t kill him outright, that he will still go down, giving me time to line up another one.”

“What if you miss?” Francesca worriedly asked.

Divale slammed the clip home and slide the bolt forward after holding the release catch down. He double checked that it was secure before pulling the bolt back again, chambering a round. “In the unlikely event that I do, the sheer velocity will be enough to send him to the ground, dazing him and allowing me to get another shot at him.” Aaron answered. He noticed the Italian witch squirm and went up to her, placing his right hand on her shoulder. “I won’t miss a second time, I promise you that.”

Francesca nodded and the two made their way up the hill, staying low and using the long grass to
maximum effect. They soon got on their stomachs, crawling inch by inch up the grassy slope. After about a minute, they came to the top and Lucchini parted the wild fronds, allowing Aaron a place to have an unobstructed view to a kill, and her eyes on the house. She put the binos to her face and looked out. The house was in full view now and looked for all the world the prototypical definition of peace and quiet. Most of the windows were open, the white curtains fluttering in the breeze, letting stale air out. There was no fire or heat for the chimney wasn’t puffing smoke. A wooden tool shed was in the back, the sliding door shut and padlocked. A door at the rear of the house was closed as well. However, there was no sign of life or activity anywhere, making the serenity of the scene disturbing. “Nothing in the house as far as I can see. All the windows are open. Door is closed, probably locked.” she observed. Panning her vision, she took a gander at the back door, a simple wood and mesh screen affair, and noticed that the ground was disturbed near the threshold, long jagged divots carved into the soil, precluding the possibility that they were made by the door itself. Lucchini shuddered as she saw the familiar ruby red twinkle of blood in the late morning sun on the random blade of grass or rock. “Someone was dragged out of the house, bleeding profusely.” she relayed to Aaron, who was setting the bipod up.

“More like someones judging from the amount on the ground.” Divale deduced, eyeing what Lucchini was seeing and getting his position right and tucking the rifle butt into his right shoulder. “Where does the trail lead?” Following less the crimson pathway and more the flattened and shallowly plowed grass, Lucchini saw that the trail led to the front barn door which, like the doors to the house and shed, was shut. Dirt was caked on the bottom of it.

“Right to the barn.” Francesca pointed out. “There’s evidence that it was opened, but I can’t tell how long ago.”

“Calor imago.” Aaron intoned, his vision allowing him to detect heat. With his spell active, he saw the inside of the structure one that was full of heat signatures. “Well, we have two horses, three cows, five pigs, ten chickens…” he began, picking out the figures. It was then that some of the pigs moved revealing an animal that one normally wouldn’t find. Two people were on the ground, their heat rapidly dissipating with one other over near them, sitting in a chair as if at rest. “He’s in there and it looks like he had some fun with the former occupants of the house.” he observed grimly.

“How many?” Lucchini asked reluctantly, not really wanting to know the answer.

“Two. Can’t tell the age or gender with this spell active until we actually get down there and have a look.” Aaron replied. Out of curiosity, he looked over the house and saw to his relief that it was completely empty. Finally a real break. That eliminates the house as a point of ambush leaving just the barn to worry about. Divale thumbed the dial to his ear communicator and radioed Carmichael. “King this is Rook. He’s in the barn not the house. House is clear over.”

“Understood Rook. Good job. Did you get that Knight over?” Carmichael answered.

“Loud and clear King.” Shirley’s voice radioed over the airwaves. “Progress is slow due to the road but I will arrive within the next five minutes. Knight out.”

“What’s your ETA King over?” Lucchini inquired, her anxiety lowering a tad knowing that her friend had overhead protection should she need it.

“Coming up the slope now.” Carmichael relayed. “Will be in position in thirty seconds. It’s all on you now Knight. Time to say hello.”

The clicking of the chain ran so fast that it sounded like someone pouring a bucket of ball bearings
on glass, but it helped give Shirley focus, allowing her to clear her mind as she traversed the woods. The dirt road was long and winding with well worn grooves on the far left and right, doing nothing to help navigate the deadman’s curves that were so sharp that one couldn’t see anything until one was halfway through the turn. She stuck to the middle and made good time despite the jarring she endured from the uneven soil and the occasional small rock. *Judging by the road conditions no one with a car has been down here for a long while. Lots of furrows from horse drawn carts. Don’t get stuck in them or you’re going to take a tumble.* Every so often she could hear the wind whistling through the branches and leaves of the tall trees that lined the road like highway markers and the chirping of birds. *Totally unlike Bedgebury thank God. Don’t even want to think about that day ever again. Don’t think about it Shirley and concentrate on getting this done. Plan is simple: Go hard near a groove which will pop the tire, get off the bike and walk it up, shouting for help when you get within the property line. Be innocent and keep a straight face. May have to do an accent to hide the fact that I’m not from around here.* As she rounded another curve, narrowly missing a fallen tree branch in the road, Yeager could see the blue house, curtains just a-billowing. *My public awaits.*

Swinging the bicycle hard to the left, the front tire caught the furrow and true to what Aaron said to her, the rubber tire gave out with a subdued pop, one that wasn’t as loud as she would’ve liked, but was alright with for it wasn’t heavy enough to alert anyone else who might happen to be nearby. *A good Samaritan right now would be the worst case scenario. The less other people get involved in this the better.*

She maintained her seat as she maneuvered towards the tree line, using the grass and slight incline to slow her down naturally. Shirley got off the bike and walked up. The house was close, probably about one hundred feet away. *Time to greet.* “Hello?!” she called out in an English accent, flicking the bell. Waiting for a few more seconds, she called out again, and thought of something. *I don’t know the names of the people who live here! What if he asks me?* It nearly made her break character if it wasn’t for Aaron tapping in morse over her communicator, one that she also hid in her rather large bun.

*(I know you’re trying your best Shirley, but that English accent is about as bad as two week old milk.) Divale remarked. (Other than that keep up the act. We got you covered and Carmichael is here. The perp hasn’t moved from the barn so I’m guessing he hasn’t heard you.)*

*Emboldened by his words, Yeager continued to ham it up, even going so far as walking up to the threshold and knocking on the door. After a few rounds of rapping her knuckles, she took herself and the bicycle around to the back of the house, yelling herself silly as she walked to the barn, getting closer and closer with every step. (He’s heard you Shirley and is now right up near that front door. Be careful. Just knock a bit and get out of the way. Act surprised and keep your view on him. If he sees you looking a bit too much in there, you’ll agitate him and he might attack you.) Aaron morsed. Keeping that in mind she kicked the stand out and leaned the bike on it. After making sure that it wasn’t going to fall over, Shirley strolled right up to the far corner of the barn door, the one that was the furthest away, and knocked. A quick second went by, before the door slid open and Yeager saw Alec Buchanon come out and stand near the threshold with the confidence of a seasoned politician about ready to deliver an address to Congress. He was shorter than she imagined, no more than 5’ 8” and a bit on the husky side. Buchanon was wearing a butchers smock and a pair of gloves that were slathered with a mixture of fresh and clotted blood. His hair was blond and the face was disturbingly soft and kind looking, one that looked more suited on the head of a caring father than a murderer, and the hazel eyes regarded her with an emotionless stare. Instinctively, Yeager put her hands to her face and backed away, saying, “Oh my goodness! Are you hurt!? Do you need help!?” My God, he looks like the very last person you’d expect to harm you, until he’s got you in his web, right where he wants you.*

“I don’t require any aid, but thank you for your concern.” Alec stated politely, his voice high yet measured as he took off his gloves, the bangs of his short blond hair waving a tad from a sudden
breeze. “Sorry, I couldn’t answer you when you were calling out. The mare inside foaled. What brings you around the Smith’s?”

So that’s their name. I can use that. She took her hands away from her face and placed her right over her heart and breathed heavily. “Thank heavens!” she exclaimed. “I thought you were hurt!” Shirley took a few more deep breaths, calming herself down before continuing, “I was riding up the road to see my cousins when my bicycle got a flat near the property. I knew Mr. Smith was good at repairing things so I came up to see if he was home.”

“Mr. Smith is not here.” Buchanon explained. “He and the missus went to town.” He took a small step away from the barn entrance and closed the door, the wood grinding into the dirt. “Names Giles. What’s yours?” Buchanon lied, offering his left hand and keeping his right visible.

“I’m Mary Rutledge.” Shirley fibbed right back, doing a rather awkward curtsy. “Sorry, the ride made me a bit wobbly.” she admitted, covering up her fault.

“No need Mary.” Alec replied with a smile. He turned his attention to the bicycle and gave it a good once over from his position near the barn door. “That’s a nasty flat for sure. May cost a bit more than usual. But regardless, let’s get it inside the tool shed and get that fixed up shall we?”

Knowing what he was trying to do and what she needed to do, Shirley put on a crestfallen face and put her hands behind her back, a stance that made her chest go out that much more. “That’s awfully kind of you Giles, but I don’t have very much money. I honestly don’t know how I’ll repay you.”

Buchanon stepped away from the barn door and waltzed right up to her with a look of understanding, seeing that her dress was part and parcel of being a poor country girl. “I’m sure we can come to an arrangement on that.” he said in a seductive manner, one eye locked to her chest and the other at her face.

Allowing herself to blush, Yeager smiled meekly and countered, “I don’t know if that will be good for my reputation.”

“And what reputation would that be?” Alec inquired.

“I won’t lie when I say that it wouldn’t be my first time.” Shirley expounded shyly. “The locals refer to me as a heart breaker.” Suddenly, a shot rang out and Alec Buchanon’s chest exploded outwards as the bullet from the PTRS-41 hit dead center, splaying out his ribs like a beef brisket, the velocity carrying his ruined body forward at an angle, narrowly missing Shirley as it careened through the air and landed a good few dozen feet away, rolling to a stop. She could feel the man’s blood all over her, coating her in crimson. Resisting the urge to obey her training and get down, Yeager calmly walked to the body to confirm the kill. What was Buchanon leaked blood like a opened fire hydrant, a pool of vitae spreading outwards from both sides of the hole and soaking into the earth, those hazel eyes that were once so full of mischief now glazing over as death settled in. Movement on the northern hill caught her eye and she saw Carmichael stand up from where he was watching, holding a Lee-Enfield rifle and wearing a backpack.

“Good job Yeager.” he congratulated, navigating the slope. “And good job to you too Aaron. Damn good shot.” Carmichael saw Divale stand up from where he was, holding his hands up in mock surrender. He stopped and furrowed his brow, wondering why he was doing that. Then Lucchini stood up, holding the anti tank rifle in her hands, the weapon looking ridiculous in her arms. “My mistake.” he commented, nodding with respect at Francesca, a gesture which she returned.

Continuing on his path, he regarded Shirley who was wiping the blood away from her face with her hands, but doing nothing more than smearing it all over the place, looking like a drunk whore trying to apply her rouge. Carmichael reached into his backpack and pulled out a water canteen, a brown
bag with her clothes in it, and a few towels. “This might work better.” he offered, the effects in his left hand.

“Thanks.” Shirley stated gratefully, snatching them from his grasp and applying water to towel and towel to face. Aaron saw all of this play out as he and Lucchini came down their hill to link up with the others. Francesca put down the rifle in the middle of the field and immediately made a beeline to Shirley, taking a towel and helping her get cleaned up. For his part, Divale walked up to Carmichael who was standing over Buchanon’s body, his back turned. He respectfully stood a small ways to his left side and said nothing, letting the detective dwell on his thoughts.

“Sweet dreams you bastard.” Carmichael gritted through his teeth in a gloating manner. He then looked up at Aaron and said, “I’ve waited for this day for years Aaron. Now that it’s come, I feel as if I’m a changed man, that I can finally rest, knowing that the job is done.”

I know that feeling, all too well indeed. Divale placed a hand on Carmichael’s shoulder and replied, “Hopefully not too much, because we might need that man later on to get the O’ Bannons taken care of.”

“Right.” Carmichael agreed, collecting his composure. He turned around and addressed the witches. “Lucchini, I need you to come with Aaron and me as we search the house for evidence. As for you Shirley, and I’m sorry to say this considering what you had to witness up close and personal like, but I need you to get in the barn and search that area too.” Knowing that they were going to have to go their separate ways again, Francesca gave Shirley a hug before joining up with Aaron and Carmichael as they made their way to the house, splotches of blood staining her uniform top and the sides of her face.

“She won’t like what she finds.” Lucchini quipped as she wiped the blood on her face away with the backside of her left hand.

“The same will go for us.” Carmichael retorted politely, reaching the back door first and testing the knob. “The man’s been free for two weeks, more than enough time for him to kill multiple times. Stay close and keep your eyes open. The man was fond of booby traps so there’s no telling what we might find in there.” He gave a silent signal to stand back and jerked open the door. Nothing out of the ordinary resulted from it and Carmichael took point, followed by Aaron and then Lucchini. Francesca’s eyes moved immediately downwards at the wooden floorboards. She winced as she saw blood trails snaking to the back door and despite the windows being open, one could still smell the cloying scent the vitae left behind. The wallpaper was goldenrod yellow, the parts near the edges starting to fray and curl inwards. Lucchini could feel the air running over her legs with force, the hallway a wind tunnel. Venturing deeper, they soon came up to the kitchen which doubled as the main greeting area, the room wide and spacious. A table with three chairs sat in the middle and white painted cupboards and counter drawers with wrought iron black handles hung under and over the double sink along the far wall. Scattered about were candles, most on their last legs, resting in holders of porcelain filled with solid cream colored wax. Stairs over near their rear led up to the next floor. As she looked around, Francesca couldn’t see the blood trails anymore. Must’ve cleaned it up, but why did he stop? Makes no sense given how much of a seasoned criminal he was.

“So far so good.” Carmichael observed, panning left and right with his rifle, stepping gingerly into the room. He looked at the floor and then back where they came, furrowing his brow, evidence that he too was puzzled. “Strange that he did only half the job.” he muttered. Craning his neck, he saw the living room just beyond through a open archway with more rooms leading from that. “Aaron?” he requested, regarding the warlock. “Take Lucchini and go search upstairs. I’ll mind the bottom. Did any of you two see a cellar of some sort when you came up.”
“Not any that I can recall.” Divale answered, turning around and proceeding to walk right up the stairs. He ducked a tad lest he hit his head on the frame, and looked up and through the narrow stairway. *No bulbous projections, no thin wires and no railing for support, nothing at all.* Confident that he had no booby traps ahead of them, he stepped on the first step, the wood groaning under his weight. He moved slowly, cautiously, his hands out to his sides. Tiny creaks from where Lucchini was reached his ears, but he paid them little mind as he got up to the next floor. He now found himself in the middle of a hallway, the line from the T as it were, with one room to the left and two more to the right. Moving into the hallway as to allow Lucchini to get around him, he pointed to the left with his right hand and then pointed at himself before gesturing with his head to the right. The witch took the hint and moved out and Aaron gave the first of the two doors his full attention. Keeping close to the right hand wall, he advanced to the door and took hold of the knob. With a flick of his wrist he opened it, pushing it hard so that it hit the wall opposite him hard, not moving from his position until he was sure that nothing was waiting for him. Six seconds went by and nothing. Aaron moved to the threshold and stopped dead in his tracks. The room was an absolute mess, the sheets to the bed thrown about and stained red, a chair with a white sock nearby was overturned and lay in a large lake of dried blood, thick rope dangling from the arms and legs, and there was a pile of clothes, two outfits that without much imagination belonged to one woman and one man with a lead pipe resting on top.

It didn’t take long for Aaron to form what happened in the room inside his mind. *Got into the house somehow and crept upstairs all quiet like during the night probably. Surprised them both, knocking them over their heads with the pipe. Didn’t kill them or else the sheets would’ve been less disturbed. My best bet is that he stripped them and tied up one of them, best guess the man. That done, he had free reign to do whatever he wanted to the woman, making the poor bastard watch. After he was done, then he killed them both and dragged him to the barn. Yet there are only blood trails in the hallway leading out to the back door and nowhere else. Intriguing and highly disturbing.* “What did you find?” Lucchini asked as she came up behind him, having checked her assigned room.

Quick as a flash, Aaron grabbed the door knob and shut it closed. He turned and advised, “Don’t go in there.”

Lucchini nodded, understanding why, deep down thankful that Aaron was sparing her some rough sights. “The room was the bathroom,” she reported. “Sink was plugged up and filled with some sort of foul smelling gray glop with a pot inside the tub over a gas fired hotplate. Inside the wastebasket, there were empty bottles of corn syrup, mothballs, and what looked to be salt shakers.”

“It’s not salt.” Aaron explained, knowing what the man was doing in there as he too did things like that when he was in France. “It’s ammonia in solid form. Farmers like the family here mix a small amount of it with water to disinfect meat before packaging and selling it on the market. As for the rest of the ingredients, if you mix all three together at a seventy thirty ratio, heat it rapidly and then cool it, you get plastic explosives essentially. Used to make it all the time when I was on the continent.” Letting the explanation suffice, Divale made his way past the bedroom and towards the last door. Doing the same thing as before, Aaron stood with his back to the wall, opening and pushing the door open after making sure that Lucchini was next to him and out of harms way. Again, nothing happened and the duo went inside together. The room ended up being a very spartan affair, with a bed, an opened small window on the far wall, and a rolling desk with a chair tucked under. Noticing the sheets were disturbed, he nodded to himself as he looked around. *He must’ve slept here for a bit.* Lucchini directed her attention to the rolling desk and opened it just a tad, checking for traps. Seeing nothing, she opened the top and saw papers strewn about, line after line filled with L’s, O’s, T’s, and almost every other letter of the alphabet. Francesca also found a letter, folded many times. Curious, she picked it up and opened it. Aaron saw her do this and watched as her face darkened. “What did you find?” he asked, walking up to her.
She handed Aaron the letter and gathered up the other papers as he looked it over. **CONSIDER**

**THE DEBT REPAID COUSIN. C. O. B.** “I think he got help in getting out of that prison he was in. My guess is that he had some possible connections.” Lucchini surmised. “Maybe Carmichael will know more.” **Good idea.** Letting her take the lead, Aaron followed Lucchini down the stairs. Using their ears, they found Carmichael in the living room, coming back from one of the others.

“Find anything of note?” he asked, shouldering the rifle. Aaron handed him the letter as his way of saying yes and the detective’s face lit up upon reading it. “So that explains how he got out.” he stated. “Bastard was in league with the O’ Bannons. C.O.B is the shorthand for their leader, Connor O’ Bannon.”

“It also says that he’s a cousin.” Lucchini pointed out. “Was he?”

“A very distant relative, many times removed.” Carmichael explained, turning the paper over in his hand. “As for whatever this repaid debt is, I haven’t the foggiest. Anything else?”

Francesca produced her pile of papers, handing them over. “Was he a forger of some sort?” she asked as Carmichael thumbed through the pages. He didn’t answer her for some time scanning the papers like a professor reading through a student’s term essay. She eyed him, noting his body language and breathing. *Eyes are widening and the breathing is getting faster, though he’s doing his best to hide it. Either he’s trying to find a connection, or he knows the connection already.*

“Not at all.” Carmichael finally acknowledged, not giving her a look. “Buchanon may have had strong steady hands once, but prison knocked that out of them. His writing was atrociously bad. This isn’t his, probably belonged to the former occupants or even a guest.” He looked out towards the front door and gestured to it with his head. “Let’s get back to Yeager and see what she found.” he ordered, going towards the door. As his back was turned, Francesca and Aaron gave each other a look, one that needed no words to convey their collective anxiety. The message was undeniable. **Carmichael knows whose writing that is.**

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The remains of the eggs benedict that Shirley had for breakfast pooled into a steaming mass over the top of a small bale of hay in one of the horse stalls, the nearby animal neighing in protest and revulsion. She wiped her hand with the last clean rag that Carmichael gave her and held her nauseous stomach, averting her gaze from the grisly sight. *Mother of God. They don’t even look like people anymore.* She gritted her teeth as she walked away towards the open barn door, the smell of fresh air desperately needed to make her feel better. As instructed, Yeager entered the barn, the insides very similar to what her family had back home with nothing but leveled dirt that acted as the floor, wooden stalls housing the animals, benches and peg boards holding the key farming implements, and a small set of stairs that led further up into the hay loft, the still green grasses poking through holes in the floor boards. She saw that there were some furrows in the dirt, flanked by blood stains and she followed them. **Biggest mistake I ever made. Those poor folks, hacked to pieces, parts of them looking like they were chewed rather than cut. What kind of person does that?** Movement near the back door to the house caught her eye, and she saw Carmichael round the corner from the front, flanked by Lucchini and Aaron. Not wanting to make herself sick again, Shirley just stood there, leaning against the wooden door, taking deep breaths. It took a good minute before the trio linked up with her. Carmichael noted her complexion with concern. “You alright?” he asked.

“I’ll manage.” Shirley replied, swallowing the last bits of bilious stomach acid down and grimacing as it went down. “Found the Smith’s further in. Nothing else. You?”

“We found out that the O’ Bannon’s had a hand in busting out Buchanon from a letter he had in a
The wind picked up and whisked the aforementioned letter out of Carmichael’s grasp like a fall leaf. Before it got away, Shirley managed to catch it with her right hand, the back of the page facing her. It was at that point that her blue eyes found something strange. Lines of off white crisscrossed the paper and she knew immediately what it was. *Lemon juice. The closest thing to invisible ink that you can get when you let it dry.* “There’s writing on the back in lemon juice!” she exclaimed. Fishing out her lighter and flicking it on, Yeager moved the flame quickly back and forth across the page, taking care not to set it alight as the rest of them looked on. Bit by bit, the writing began to reveal itself.

**THE SHIPMENT IS ON TIME. HICKORY DOCKS. COS OUT. SOS IN.** “What does this mean?” she asked Carmichael who put his right hand to his chin in thought.

Suddenly, he snapped his fingers in a moment of inspiration. “Those terms are shorthand used by sailors. COS stands for Clacton On Sea while SOS stands for Southend On Sea. Both are fifty miles or so to the east of London. If the message here is not just a ruse, the latter is going to get a shipment.” he anxiously explained to them.

“How do you know that?” Shirley asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Before I joined the force, I helped my dad, a fisherman by trade, with the daily catch on some days when finding people to crew his boat became difficult during the winter.” Carmichael illuminated.

“As for the shipment, will it be weapons or contraband goods?” Lucchini asked.

“Won’t matter.” Aaron quipped loudly, walking to the middle of the field and picking up the anti tank rifle off the ground. “If the shipment is there, the O’ Bannons will be too. Two birds with one stone.”

“Righto lad.” Carmichael beamed. “We need to bring this back to the station and inform Fleming immediately.” Unbeknownst to all involved, this scene was being watched by a pair of eyes hidden in one of the taller trees that crested the southern hill that Aaron and Lucchini hid themselves as Shirley lured Buchanon out to his doom. A camouflaged face smiled as the orbs looked on through a pair of binoculars, knowing that the they had just found the hidden message, her message to them.

*That’s right my puppets. Dance to my tune and serve my ends with glee. Makes my job that much easier. Speaking of which, I need to pay a someone a visit.*

The guard’s teeth bit into the apple with a loud crunch, disturbing the silent night as he and his partner stood watch on the side of the long road that led up to the compound. Air was chilly, as it always was during March, but when you were so close to the sea like they were, the evening gusts had far more bite than usual. Clothed in thick woolen coats and pants and carrying shotguns, the breezes did little more than make them grumpier, rustling the leaves and bushes they found themselves next to, making them jump at imagined ghost sounds from time to time. The other guard farted loudly, standing down wind as to not inconvenience his friend. However, the one that bit the apple put on a face of pure disgust and spat, chunks of fruit flying everywhere in the dark. “Bloody Christ!” he cursed, throwing the rest of the apple away into the woods. “Not only are you gusting up a storm to go along with the weather, we keep on getting shite food too. That bitch was mealy as fuck.”

“It was your fault for asking for them in the first place.” his friend reminded, rubbing the side of his nose. “You know that they’re out of season this time of year. Should’ve went for the bread.”

“I wanted something sweet that didn’t disagree with my stomach.” the other guard explained, spitting
out the stray bits that clung to the insides of his cheeks. “Bread isn’t better. Just makes you hungrier.”

His friend was about to say something else when they heard the revving of a car engine some ways off down at the far end of the trail. Immediately, the two went on high alert, knowing that the boss wasn’t supposed to receive any visitors this evening, and lined up across the road, blocking any further advance. Squinting their eyes, they could make out the tell tale yellow of headlights making their way up, the sounds of the engine getting louder and louder. “It’s something big and bulky,” the guard remarked, listening intently. “Probably a truck. Be ready for anything lad.” After a few more seconds of waiting, the vehicle rounded the corner, revealing itself to be a covered transport truck, a lone driver occupying the cabin. The guards raised their left hands and gestured to their pieces, letting the driver know that it would be best to stop or else. Gears audibly shifted in the darkness as the truck driver came to a complete stop. Taking their time and keeping their eyes open, the duo went to either side as the driver rolled down his window fully.

When he came face to face with the driver, the features hidden by a long black coat with the collar popped up, a pair of black leather gloves over the hands, and a wide brimmed hat tilted over the eyes, he asked while making sure that the barrel of the shotgun was visible to the unexpected arrival, “Lost or looking to find your way?” Slowly, the driver put up his hands and reached for a small object on the front of the dash that the guard couldn’t make out. After being handed it, the guard moved back to the truck front, using the headlight glare to identify the object. It was a wooden image of the head of a saint wreathed in orange painted flames, blood trickling from the eyes that looked heavenwards.

The other guard came back and inquired, “What you doing?”

His friend looked up at him, face drained of all color and hissed, “Go with them. I’ll radio the compound.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” the other guard asked, fearful of hitching a ride with a complete stranger.

The other guard walked back up to the driver and handed the wooden symbol back to him. “The Sicilians are here.” he muttered softly.

Connor O’ Bannon took the cigar out of its humidor and gave it a customary sniff as he usually did on nights that he was restless, and this one was no different. The scent of the tobacco took him back to the first time he met her, Isolde, the woman who did the impossible, the lady that captured his heart with nothing but a glance. It was mid day in Belfast, and he had just been honorably discharged from the navy. With the Great War over and the willingness of the victors to never take part in such a destructive conflict ever again, it seemed liked the right thing to do. The year was 1923 and everything was looking up for the country. Rationing was over, businesses were demanding workers of every stripe and creed to fill vacancies, and the damned influenza was gone. As he walked out of the office, the commander graciously allowing him to keep his uniform, O’ Bannon bumped into someone as he turned to go up the street. A woman’s bag hit the ground and he instinctively picked it up. He was about to hand it to the lady in question when his entire body stopped, the muscles locked tight. In front of his blue eyes, kneeling right next to him, was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Her skin was pale like milk and her brown eyes glittered in the sun like topaz. Long blonde hair hung down in a braid that hung halfway down her back, held secure with a white ribbon. Connor remembered little about what she wore, and honestly he didn’t mind for his attention was on her face and her face only. For the longest time, neither said a word, both individuals overtaken by the other’s presence.

He laughed to himself as he picked up the metal butane lighter from his cherry wood desk and
flicked it to life. *It was so random, but I can’t help but feel that God sent an angel to me that day.* Memories of the wedding flew through his mind, one where the entirety of his family turned out to see them wedded. Cousins from near and far, some that not even he knew at all, came from miles around to give their congratulations and blessings. It didn’t take long for him to find a respectable job at the dockyards in Belfast and settle down with Isolde, the pair making passionate love almost every night. She became pregnant with Diedre in ‘29, and the world that O’ Bannon knew changed again, this time for the worse. The Depression that struck the United States had spread overseas, the economic version of the Spanish Flu that destroyed lives and curtailed futures. Connor had invested heavily in the America stock market and when it crashed, he lost over seventy five percent of his savings and the dockyard folded almost immediately afterwards. Knowing that he had to do something, he took Isolde, at the time two months pregnant, and moved on over to Ipswich. Hard times were in store for them and they both knew that the moment they stepped inside that pathetic excuse of a flat that the slumlord of a landlord provided them. When Diedre was born in the late fall that year, the hospital bill took away almost the rest of his savings.

O’ Bannon applied the flame to his cigar and puffed, thick clouds of smoke gusting from the process. The haze made him recollect the night that he nearly drowned himself in drink, but was stopped by some of his cousins that happened to be at the pub that night, and informed him that they were going to do something to help him. *Didn’t have much choice in the matter. I refused to be like my father and desert the woman I loved and the child I helped bring into this world. When presented with two evils, you don’t always have the choice to choose neither, instead, you have to go for the lesser.* His life of crime began then and there, strangling the landlord to death with a piece of baling rope while the cousins forged the deed and the last will and testament, giving him the property and all his assets. He used a good chunk of it to fix up the dilapidated building and became a local hero in the process. *If they only knew that their Robin Hood was more like the Sheriff of Nottingham. That night changed me forever, making me want more and more.* The years went by in seconds as he leaned back in the black leather business chair, the countless thefts, murders, racketeering setups, smuggling operations, and booking schemes all going to the greater good of his family and the organization blowing by in a gale of forgetfulness. Made enough to purchase outright a large piece of property on the outskirts of Bawdsey, a tiny hamlet east of the city in ‘36. It grieved him when Isolde found out how he got the 26,000 pounds to pay for it. She made him swear that he’d give up that life, to leave behind the gang for good. As if it wasn’t enough punishment, his beloved wife took ill with a fever that wouldn’t go away and she died a week later, despite all the money he spent on doctors to try to help break it. Having to carry the casket at the funeral with his child looking on, crying tears that no amount of handkerchiefs could ever dry, was the hardest thing he ever had to do, but it didn’t even being to equal a fraction of the pain he felt, and still did, when he broke that promise.

Looking at the framed picture on his desk, one that was taken the day they arrived at Bawdsey for the first time, Connor ran his left index finger over his late wife’s face mournfully. He remembered that day too. *The sun was shining bright and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Just perfect. I was so proud of myself for finally giving us a legacy to leave behind to our daughter. So happy were we, yet if we only knew what lay in store for us. I miss you so much Isolde. If only you’d lived, I would’ve kept that promise I made to you, but Diedre needed to be looked after and I was determined to provide her with whatever it was that she needed. The life I’ve led has damned me for all time in the eyes of the Lord, but she’s innocent of all the blood I’ve spilled, of the things I’ve done. God willing my love, she will not follow in my footsteps and make something of herself that we both can be proud of. Help me watch over her.* He noticed his reflection in the glass, one that was now wrinkled with age, the blue eyes dull and forlorn, his once blond hair more white than gold. “You alright dad?” a young voice asked. Raising his head, he saw his fifteen year old daughter Diedre wracked with concern. If one could take the picture and hold it right next to her head, one would say that she was the spitting image of her mother, down to the blond hair that she wore in a braid, yet her ribbon was ebon black. She was dressed in an expensive pink dress that covered her legs, but not the shiny white
A sad smile came over O’ Bannon’s face and he put the cigar into the crystal ashtray. Without saying a word, his daughter came around the desk and gave her father a hug, his head resting softly on her right shoulder. “I worry about you dad. You’ve been acting strange for the past two years. What’s wrong?” Diedre pressed.

“I wish I could tell you about the partnership I had to make with them, to secure the future I want for you, but you wouldn’t understand. It pains me to have to keep this from you, but the time isn’t right. “Just the usual stresses the business brings.” Connor fibbed, feeling a bit of himself die within him. He let go of her and looked into her brown eyes. “Did you get your history work done?”

“Yes dad.” Diedre replied, but Connor knew when his daughter was trying to get away with something and cocked his eyebrow. She wilted under the pressure and admitted, “Some of it.”

O’ Bannon pointed a finger at her face and stated, “Get it done girl and done right before bed. I’ve enough paperwork to do everyday without having to flub your homework.”

Nodding in defeat, Diedre answered, “Yes dad.” She walked away from her father and strolled to the wooden chair that her history textbook rested on, along with her pencil and papers, page after page filled with notes concerning the rise of modern Germany. “It’s so dry with all the talk about politics. I can’t get into it at all.” Her eyes wandered around the room as she sat down, picking up the book and pretending to read. O’ Bannon’s office was large and spacious with red carpeting and walls, white border frames with diamond shaped imprints separating the two harmoniously. The ceiling had no tile, just hardwood lacquered to a high sheen. No light fixtures were up there, instead little niches along the walls contained unshaded lamps, the light bulbs shining bright. Every few feet or so was a wooden chair like her own, resting under an oil painting by some French or German artist whose name that Diedre couldn’t even begin to pronounce. A book case rested behind her father’s desk, the contents of which were an absolute mystery to her as he forbade her from touching them. Heirlooms from the family he says. The painting above her head was of a small cottage in the country, the white stone shining like pearls in the sun, but black clouds were coming down from the mountains, heralding the coming darkness. Gives me the creeps when I look at it, but dad won’t remove it. The thought of her father made her look at him again, puffing away at his cigar. He was dressed in a gray suit coat with black slacks and black shoes. The white button down shirt contrasted sharply with his emerald green tie, bringing out his faded blue eyes and wrinkled face, the product of years of worry. Please don’t worry so much dad. It’s killing you and me seeing you like this. If mum could see you now, she’d be horrified. Let your brother help you out more, or even me for God’s sake. This is just as much of my life as it is yours and I’ll stand to inherit it one day. It may not be what you want me to do, but I’m going to make you proud when this becomes mine. You’ll see.

Suddenly, the door at the far end of the room with a coat rack on the left side opened and in briskly walked a rather large man, one that she knew was her father’s brother Brian, her only uncle. He was younger than her dad by a few years, but unlike him, Brian wore a sickly sallow complexion due to years of alcoholism and a paddy hat at all times to cover his baldness. The blubber like jowls flapped like flags in a breeze as he huffed and puffed across the carpet, the thick wool doing nothing to lessen the creaking of the floorboards underneath it as his brogans stamped up and down . “Brother,” Brian stated with a wheeze, adjusting his brown suit coat that was stretched over his white buttoned down shirted largess to the point of bursting. “we have visitors.”

Connor looked at his brother and furrowed his creased brow. “I wasn’t expecting anybody this night. Who are they?” he demanded while taking another puff from his cigar.

“They are Sicilian’s. Seven in total. Six men, one woman. Came up by truck just a few minutes
ago.” Brian relayed, taking out a handkerchief from his front coat pocket and daubing his face with it.

Diedre watched in awe as the cigar fell from her father’s normally steady right hand, landing on his desk and scattering orange glowing ashes all over the wood, the stogie itself rolling for a good few inches before coming to a stop against the ashtray. He collapsed into his chair in shock, the legs giving out as if they were chop blocked from behind. “Where are they now Brian?” he anxiously asked, casting a fearful gaze at her for a brief moment, hoping that he had time to get her out of the room, while gathering the cigar up.

“Right where we need to be.” a heavily accented female Italian voice announced. All three of the Irish occupants looked on in fright as a short woman, probably 5’3”, strolled into the room as if she owned it, her features hidden by a long black trench coat with a popped collar, black gloves, and a wide brimmed hat. Her boots, the kind worn by military personnel, didn’t make as much of a sound as she turned her attention to the coat rack and began to take off her coat. She slipped it off quickly and hung it, smoothing out the hanging flaps of her white uniform that reminded one of a German officers coat, her black slacks providing contrast. Connor noticed immediately that something was off. *There’s a bulge in her right front pocket. A weapon? In my office? How?*

Apparently, his brother Brian noticed it too and broke the silence. “With due respect signora,” he began, his Irish mien viciously butchering the Italian, “in this room, weapons are not permitted.”

“Oh that, I’m sure.” the woman answered, taking off her hat and not even regarding Brian. The head covering revealed short dark brown hair that had streaks of gray that ran a small ways up from the neck, the skin slightly tanned. She finally turned around and Diedre gasped in amazement. Her face was scarred along the right side, six long white lines running at such angles that she looked like a living embodiment of an advanced trigonometry equation. One of them ran over her right eye, one that was clouded like gun smoke, the trauma draining it of color, going from the forehead and down, coming to a stop at the center of the upper lip. Using her sole good eye, one that was hazel, she eyed Brian and added. “Your men said that much when I came inside. Once I showed them my badge of office, they quickly realized not to press the matter.” She looked around the room and when her eye rested on Diedre, she nodded and smiled. “I’m glad that all three of you are here in this room, for what I have to say will affect all three of you greatly. My name is Emilia Largo, consigliere to the don and I wish to impart two messages if you’ll allow me.”

Connor O’Bannon became dreadfully nervous at Largo’s words. *Something that has consequences for all of us? What could it be?* “We’d be honored Ms. Largo. Please have a seat.” he kindly offered, hiding his unease well and gesturing to his brother to fetch a chair from the side of the wall, while swiping away the ashes that were left behind by the cigar. Brian moved fast, practically running to a chair that lay next to Diedre’s, picked it up, and placed it four feet in front of the desk.

“Grazie.” Emilia thanked as she sat down, crossing her legs. Diedre did her best to not pay attention to her, to do her homework like her father asked, but she couldn’t concentrate at all. *That woman is a threat to my father I’m sure of it. Well, if you want to do something bad to him, you’ll have to get through me.* She picked up her pencil and pretended to scribble down what she read, but keeping her eyes just a hair above the book cover at all times, listening intently to what she was about to say. “The first message I bear concerns a member of your family Mr. O’Bannon, a cousin to be exact.” Largo announced, reaching into her front right breast pocket slowly as to not provoke or give the wrong impression. A quick second of fishing later, and a simple silver cross with an emerald in the center of it was produced. She stood up, placed it solemnly in front of Connor, and sat back down.

Connor’s eyes flashed as he saw the icon on his desk, his mind realizing who it belonged to in an instant. *I gave it to him myself for what he did for me during Isolde’s funeral. He didn’t have to, but*
he did anyway. Even added a favor should he ever need it, one that I gladly accepted when he
needed to get out of that prison. His hands trembled as he picked it up from the wood and he held it
in his hands, feeling the cold metal on his fingertips. “Where did you get this?” he asked with a
sinking feeling in his bones.

“From Alec Buchanon himself.” Emilia answered without mirth. “I also regret to announce that your
cousin is no longer among the living.” She noticed the O’ Bannon patriarch stiffen in anger and
hastily added, “We had nothing to do with his death. Mr. Buchanon was betrayed, by one of your
own.”

“What?!” Connor exclaimed, standing up from his seat so fast that the chair flew into the bookcase
behind him with a small crash of wood and paper. “Who betrayed my cousin?! Do you have a
name?! Proof even?!”

Largo simply sat there, not bothered in the slightest at the disorder she just caused. “One of the guard
patrolling along the road rode up with me and my men, one by the name of Brandon if I recall
correctly, bring him up.” she advised. O’ Bannon gave his brother a look and his relative nodded in
silent understanding. Diedre watched as her uncle left the room without so much as saying goodbye
or even a look, leaving her and her father alone with Largo. “Scotland Yard had their barbs in him
for a good week, paying him off to the tune of five thousand pounds if he would provide information
that could lead to his arrest.” Emilia explained. “The incident took place earlier in the day, but given
his responsibilities here, he may have not had enough time to get rid of it, to hide it in a safe place.”

O’ Bannon placed his right hand underneath his chin and leaned back, sighing deeply. “And where
there’s one cockroach in the kitchen, there’s always more.”

Emilia nodded. “That saying has been proven true on more than enough occasions for my liking.”
she stated. “We recently had to do a bit of trimming ourselves. Things got very wet, very fast. It is
my hope that such methods won’t be needed here.”

Connor’s face went pale and the back of his throat dried up. He was about to inquire as to why she
said it that way, when the door opened up again and in walked Brandon, looking confused and
afraid at being summoned at such short notice without a word of explanation, Brian right on his heels
who closed the door behind him. The guard was young, probably no more than twenty and painfully
skinny with acne all over his face, making him look like he got stung by a hive of bees, dressed in
the long warm wool coat still, the shotgun having been taken from him. Emilia stood up and O’
Bannon commanded from his chair, “Come here Brandon.” Brandon walked slowly up to the desk
running his right hand through his short brown hair, trying but failing to put on a brave face in front
of the boss, Brian never more than an arms length behind him. As soon as he got near Largo, she
placed a hand on his chest, arresting his progress. Before the young man could inquire as to why, the
Italian mobster had her right hand in his coat. Not even a second went by and Emilia pulled out a
billfold, stuffed to the brim.

“Oi, that’s my mums inheritance money!” Brandon protested and he made a move to snatch it back
from her, but Brian put a plump hand on his shoulder.

“You so much as touch her boy-o, and you’ll be in worse trouble than you’re in right now.” he
growled.

Largo opened the wallet and pulled out the money, counting it carefully. When she was finished, she
handed it to Connor and grimly informed him, “Five thousand pounds exactly.”

Though she wasn’t next to him, Diedre could feel the heat of her father’s ire rise to the fore. It was
etched all over his face as he got up from his chair and took the bills in his right hand, clutching them
Brandon opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out except the dull sounds of flapping lips and gums. “Answer me!” he shouted, the noise causing his daughter to drop the textbook in fright. Again, Brandon couldn’t respond, prompting Connor to demand in a menacing voice, “My cousin is dead, killed to the tune of five thousand pounds, five thousand pounds that are in your wallet boy-o. Last time Brandon and tell me honest, did you rat out my cousin Alec?”

Brandon’s eyes looked away from O’ Bannon’s and his head hung low. “I’m sorry Mr. O’ Bannon. I had no choice. They had my sister—” he began to plead, but Connor interrupted him.

“Who paid you off?!” he shouted. “I want a name you traitor bastard filth!”

“I know who it was.” Emilia remarked, bringing attention to her again. “His words are no longer required Mr. O’ Bannon.” Diedre looked on in horror as her uncle started to take Brandon out of the room, the young man starting to cry, looking back at his former boss, hoping against all hope that he would be spared, but he got nothing in return from his former employer except a glacial cold icy stare of indifference and hate.

“You look tired Brandon.” Brian observed as he opened the door and pushed him out into the hallway. “Maybe you should take a nap.” he added as the door was shut. Diedre started to shake. Those words again. Take a nap. Uncle Brian isn’t going to-

“Diedre.” her father said softly, his anger nonexistent, making her look at him. “Come here girl.” he coaxed, holding his arms out wide. She ran to him, the notes she had taken flying everywhere in her wake, and hugged him tight so that that her embrace would force her scared tears to go away.

“Dad?” she asked, her voice and resolve shaking like Jello during an earthquake. “What’s going on? What’s going to happen to us?”

For the first time in a long time, Connor O’ Bannon could say nothing to calm his daughter’s fears, for he too had the same question ringing in his head. I don’t know lass, I don’t know. He held her close to him and sat down in his chair, putting his right hand on Diedre’s head.

“If proper steps are taken little one,” Emilia assured, coming around the other side of the desk, “nothing at all.” The response caused Diedre to regard her with an acid gaze.

Connor saw it and moved his daughter slightly out of the way so he could rotate around in his chair and look at Largo. “Who paid him?” he asked, the anger within him threatening to return.

Emilia crossed her arms over her chest and responded, “An undercover Scotland Yard detective by the name of Carmichael, the very one who arrested him all those years ago, ponied up the cash, but he didn’t do it alone. There were three others with him, two women, both witches, and one man that we still haven’t identified. He looks Italian, so we’re concentrating our search efforts in that direction.”

“Witches?” O Bannon blurted in astonishment. “Are they military?”

“Entirely plausible,” Emilia answered, walking back to her chair and sitting back down, “given how they conducted themselves, but we can’t tell for sure. I assure you that our spies within Scotland Yard will discover who and where they are in due time which now leads me to the other message.”

She took a deep breath and continued, “The don has expressed concerns over the dramatic shortfalls in product coming in to us and that includes the payments. As of now, the loss in revenue is hovering around twenty percent just from this month alone.”
“Signora,” O’ Bannon ventured politely, his pronunciation of the Italian word far better than his brother. “the war has now moved to our doorstep, making transportation that much harder to come by. Prices have gone up as a result.”

“It’s been on our front door for years now, yet we haven’t experienced anything remotely akin to what we’re seeing here.” Largo countered. “Both the don and I are of the mind that there is deliberate sabotage and embezzlement going on here, two things that he doesn’t like seeing, things that could involve us taking drastic action to correct.” She let the words hang in the air, watching Connor blanch. “My investigation will commence first thing in the morning. The men I’ve brought with me need access to the books and the background records of everyone that has had contact with this organization within the past twelve months. Do I have your full cooperation in this effort?”

O’ Bannon nodded. “Absolutely. You and the don have my support in this endeavor. I have no idea how these snakes got in, but I will do everything in my power to clear them out and prove to you both that I’m not at fault in any of this.” he declared emphatically.

“Of that, I have no doubt.” Emilia replied, smiling in admiration. She looked towards the door and started to make for it. “I also trust that as a token of your good will that you will allow me to stay on the premises?” she inquired, taking her coat and hat off the rack.

“Of course.” Connor agreed. He turned to Diedre and said to her, “Take her to the guest room lass. You remember? The one above me?”

Diedre nodded, recollecting the location of the room in question, but began to protest. “I still have the homework to do dad.” she retorted, gesturing to her disheveled work.

“I’ll take care of it.” her father replied harshly. “Now do as I say girl and go to your room afterwards.”

“Yes dad.” Diedre meekly replied and she walked out from behind the desk and looked up at Emilia, who looked a bit confused as to why she was leading her to her room. The pair didn’t break their gazes as the little Irish girl walked up right next to the Italian mafioso, standing at the threshold for a good few seconds, each gauging the other and coming to the same silent conclusion. I don’t trust you. “You ready?” she asked her, mustering all the courage that she could. Largo merely nodded and Diedre opened the door that lead into a wide hallway, the guards on either side of the door standing at attention as they walked out. It was hardwood, the floorboards walnut and waxed evenly, the white wallpaper and the hanging light fixtures dangling from the hardwood ceiling reflecting off of it like a mirror. Pictures and fine sculptures sat near the walls as Diedre turned right towards a wooden staircase, putting her tiny hand on the thick oak banister for balance. As they went up, Emilia stated, “Your father has good tastes in art. Do you have the same fondness for it?”

“Not really.” Diedre flatly replied, not wanting to make small talk and intent on getting her to the room as soon as possible. Just being near you gives me more creeps than that painting I sat under. “I’m more inclined towards business.”

Largo cocked her eyebrow as they came up to the next floor. “This sort of business?” she inquired with curiosity in her voice.

“What’s it to you?” Diedre riposted, forgoing her manners. “Why are you so inquisitive?”

Emilia felt her temper flare for a brief instant before forcing it back down. I’ve killed people a lot ruder and younger than you girl. “I’m merely trying to make small talk, nothing more Diedre.” she answered. O’ Bannon nodded absentmindedly to herself while looking out for the door to the guest room that her father meant. She saw the portal she was looking for, one that was painted black, the
only one like it in the entire house. *Never was told why. Dad said that he would tell me when I got older.*

“Here it is.” Diedre gestured hurriedly. “The door’s open. Enjoy your stay.” Expecting her to just go in and disappear, she started to turn to go back down the hallway towards her room when she got the sensation of being watched. Turning back around, she saw Largo stand there at the foot of the door, watching her every move like a dance instructor does a prospective ballerina. Diedre couldn’t help but blush in embarrassment as she remembered that it was customary to open the door for a guest before they went into the room. *I don’t want to do it, especially for her, but she might tell dad.*

“Sorry, where are my manners?” she apologized, placing a hand on the knob.

Suddenly, she felt something cold on the back of her skull, followed closely by a click. Emilia leaned over her whispering into her left ear, “After you little one. I insist.” Diedre’s blood froze as she realized that a gun was right up against her head. She started to open her mouth to cry out for help, but Largo stated with malice in every syllable, “One word and your father will be doing your homework permanently. Now open the door and stay quiet.” O’ Bannon breathed in deep and did as she was told, turning the knob and pushing open the door. Inside, the guest room was a drab affair, a rough hewn wooden floor with only a metal framed tiny bed with white sheets resting against the wall and an old dresser to the side of it. A single round window provided the sole source of illumination, the light of the moon shining through, and a small table sat in front of it, an iron three pronged candelabra at rest on the face of it and unlit. With a gentle push of the pistol, the girl got the hint and walked into the room slowly, Emilia closing the door with care behind them with one hand, the catching latch as silent as it could be. Diedre heard her rack the dead bolt and started to convulse with fear. *I’m trapped in here and there’s no way they’ll hear me past that door! Oh dad, why did you let me take her here by myself?* She felt the gun barrel press against her cranium again, and she walked further in, her steps taking her toward the foot of the bed. Once they were there, Diedre heard a sound that she didn’t expect to hear, that of a small grating of metal against metal. Taking a great risk, she turned around and saw Emilia place the lower left bed knob on the sheets and reach in with two fingers on her right hand, holding the gun in her other. Finding what she was looking for, Largo pulled out a long black wire, connected to a rounded speaker. *A bug?!*

Emilia put the pistol back in her front pocket and coiled the wire in her hands, looking over the piece of spyware. When she had around a few inches left of cord, Largo leered at Diedre menacingly with a look that told her ‘your father led me here on purpose’ and pulled hard, snapping the speaker from the wire. She let it drop from her hands onto the white bed sheets and pulled out the weapon again. *Oh God no!* Diedre backed away towards the wall, scared beyond belief, breathing hard breaths.

“Did you know about this?” Largo asked, leveling the pistol at O’ Bannon’s heart. “Did you know that the room was bugged?” Diedre tried to answer the charge, but like Brandon before her, she had not strength to defend herself and looked down, closing her eyes and awaiting the inevitable. A strong hand took her by the chin, tilting her head back up. “I’m waiting.” Largo said. *

*Diedre opened her eyes, tears of fright falling like rain down the sides of her cheeks and stammered, “I-I swear on my mums soul t-that I d-didn’t know.”* The seconds passed with the speed of growing grass as the mobster looked down at the child, her face void of expression.

“I believe you Diedre O’ Bannon.” Emilia finally answered, putting her pistol away. “Just like I believe your father when he told me that he had nothing at all to do with this, that he did nothing wrong.” O’ Bannon’s legs gave out and she laid on the cold floor, trying to calm down, wiping the tears from her face in joy. *Thank you Jesus! Thank you Lord! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!*

“But regardless,” she went on, “you and your father are in grave danger. This Carmichael has a grudge against your family and his reach is long and firm within these walls. He and his will stop at nothing until he brings ruin upon your heads, of this I’m sure.”
Diedre immediately got up from the floor and stood before Largo, her love for her father overriding all sense of fear. “You’ll protect him right? You’ll make sure he’s okay?” she hastily asked.

Emilia placed her hands on Diedre’s shoulders and stated, “I will do everything in my power, but I feel that your father’s time in the sun has passed, that he can’t lead this type of life anymore.”

“What do you mean?” O Bannon asked with concern.

“Though this business has yielded great things and opportunities for both him and you, your father understands deep down that wrong is wrong, even if it helps. His wife knew this and he’s slowly coming around to that same conclusion. In my view, it is for the best that he leaves the business behind, to get out and.” Emilia explained, but Diedre put a stop to her train of thought violently.

“Never!” she hissed. “Dad would never give this up! Yes dad didn’t want me to get involved, to follow in his footsteps, but this is as much mine as it is his and I’m not going to let him throw it away! I won’t allow it!”

“He might not have much of a choice.” Largo insisted. “Depending on how deep the tunnels these moles have dug for themselves, I might have to suggest that course of action.”

“You wouldn’t dare do that!” Diedre responded, standing firm. “You do and I’ll kill you! I swear to God!”

Largo backed away from the girl and gave her a hard look. “Watch it wee lass, tougher than you have tried to kill me.” she countered through gritted teeth. She took her left hand and moved it across the ruined part of her face. “This was courtesy of the German Army during The Great War, the beginning salvos of the Battle of Caporetto in the fall of 1917.” Emilia stuck a left handed gloved finger into her mouth and tugged her hand out. In the moonlight, Diedre could see that it was heavily scarred from burns, like she stuck her whole hand into a fire and let it cook for a good few minutes. “This too and the other.” she admitted, taking the glove out of her mouth and flexing her fingers. “I was a young girl, just like yourself, full of ideals and love for my country and profession. I wanted to continue a family legacy, to do my forefathers and mothers proud. That day changed all of that forever. The Germans sapped underneath the lines and placed tons of explosives on the exact place where I was caring for survivors of the gas attack earlier that morning. Diphosgene. You have no idea how much strength it takes to shove a tube into a man’s lungs to clear out the fluid within, to hold him down and say that it’s for his own good. At eight in the morning, they detonated the mine. One second, I was treating a patient, and the next I knew nothing. When I came to, I was still there, but instead of Italians, I was surrounded by the enemy. A young lieutenant was nearby, and he said to me these words, ‘You are being taken away from here and allowed to go home. This place, this life is not for you’."

Largo looked out the window as she put her glove back on, lost in her thoughts. “He was right you know.” she said, looking straight into Diedre’s eyes. “At first I didn’t accept it, but I relented in the end, for it was the only way I could live it down. Do you love your father?”

“More than anything.” Diedre replied without hesitation. “He raised me single handed when mum died. I owe him everything Ms. Largo. I want him to be okay, for him to be there for me when I graduate from school and university, when I get married, have children of my own.”

“Then help me help him now, make him see that all options must stay on the table.” Emilia implored. “That way, there’s a great chance for him to be there for those moments. My fear is that if he stays on, that if he tries to weather the coming storm that Carmichael’s blowing his way, he’ll get killed and you’ll die alongside him. Right now, I need you to trust me Diedre. Do I have it? Even if he has to leave this behind?”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Diedre O’ Bannon gets the day off from school and finds another way to amuse herself, taking a journey that leads right into another school, one of hard knocks at Southend-On-Sea, courtesy of Carmichael’s daring plan to ambush her family. Aaron and company fight bravely, but not everything goes to plan.

Chapter XXXI: Savage Streets

There’s an old saying in war concerning how ineffective best laid plans are in surviving first contact with the enemy. I learned that very early on in my life, but for some reason, I apparently forgot all about it when the bastard slipped through what I thought was an inescapable trap and took what remained of his followers into the sewers of once gay Paris. What was I thinking you ask? Well, to be honest, I did a lot less of that and more running and fighting for my life. Remember folks: Never expect an easy battle, especially in the shadows of Notre Dame.

Diary Entry October 21st 1943

The rain had stopped finally after coming down in torrents for the past three hours, giving Aaron some time to dry as he continued to keep silent watch on the roof of Lucretia’s flat. His magic shrouded him from view as he looked down at his watch, wiping the beads of water that still clung to the glass face. 0540 hours. Just twenty more minutes and I can call this a done deal. After the three of them got back to the station and made their report to Fleming, Divale relayed to Francesca and Shirley that he wanted to get back to flat stealthily, just in case they were followed. Knowing full well now that Carmichael knew where they lived and that he still couldn’t be trusted after witnessing his reaction to the writing, they agreed. He let Shirley drive and Lucchini holding on to her from the back seat. As for him, Aaron used obscurum and rode in the car, acting as a hidden lookout. As far as he saw and felt, they weren’t tailed at all, but Divale wasn’t taking any chances. Slinking out of the house after a quick bite to eat, he placed an alarm near the door, a spell that unless dispelled by him, would create this intense shriek that would wake up half the neighborhood and everyone inside. Kept me safe in France and saved my life more than a few times. Then he walked down the street for about a few dozen feet before ducking into an alley, cloaking himself, and flying up into the air, perching himself like some bird of prey on a ledge on the roof. And there he sat since seven in the evening, eleven hours of being outside, not so much as moving a muscle, even when the winds blew hard and the rain came pouring down in sheets.

Aaron rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn as he took another gander around the place, looking for anything out of the ordinary. The sun hadn’t risen yet, the skies overcast and gray. Wind gusted at certain points, but not like last night at all. It was brutal and I’m used to enduring those sorts of things. Turning his head left and right from his position, one that was over the front door, but slightly
off center so that he could watch the rear, he kept a running tally of things that could be considered suspicious in his brain, little features that while looking perfectly fine to anyone else, kept him occupied for hours, peering at them intently. Every window, every light, every rustle of a curtain or blinds could be harboring a pair of eyes that seek to harm us. The witches think I’m paranoid, but I know better. “Do you now?” a voice piped up near him, as if knowing what he was thinking and making a comment. Divale’s lips curled contemptibly as he looked over his right shoulder at a puddle of rain water that failed to drain from clogged gutter started to smoke on the surface.

“Really?” Aaron asked. “You too?”

The liquid stopped fogging over and the face of Ismenoth appeared, the demon’s yellow brow furrowed in thought. “Partially,” she answered at length, her left hand adjusting her bangs, “though let’s be serious for a moment Aaron. If Carmichael really wanted you under a microscope, he would’ve done it when you were traveling to meet him at The Royale two days ago.”

“Maybe he couldn’t then.” Aaron theorized.

Ismenoth sighed heavily, her breath sounding like the death of one who passes away in their sleep. She looked at Divale and pouted her lips. “I think you may be overthinking this, but out of the many things that annoy me about you, this part of you gets to me every time. Never settling for the simple and instead putting yourself in the middle of a well of hurt that you didn’t need to go into in the first place. Makes for such interesting times, like that one in Paris, remember?” A bright light and night descends once more and the rain comes down again, worse that ever before. A pair of feet move in blurs, churning up mud and debris from the ruined road that ran straight through a main drag, a heart pumping loudly, matching the footfalls. Eyes frantically scan the skies above and behind, the breathing ragged, the exertion taxing the body. Pain registers in the brain. Muscles are cramping up, but onwards we go through the streets of the devastated city of Paris, fear keeping us moving. Suddenly, a flapping of wings is heard and the world spins as a body combat rolls through a blown open door to a house, the wood long since molded away. A shotgun is pulled out as a hiding place in found further in, one behind an overturned sofa, causing rats to scurry about and squeak in indignation upon having their nests rudely disturbed. The weapon is worn and heavily scuffed from excessive use, but still ready to unleash a blast of buckshot at anything stupid enough to pursue. Vision is blurry and a left hand wipes the mud and grime clear. Something lands hard, cracking loose stones free from the asphalt and concrete. It growsl menacingly and unleashes a flurry of clicks from it’s throat. Cautiously, vision pans around the far side of the sofa, and sees nothing but a blue glow emanating from whatever it is, the light moving to and fro. Realization kicks in. It knows someone came through here and is searching. Thoughts drift back to the last words the former prefect of Lille said as the gun is clutched tighter. ‘You may think you did a great thing for them, but you’ve done nothing but cause pain. This sin was seen by them, the eyes of Notre Dame and you will soon know their displeasure.’

“I wish I couldn’t recall, but I do unfortunately.” Aaron groaned, feeling the parasympathetic pains in his back flare up again as he relived the clash in his mind as the memory vanished.

“You had it all taken care off.” Ismenoth pointed out. “The prefect was dead and so were his cronies. Should’ve lined up your shot better, killed him outright instead of letting him drag himself out that cathedral door as he bled out. Once those gargoyles started to come to life, what should you have done?”

“Cloaked and flew away.” Aaron answered, not really paying much attention to her.

“Yet you stayed and fought them, all seven at one time.” Ismenoth scolded. “That act of bravado on your part nearly killed you. It got so bad that I had to intervene to save your ass from getting
mauled.”

_I couldn’t let them live and prey upon scavenger team and other survivors you heartless bitch. So what I got roughed up, I lived. And of course the icing on the cake- “I remember someone getting pretty pissed.”_ Aaron chuckled as he ran his fingers through his hair.

Ismenoth glared at him and her face trembled in anger. “You tricked me!”

“Not really,” Aaron replied, “you were the one that wanted my soul. Wasn’t my fault that you didn’t specify.”

The demoness gave a growl in frustration at having been deceived so easily, to be robbed of her prize. “The next time you need me that badly Aaron, I’ll make damn sure to specify what I want from you.” she seethed through gritted teeth.

“I’d rather die than let you have it.” Aaron declared. “You can threaten me with all the Ten Plagues of Egypt and you’ll never get any closer to my soul.”

“We’ll see.” Ismenoth spat. The puddle of water clouded over and the fiend’s face disappeared. _You’ll help me out again. You talk big, but when the moment of truth comes you shrink Ismenoth and you will shrink again._ Looking back down at his watch he saw that it was a few seconds away from six in the morning. Deciding to call it a day, Aaron stood up slowly, his muscles aching like a ditch diggers and his stiff joints cracking like fissuring rocks. He breathed in deep, letting the pain flow out of him as he unfurled his wings and flew into a deserted alley, the same that he used yesterday to help set up his watch. It didn’t take long to reach it, end the enchantment, and walk nonchalantly back to Lucretia’s flat. While doing so, he felt for the key in his front right pants pocket as he made circles with his neck, letting the muscles and tendons stretch, relieving the pressure on his spine. _Doing that never used to hurt like this. Maybe Minna was right, I’m not getting any younger and I can’t take things like that for granted anymore._ Thinking that made him uneasy as he took out the key and fitted it into the lock, feeling the pins catch. He opened the door slowly and walked in, muffling his footsteps as best he could. Making his way into the living room, he saw that Shirley and Lucchini were still sound asleep with Yeager on the couch, lying on her back and arms spread out, snoring lightly and her wingman curled up into the fetal position at her feet like a cat, pillows and covers strewn about.

Paying them little attention, he took off his damp uniform top and draped it over a wooden chair. Aaron rubbed his eyes again and sat down on the floor, his back against the wall. Though he felt hungry, he knew that he didn’t really need to eat. Suddenly, the light in one of the windows across from him changed. Whipping his head around, he saw to his relief that it was only the sunrise turning the gray skies into a sea of oranges and reds, the rays flooding into the house. It was at that point that Lucchini woke up yawning and pushed herself up into a sitting position, the cushions sagging down. She noticed Aaron was in the room and called out in a low voice. “Good morning. How long have you been back?”

“Good morning to you as well.” Divale answered with a small smile. “Haven’t been back long. Maybe a minute or two at most. How did you all sleep?”

“Better than you by a mile it looks like.” Lucchini commented as she slid carefully off the sofa as not to disturb Shirley. _She’s like a bear being woken up during hibernation. Not pretty at all._ She landed on her feet and stretched her arms above her head, the white T shirt looking more yellow than anything in the sunlight.

“I’ve weathered worse in my time.” Aaron retorted. “And I still look fantastic.”
“If by fantastic you mean having the stare of a long range patrolman during an all night ambush then yes.” Francesca countered right back, walking towards him. She knelt down in front of him and took a closer look at his face. “You didn’t have to do that you know.” she added.

“I know,” Aaron acknowledged while nodding, “but I had to make sure. While nothing was amiss and we weren’t followed, I’ve lost too many friends to negligence on my part.”

“Don’t put so much on your shoulders.” Lucchini stated. “You’ve done enough heavy lifting over the years, let someone else take a piece of it for a while.”

*I know I should Lucchini, God knows I should, but I can’t. Something could go wrong, someone could overlook something. For better or for worse, I will do what I do.”* Maybe one day.” he said, looking back at the sunrise again. Francesca turned around and sat off to his right side, watching the view along with him.

“It’s a blood red sun.” she observed, pointing with her right hand. “There will be some rough going today.”

“Yes there will.” Aaron agreed. “Yes there will.”

“You should get some sleep.” Lucchini suggested. “At least get an hour or so because Carmichael said that the earliest time the vessel will be in the harbor is around nine.” Aaron didn’t answer and it made her stare at him out of concern and when she did, she understood why. Breathing in softly was Divale, fast asleep from exhaustion. Francesca got up and got a blanket from off the floor, draping it over him. *Rest easy my friend because you’ll need it.*

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Diedre closed the front right drivers side door to the car behind her as she buckled up, her uncle Brian placing her brown leather backpack in the back seat with one arm. She looked out the window and saw the gathering of cleanup crews getting ready outside of her school, suiting up in silence in rubber waders that came halfway up their chests or trudging off with shovels. The rain last night hit the town hard, the school she went to in particular, causing the basement to flood, ruining supplies and books from the entirety of the first floor. When they arrived, the headmaster came up to them saying that school was closed until further notice. She panned her view all around, taking in the sights of a small community devastated by mother nature. Mud was everywhere she looked, mixed with fallen branches and loose debris of all kinds, from barrels to bicycles. There was even a car, silt and soil spilling out of the interior, ruined beyond repair. Large sinkholes had developed along some parts of the road or even on property lines, creating crevasses that swallowed cars, sidewalks, even homes. Policeman and medical personnel navigated back and forth on foot, sectioning off portions that were deemed unsafe to drive on or evacuating people to safer sections, the prospect of using vehicles on ground that wasn’t so solid anymore too great a risk to take. *My God it’s awful. “Looks like you lucked out lass.” Brian observed, following the policeman’s waving hands to keep to the right as he turned up north out of the town. O’Bannon nodded slowly, wishing that school wasn’t canceled. *I need something to get my mind off of what happened last night, what I had to say to Largo.* Brian shifted gears, the tires somehow finding purchase in the soggy earth and off they went, back to Bawdsey. Her uncle shifted in his seat uncomfortably, using his left hand to rub the muscles in his lower back, the jarring from the uneven dirt road not helping matters at all.

“You alright Uncle Brian?” Diedre asked, noticing his discomfort.

“Overexerted myself last night.” Brian explained, wincing as he felt a rough patch of stressed tissue. “Plus I didn’t sleep a wink due to that rain last night. Kept me up until almost four in the morning.” He turned to her and said, “But don’t worry, our home isn’t like your school. Your father made sure
of that.”

“Ah.” Diedre uttered, looking forward out of the windshield, seeing the fields of wheat and corn pass by one after the other. _Overexerted yourself you say? More like covering up the fact that you had to send Brandon back home, in a very small box. Nice try, but I know what you do here uncle._

“You alright there lass?” Brian asked. “You’ve been awfully quiet since breakfast. Something on your mind?”

“Uncle Brian, be honest with me.” Diedre requested, regarding him with her brown eyes. “Do you trust Emilia Largo?”

“Do you?” Brian responded, answering her question with a question of his own.

“When she came in last night,” Diedre began, clasping her hands tight, “I felt scared because I thought that she was going to hurt dad, you, me, all of us. Yet when I walked her up to her room, we talked a bit and-”

“What?!” Brian exclaimed in shock and he put his foot on the brakes hard, Diedre almost hitting her head on the dashboard. He put the car in park and turned in his seat so that he could face her fully. “What did she say to you Diedre and speak true lass. Any bit of information you have could help us. Out with it!” he pressed anxiously.

Diedre was astonished that her uncle would do something so reckless with the car while she was in it, but now she found herself in a bind. I told Emilia that what happened will remain a secret. Gave my word and everything. If I tell Uncle Brian, who knows what will happen. Just have to wing it and hope for the best.

“Well,” she began, doing her best to look like she was trying to recollect the truth, “I took her up to the room like dad requested and opened the door for her. I made an attempt to politely leave when she bids me to stay a little longer, gesturing to into the room. Thought it was very strange to be sure.”

“What happened next?” Brian asked.

“She puts her finger to her lips, a signal for quiet and she removes one of the bed knobs. Inside the metal was a bug Uncle Brian and she was furious.” Diedre continued, shaking a tad.

“Did you tell her you didn’t know?” Brian inquired.

“I did.” Diedre admitted. “I honestly had no idea that a bug was there. She listened to me and said that she believed me, just like she believes dad.”

Brian breathed a sigh of relief. _Well brother at least we have her on our side._ “That’s good to hear Diedre. Anything else?” he queried.

O’ Bannon hesitated, reluctant to go on, and swallowed deeply. _Have to phrase this carefully or else I’m dead to rights._ “Largo seems to believe that the roots of corruption run deep here, and to that end, she thinks that dad should get out of this, flee the country and retire before Carmichael does something horrible to us.” she conveyed with tears in her eyes, accepting that such a thing could come to pass still a bittersweet pill to swallow. With a start, she took hold of her uncle and hugged him, tears falling down her face. “I love dad Uncle Brian and I don’t want him to get hurt. Will you tell him this please?” she sobbed.

Brian O’ Bannon held his niece in his arms and rocked her back and forth. _Oh lass if you only knew how much I’ve been telling him the exact same thing since Isolde died._ “Your father already knows that you love him and he knows how much you care for him. Those facts were never in question.
However, I will tell him that if it will make you feel better. Thank you for telling me this. You have no idea how much this takes off our collective shoulders Diedre.” he replied. He then let her go and looked forward getting his bearings back. “Ah, we’re already close.” he muttered. Diedre looked at what her uncle was looking at and gazed upon the muddy road, bisected in two with one path leading up a hill and the other going east. It didn’t take long for her to recognize that the route going up the hill was the way to her house. *Is he going to make me walk up in my nice dress?* “I’m sorry to do this lass, but your father wants me to go to Southend-On-Sea to take care of some business there and if I take you all the way up, I’ll be late and you know how much he hates that.” Knowing that arguing with him would be pointless, Diedre got out of the car and set foot on terra firma, taking off the sash across her waist and readjusting the yellow dress she wore so that the ends wouldn’t get muddy. Brian waited for her to do this and then handed her the backpack. “Remember,” he added, knowing that his niece never liked going up that path alone, “if you feel uncomfortable at any point, take one of the guards with you.”

“I will uncle.” Diedre answered before closing the car door. She stood off to the side as her father’s brother restarted the car and drove away, going slow to start as not to spray her with mud. O’ Bannon waved goodbye and wiped the tears that still dribbled down her cheeks. *Thank goodness you don’t have dad’s ability to detect my fibs. It pains me to lie to you uncle, but I have no choice.* Shouldering the backpack, Diedre began the foreboding trek up to her house, a good mile and a half up. *It’s alright Diedre, nothing is in this woods that can harm you. Poachers are kept out and there are never any paparazzi looking to get a picture anymore ever since Brian nearly killed that one poor chap when he snapped a picture of me in my swimsuit two summers ago. He was so angry I though he would burst.* Thoughts like this and more went through her mind as she continued on her less than merry way, her shiny black shoes now being caked with mud and dirty water. Birds were chirping in and among the trees and the squirrels were out and about, jumping from one branch to the other, their landings creating miniature deluges that drenched whatever was underneath them. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the smell of green and the sea as tiny breezes whistled through the foliage. Every few hundred feet or so, there was a clearing which allowed one to look upon the sea if they wished to do so. Feeling that the sight would calm her down a bit, she turned and looked out across the water, the waves lapping against a coastline that stretched as far as her eyes could see, rocky outcroppings teeming with marine birds that pecked and strutted around. *No wonder why dad chose this place for our home. It’s beautiful.* The thought made her sad, knowing that there was a possibility that it could all be taken away in an instant. Not wishing to dwell on it any further, she resumed walking, taking a small shortcut that lead into the forest interior that some of the guards took while navigating the area.

Diedre didn’t even get within thirty steps down the way before she heard a shrill cry coming some distance in front of her. Immediately, she crouched down, hiding as best she could. Her eyes searched the way forwards and her heart beat rapidly as they panned to and fro, searching and for the source of the sound. *It’s probably just a crane or heron. They do come up this tie of year.* The reasoning didn’t wash as the cry burst forth again, triggering something within her. *Wait a second, I know whose yelling. It’s my old nanny Dolores! Is she hurt?* Curiosity getting the best of her, Diedre kept low and continued to move closer to the origin point. Looking down, she placed her feet on roots and rocks, not leaves or twigs. *Dad used to tell me that if you find solid ground, no one will be able to find you in the woods.* Step by step, O’ Bannon traversed the woods, keeping one eye on her feet and the other in front. Soon, the red and yellow flickering of a fire pierced through the green, followed by the harsh smoke and the popping of sparks. An engine thrummed loudly, the pistons ramming up and down. Voices could be heard too, those that didn’t sound like her former nanny at all, speaking a language that Diedre couldn’t even begin to understand. *Could they be the Sicilians? What are they doing with Dolores?* Seeing a wide willow tree trunk, she made for it with lunging steps and put her back against it. Her nanny cried again, the sound rending her heart, but she kept firm as another thought crossed her mind. *If they have her, she must’ve been in league with
Carmichael. But why? Dolores has been loyal since I was a babe. What caused her to change?

Then, another voice she recognized reached her ears, Largo’s. “There is no point in yelling for help Dolores. Connor O’ Bannon has left strict instructions to the guards to not interfere with our investigation, regardless of how august a figure such as yourself might be.” Emilia stated. Finding the courage within her to turn, Diedre swallowed deeply and cautiously poked her head around the outer edge of the trunk. Greeting her eyes were the Sicilian’s, the men all gathered around the fire, either warming themselves, talking, or stoking the flames higher, sending plumes of sparks flying into the morning air. In the fire pit was a pair of tongs and a poker, the business ends glowing white hot. Their truck was parked alongside them, the engine idling and the tail gate down. No sign of Dolores or Emilia. Where are they? As if she heard her thoughts, Largo emerged from around the truck, her gait and eyes directing her to the fire. Taking a rag from her back pocket, she wrapped it around her gloved right hand and reached for the poker handle, lifting it from the fire, turning it in her hand. Largo regarded her men and gave an approving nod, before turning around and disappearing out of sight around the truck. Dolores might be there too. I have to see.

Diedre maneuvered around the trunk and bounded the eight or so feet separating her and the other side of the vehicle. She stopped near the tail gate and gently scampered inside the truck. Her hands and knees found purchase along the metal, mud and water all over her dress and hands, but she paid it no mind. I’ll just tell dad that I fell on my way up. The interior was mostly bare except for a trio of boxes pressed flush against the right hand side. Deciding to make her way there as that would get her into a position to look out the porthole behind the drivers cabin, O’ Bannon crept silently, listening intently for any approaching footsteps keeping her body tense in case she had to roll under the seats, which thankfully had a green drape that would shield prying eyes. Every second felt like minutes as she moved. Finally reaching her destination, she stood up, and slid the iron slide away just a tad, allowing her to look out the windshield.

Diedre stifled a gasp as she saw, tied around a tree with thick corded rope, her old nanny Dolores who was dressed in a blue one piece evening gown, her gray hair matted and greasy from not having a morning bath. The wrinkles on her face were wracked with pain and anguish, burn marks along the sides of her temples, the tip of the nose, and underneath her jaw. Some of them had burst, clear liquid running from the wounds. Her breath came out in ragged gasps as she struggled to keep herself from going into shock, a feat that given her advanced age, would only end in one outcome. Then, Emilia Largo came into view, brandishing the still hot poker in her right hand, advancing towards the old woman with evil intentions in her eyes. “You should cooperate.” Largo mentioned, stopping in front of the traitor that she found. “If you tell me what I need to know, I can make this all stop, and all will be better for you.”

“To hell with you and your honeyed words!” Dolores cried. She looked at the Italian with her old brown eyes and smiled. “You and I both know how this is going to play out.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.” Emilia pointed out, taking another step towards her. “There are other ways you could be punished, ways that don’t involve me taking your life. Someone else could do it, but not me if you answer my questions.”

“You’d really do that? Truly?” Dolores asked, caving in slightly, hanging her head.

Largo came up close to her and picked up her head with her left hand, placing it under the chin and tilting the head. “You’ll never know Dolores if you don’t take the chance.”

Diedre watched as her old nanny’s resolve, something she had never managed to even strain in her worst of moments, shatter into pieces like glass. “What do you want to know?” she muttered.

“How did Carmichael contact you?” Emilia asked, whistling for one of her men to come up.
“It was easily two months ago.” Dolores began. “I was walking down the Pickman Avenue in Ipswich and some puckish rouge came up from behind me and grabbed my bag. He got at least ten feet away from me before a man in a long brown trenchcoat sprinted after him, chasing him down an alley.”

“That man being Carmichael no doubt.” Emilia deduced, handing the poker and rag to her man. “What happened next? Did you follow them, and if so, why?”

“Being a caretaker of children, its recommended but not required to have basic medical training in case a child in your care gets sick or injured.” Dolores explained. “I had experience when I volunteered towards the tail end of The Great War. Though I didn’t see a weapon of any kind on either, I went after them as best as I could in case either got hurt.”

“Makes no sense to me in helping a man that does you wrong, but alright. Continue.” Largo pressed.

Dolores was briefly taken aback at such a cold statement, but recovered and went on. “I got within a stones throw of the alley they went down and I heard this great struggle. I round the corner and the man in the brown trenchcoat was standing behind the thief, taking his head and ramming it repeatedly into the side of a brick building. Once, twice, three times he did this before throwing the rascal down to the ground. He looks up, noticing me and bids me to come over to him. I was terribly frightened mind you, but then he flashes a police badge which calmed me down enough to obey. Gathered up my bag and hands it to me, asking for my name, for records sake. Naturally I gave it and he then remarks, and I quote here, ‘The nanny to Diedre O’ Bannon, daughter of Connor O’ Bannon’? Had to politely correct him that I hadn’t been that girl’s caretaker for a good two years, but I did say yes. He then looked away at the unconscious ruffian at his feet and then back at me, nodding. Tells me to have a pleasant day and starts handcuffing the man.”

“At any point did you find it strange that he asked you who you were?” Largo inquired, crossing her arms. “Unless the case is serious and goes unsolved for more than twenty four hours, proper police protocol in England dictates that the victim remain anonymous.”

“I didn’t know police protocol at the time.” Dolores replied fearfully. “How was I supposed to know?” Diedre kept her eyes glued to the scene, her muscles locked rigid. Even if she could move them, her curiosity wouldn’t let her turn her head away. Largo made circles with her right hand, a silent sign for Dolores to keep going. “Anyway,” the old woman recollected, “when I got back to Bawdsey later that day, I looked in my bag to double check that nothing came out and found a folded letter.”

“Do you still have it?” Emilia asked anxiously.

Dolores shook her head, “I burned it for it said to.” she answered sadly.

“What did that letter say Dolores?” Largo pressed. “What did Carmichael ask you to do? What did he pay you to betray the family you served?”

“He said that he had intentions against the O’ Bannons and now that he knew that Connor had a daughter, he knew exactly where the first strike would land and when it happened, her father would know of how and why it happened.” Dolores stated, tears welling up. “I cared for that child for years and I felt so bad at having been so careless in answering him so truthfully. Diedre is a good girl who doesn’t deserve to suffer on account of what her father does, and I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if she got hurt or worse because of me. I had no choice but to agree to tell him where the telephone lines were.”

Emilia’s eyes widened and she went pale. She opened her mouth to say something, but her words
were drowned out by a roaring series of explosions that seemed to come from every direction. The booms shocked Diedre into action, making her get on all fours and crawl under the draped seating. As she did so, O’ Bannon heard Emilia bark out orders in her native language, no doubt ordering the men to stamp out the fire and get in the truck. Then, she heard the cocking of a pistol followed by a single gunshot. Diedre winced, knowing that her old nanny was dead, with no one to properly care for the body. She started to cry, but the tears never came as the sounds of booted feet came up and over the tail gate, urgently finding seats. Through the pencil thin gaps in the flaps, Diedre could see much to her horror that she was surrounded by muddy black boots. Oh dear almighty God if they see me here, what will they do to me? Another set of sounds drew her attention away from her immediate predicament, the slamming of a driver side door and the shifting of gears. Her eyes widened in realization. We’re moving! Where are we going? Then she heard Emilia tell a few things in Italian that made no sense, but three words stood out, filling Diedre with fear and dread: Southend-On-Sea.

Carmichael looked at his watch and smiled to himself, listening to the faint sounds of explosions that occurred many miles away. All charges went off. So far the plan is working to perfection. They won’t get suspicious at all, thinking it to be thunder for all they know. They won’t know that their communications have been cut off until it’s much too late. “Any change in situation?” he asked Aaron, regarding his partner. The two had been in position for the better part of an hour, monitoring the dock and the adjoining warehouse that would serve as the entrepot for the shipment through a broken window on the second floor of a condemned office building. The weather was crummy and the winds howled furiously, each gust feeling like a knife against one’s cheek as it found ways into their hiding place. Inside wasn’t much better with the rotten floors, molded over walls, and piles upon piles of rat droppings. Furniture, chairs, filing cabinets, and more were overturned and broken. A ceiling fan above them suddenly came away from its moorings and fell to the floor was a dull thump of metal and plastic, the culprit of the sabotage, a lone fat rat hanging by its front paws only briefly before somehow managing to pull itself up and through the hole in the ceiling.

“Besides that little bit of excitement, a whole bunch of fuck all.” Aaron replied, looking through a thin streak of clean that he personally made when they set up shop. “The count is still the same, seven guards on the outside with an unknown number inside. Add in the skeleton crew of three minders on the docks we have ten total, same as last time.” He paused and turned around to Carmichael who picked up his Lee Enfield from a dusty table top, wiping the funk of lord knows how long away with a handkerchief. “You sure you want whatever’s one that ship? It would be far better to sink the bitch and let lie.”

“Believe me my boy,” Carmichael replied, making sure that he had a full clip into the bargain, “the thought had crossed my mind numerous times, but mind this fact. Though Dover is much bigger, Southend-On-Sea functions as an overflow point where ships that can’t get into that port can still find safe harbors. Granted, the Defense Ministry hasn’t really buffed up the defenses here due to the air perimeters further south, any disruption in shipping here could jeopardize lives down the road and a sunken ship in harbor would qualify as such. That way is a no go Aaron unless circumstances dictate otherwise.”

Divale nodded, the explanation plausible. Guess that’s why you told us that we couldn’t bring grenades. It also made him think about something else. “Given how big such an operation like this is, do you think that they will send someone in their higher echelons to oversee it all? To put the O’ Bannon stamp of approval on things as it were?”

“I sincerely hope so.” Carmichael quipped coming up to the window and taking a gander out of the thumb thick slit. “Anything we can do to hurt the O’ Bannons will make for easier times later.” He
was about to leave Aaron to his duty when he saw a car come up the road leading to the warehouse, an expensive black Rolls Royce. “Looks like the family decided to oblige us.”

Aaron thumbed his communicator and morsed, (You see that car Shirley?). Both the witches were on the opposite end of things in an alley next to another building further down, cloaked from view by Divale’s magic and in a better position to get the angle on another who might come up from the main drag. Carmichael provided them with warm overcoats and hats and Aaron gave Shirley Sleipnir, knowing that if things went down, they had to link up and fast.

A second later, he got a reply, (We see it Aaron. Looks expensive. Can’t see inside of it due to the smoked windows. Will update as soon as we get eyes on the passengers.) Suddenly, Carmichael tapped Divale on the right shoulder and pointed to the road again. Following his finger, the warlock could see police squad cars trailing a small ways behind the Royce, no lights or sirens, just silently making their way to the warehouse as if it they were practicing for a parade.

“The fuck is going on?” Aaron murmured, making sure that his four Webley’s were secure in his pockets.

“I think the O’ Bannon’s have part of the Southend-On-Sea police force in their pocket.” Carmichael grimly replied, looking through the scope of his rifle. Part of it? That looks more like all of it. Divale looked out again and saw the whole motorcade set up a perimeter around the warehouse front. The squad car doors opened up and out came cops in full uniform, armed with rifles and shotguns, looking out across the way, making sure that nothing was amiss as sergeants moved their deputies around. One in particular stood out, a small man with a bushy gray beard and carrying many honors on his chest who made his way to the black Rolls Royce. “That’s Chief Inspector McGrath, head of the whole shebang.” Carmichael muttered with disgust. “Respectable, cool headed, and now corrupt.” McGrath stood at attention, saluting as the driver opened the door and got out. A few seconds went by as Carmichael eyed this new arrival, taking in the sight of a man who looked too well fed with a paddy hat firmly on top of his head and holding a brown paper bag. “My God in Heaven,” Carmichael exclaimed softly with a smile on his face, “Brian O’ Bannon, Connor’s brother and right hand man. Normally, he’s in charge of the dirty work that they do. Willing to bet my salary that he put the hit on some of our own over that past few months.”

“I’m willing to see that bet and raise you my back pay that what O’ Bannon has in his hands isn’t his packed lunch.” Aaron countered. Both men looked on as O’ Bannon handed the McGrath the bag and crack a smile on his porcine face. The Chief Inspector reached into the bag and pulled out a wad of money as thick as two baseball bat heads, nod in approval, and put it back in. I may not have a proper education and all, but even I can tell that that’s a lot of money. Easily fifty thousand, maybe more. He morsed to Shirley, (We’ve identified the head honchos. The little guy is Chief Inspector McGrath of the Southend-On-Sea police department and the one in orbit near him is Brian O’ Bannon, the right hand of the gang. How many do you see out there?)

(Getting a count now.) Yeager morsed back frantically, (We count around fifty cops and- hold on a tick. Looks like the doors are opening.) Sure enough, the large warehouse doors started to slowly part revealing the interior.

“What do you see Carmichael?” Aaron asked, worrying that the situation was escalating far beyond what they were capable of handling.

Carmichael peered through his scope and his face darkened. Inside the warehouse were five transport trucks and an additional thirty men, armed with Gewehr 43’s, PPSh-41’s, and six men, split into teams of two, manned three DShk 38 heavy machine gun emplacements behind sandbagged positions. ‘They’ve got at least thirty men in there with semi automatic rifles, submachine guns, and
three machine guns.” he answered without mirth. A display of strength, showing the police that they have the means to get out of this pickle if things go south.

Eschewing the morse code Aaron relayed, “You get that ladies?”

“That we did.” Shirley said. “When we add the outer perimeter, plus the interior, and however many they have coming in on the ship within the next half hour, we could be outnumbered by a good twenty five plus to one here. I say we abort or call for backup.”

“That’s a negative on that captain.” Carmichael retorted. “We have no friends here that will help us as you can plainly see, and Fleming has already committed what officers he could scrounge up in ambushing that ship before it reaches the harbor. We’re on our own.”

“Are we really going to fire on cops?” Shirley inquired with apprehension in her voice. “What if some of these men don’t know what’s going on? Do you have any idea what they do to cop killers where I’m from?”

Aaron shook his head and illuminated, “If they didn’t know what was going on by now, it’s obvious that they’re complicit in this whole scheme. Moreover, let me shoot this by you. A policeman that takes a payment from a private or public figure, other than the one that he or she rightfully earns for services rendered, is willingly accepting a bribe. According to the Allies, people who embark on adventures either on foreign soil or on the home front, purely for personal financial gain and are not an official part of the armed forces, are dubbed mercenaries, and mercenaries have no protection under the law if they are found to be engaging in activities that are deemed detrimental to a wartime effort within a combatant nation’s borders. So, as far as I’m concerned, these are not police officers anymore Shirley, but smuggling aides. I’m sure you’ve seen them take the money.” He paused and regarded Lucchini over the comms, “Francesca, though I’m not considered a native son of Italy, inform your friend what they do to crooked cops where we’re from.”

Aaron kept his finger on the receiver, allowing him to pick up residual noises on the other end. Though faint, he could hear Lucchini tell her wingman, “Four words Shirley, piano wire neck tie.”

“I know you don’t like the look or sound of this Captain Yeager,” Carmichael added, “but Divale is right. These officers are corrupt and they know the penalty they face if they are found out. Make no mistake, if it’s between putting a bullet in you or spending the next twenty five years in prison, they’ll take shooting you dead every single time. I don’t like the thought of firing on fellow officers either. I’ve known McGrath for years, hell, the man was my instructor at the academy in Cambridge. Even met his family for Christ’s sake. But given what he’s doing now, I can’t and won’t stand for it and neither should you. Stand by. Operation Thunderball will commence in sixty seconds. Good luck and be careful out there you two.”

“You as well Carmichael.” Shirley replied and cut the link.

Carmichael looked over at Aaron who was strangely rummaging through a rusty overturned filing cabinet. “You should get into position Aaron. If you are indeed as powerful as your friends say you are, I need you to do some heavy lifting out there.” he stated walking towards him.

“I will Carmichael.” Aaron quipped, sifting through yellowed dusty papers and mildewed folders, “but there’s something that I have to do first.” The detective watched as Divale pulled out of the ruined cabinet drawer a quarter full bottle of whiskey, the label mostly torn yet legible, and the cork still firmly pressed down. Dear diary, jackpot. Always had a nose for these sorts of things. Aaron wiped the sides of the flask bottle with his left hand and swirled the brown liquid around. “By Jove, it’s not contaminated.” he observed, pulling the cork off the bottle with a crisp pop. After he took a customary whiff, he offered it Carmichael who denied it with a few quick side waves of his right
hand. Divale conducted his ritual and bubbled up the remains of the whiskey, swallowing the last dregs within ten seconds. Carmichael shook his head in awe as his fellow compatriot then tossed the bottle back into the cabinet from where it was found and cracked his knuckles.

“You sure you can pull this off half cocked?” Carmichael queried with concern.

Aaron regarded the detective with a sly grin and a wink. “Please, remember who you’re talking to,” he said. Divale then walked past Carmichael and unfurled his wings as he got close to a vast hole that led down to the ground floor, a drop of twenty feet. Without fear, he hopped up and fell through the chasm, his wings allowing him to slow his descent enough so that it looked like he floated down.

He wiped his grimy left hand on his pant leg and pulled out two of the revolvers, cocking the hammers, the sound echoing all around the walls of the deserted building. “Don’t forget this. Though I haven’t a clue as to why you bothered bringing it in the first place.” Carmichael called down the hole. Aaron looked up and saw his comrade positioning an old megaphone over him. He nodded and the detective dropped it down. Though inebriated, the warlock caught the acoustic device with his elbows. “So how do you plan on thinning the herd out there?”

After he placed the gun in his left hand back into his front left pocket, swapped the right revolver to his left, and took hold of the megaphone with his right, Aaron looked up at Carmichael and answered, “Bring the rain.”

Brian looked inside the warehouse and smiled proudly. Damn good job setting up my boys. Show our strength. He took a few steps inside and took off his hat, quickly running his right hand over his bald scalp before putting it back on. It’s a lifesaver for my pride to be sure, but I’ll be thrice damned if it isn’t itchy and hot. Spotting the radio man, a mumbling gentleman by the name of Robert, he called out to him, “How much longer until the Odette hails us?”

Robert turned around in his seat and regarded the headman with a respectful nod. “Bou fiftee minues. Nah mush moor.” he reported in his own way of speaking.

A heavy footfall behind him drew Brian’s attention away from the radioman. He didn’t have to acknowledge Chief Inspector McGrath, but given that his cooperation in the matter did render the possibility of being discovered next to impossible, it was probably the right move. “Very soon governor we’ll be offloading the old girl and getting all out of your hair as soon as possible.” O’ Bannon announced.

The police officer put on a relieved face, knowing that the less time it took for them to clear out, the better. “That pleases me.” McGrath stated. “The boys are eager to play around with the generous donation you gave them all.”

Of that I’m sure. Fifty thousand pounds split even that many ways is still close to a full grand, enough to pay a man’s wages for the next four months if not more. Brian then walked out the way he came in and stretched his arms, or at least tried to given the fact that years of living large had caught up with him. Connor was right about me. Don’t eat so much and do so little he said, or else you be living and looking like it. Should’ve listened. Guess maybe next year, I’ll make my New Year’s resolution to lose weight. He looked around the warehouse front, past the sea of cops and took in the sight. Though the dockyards of the city were invaluable, lack of appropriate funding by the city council had left this section fairly shabby. More than a few of the adjoining warehouses and office buildings around him were deserted or condemned, legacies of the crash of ’29. The wharves were warped in places or even rotted through, prompting makeshift ones to be built, mostly by ripping bits and pieces of wood and steel from the old buildings and erecting these haphazard
walkways that looked so flimsy that Brian was surprised that the wind didn’t carry them away. Even the ground in front of the warehouse was bad. There were potholes in the asphalt and the iron guardrails were rusted out in spots. Bulges could be seen coming up from underneath, the overtaxed water table from the excessive rains from last night being pushed up to the surface, making them look like black pimples that rose a good three feet. How can any self respecting Englishman worth the title let the very lifeblood of their nation go so? It’s disgraceful. Of course I understand the reasoning behind not doing any restoration in this section because of the sheer cost, but come on. Even the President of the United States was given a blank check by his Congress to pay the costs of the war effort. Why can’t the Prime Minister do the same from the Houses? He’d have the endorsement of His Majesty.

Suddenly, something out of the ordinary caught his eye emerging from behind one of the buildings, roughly one hundred and fifty feet away. Focusing intently, he could see that the something was a young man, a soldier judging by the looks of his uniform, walking calmly towards the warehouse, armed with four holstered revolvers and an unholstered megaphone. That’s a big boy coming down the pipe. Doesn’t look drunk and doesn’t seem like the type that if there was an emergency that they’d take their sweet time with it. So that leaves two possibilities: He’s curious or he’s looking for trouble. The police noticed him too and stood at attention, brandishing their weapons at him, letting the boy know that they meant business. Strangely enough, the lad still kept walking, paying the imminent threat no mind and adjusting his glasses every so often as he looked at the ground in front of him. He also turned his head to the side once in a while at an angle, a sight that made O’ Bannon’s mood sour. He’s in communication with someone. He turned around to McGrath and muttered, “Deal with it.”

The policeman whistled for one of his men to come up with his megaphone, an order that was hastily obeyed. Once the device was in his hands, McGrath put it to his mouth and called out, “Cease and desist!” The statement immediately stopped the intruder dead in his tracks. Smiling, McGrath continued, “You are intruding upon a top secret operation that has great bearing on national security. Under the articles of war, you can rightfully be arrested and charged with espionage. I deeply implore you to leave right now, or else I will not be held responsible for what must be done to ensure the success of this endeavor. Do you understand me?”

All outside and inside the warehouse, even the ten men that had the job of minding the dockside watched in awe as this crazy unknown soldier put down his megaphone, brought up both his hands and clapped for a good few seconds, grinning from ear to ear. One officer breathed, “The man’s a nutter. Completely daft.” Even McGrath and O’ Bannon were too flabbergasted to speak or even think. What kind of a man walks into this much firepower and laughs?

The applause died and the man picked up his megaphone. “I do understand Chief Inspector McGrath,” he began, his voice booming, “however, I’m not intruding truth be told, for that would entail some sort of bad intention on my part. In fact, I came here to offer two things, the first of which is my sincere congratulations in leading me to where I need to be.”

McGrath’s bearded mouth gaped at such a proclamation. O’ Bannon’s reaction was far less silent or subtle as he reached out and grabbed the Chief Inspector with both hands by the shoulders and whipped him around. “The fuck is he talking about McGrath?!” Brian shouted, bits of saliva sailing through the air. “Did you betray us?!” The policemen nearest to the scene tried to interfere, but the machine gun crews racked the bolts to their weapons, giving them pause. Brian snatched the megaphone from his still gaping companion and addressed the stranger, “Might I have the pleasure of your name before I have you shot?”

“Oh me?” the soldier asked, placing his left hand on his chest. “I’m just a nobody who still has one more important thing to say, before I depart.”
“Then state you peace and bugger off!” O Bannon roared, his patience nearing its end.

“If you try to radio the Odette right now Mr. O’ Bannon, you will find that communications are down.” the stranger informed. Brian turned around and nodded to Robert, the silent gesture prodding him to action. The mumbling man flipped a few switches and rotated a few dials before morsing to the ship, the one that carried a great deal of precious cargo. Seconds went by and Robert’s face regarded O’ Bannon’s, white as a sheet. He didn’t say a word, for none were needed. “Also,” the boy went on, “communications with your boss are down as well, courtesy of a bit of wet work. With those things said, I must tell you all that you are in grave danger. Right now, half of Scotland Yard is here in Southend-On-Sea with a team ready to take the Odette by force and a team that currently has all your numbers in the structures all around me.” He paused, watching the corrupt and criminal alike look to and fro at the supposedly empty warehouses and office buildings, and put on a serious face. “I do not wish to fire upon officers of the law today, for I understand that you men have families and sweethearts. Ask yourselves: If I were to die today, who will care for them? In my mind, if you can’t answer that question, you should consider leaving here now. Any who do that, I personally guarantee that I will turn a blind eye to what occurred here today and spare your lives. Others won’t but I will. Please Chief Inspector McGrath and Mr. O’ Bannon; I implore you to give up this venture and surrender your arms peacefully.”

McGrath hissed in Brian’s right ear, “These buildings were checked and rechecked this morning before you even got here. There’s no one in them. Plus, we’ve heard nothing from our boys on the roads saying that the London Met are here. He’s bluffing.”

O’ Bannon chuckled and replied, “You are full of yourself boy-o to think you can fool me or McGrath. You’ve got no one and nothing protecting your arse right now. I give you credit though. You had us fooled for a good bit. Now, I implore you to give up this venture and surrender your arms peacefully. Have no idea how you got this crack pot scheme worked out in your head, but believe you me, this ends now.”

Brian watched the mysterious solider hang his head and heave his shoulders up and down as he sighed. The megaphone dropped to the earth and he started to take off his glasses with his right hand. “You are correct Brian O’ Bannon.” his voice echoed across the way. Everyone took a step back in fear as there was no way that any man could project their voice that forcefully. Regarding the boy again, O’ Bannon’s blood went cold and the breath died in his throat as he saw two glowing orange eyes stare right back at him, joined by two wings that erupted from the man’s back, wreathed in flame like some angel of holy retribution. Slowly, the angel or whatever it was regarded the gathered men in front of him and added remorsefully, “This ends now.” No one could move as they saw the figure breathe in deep and scream a shriek that only could exist in nightmares, a sound so shrill and grating that many fell to their knees, cupping their bleeding ears as the sounds of dozens if not hundreds of shattered windows joined him in a chorus of destruction, the shards billowing out towards him like a windbourne cloud. The sea of broken glass hovered in the air above him, a twinkling mass, as he pulled out two revolvers and cocked the hammers.

Regaining some sort of composure, Brain turned and ran for the warehouse door, yelling at the top of his frightened lungs, “Get to cover!” He had barely made it to the threshold when he risked a glance over his right shoulder and saw the angel of death charge in, bellowing it’s battle cry, the glass cloud above him coalescing into wide bands and rocketing forth at the police perimeter with hellish speeds.

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Shirley and Lucchini looked on and couldn’t help but feel sorry for those poor bastards as the glass was hurled through the air by Aaron’s magic and collided and annihilated anything that it touched. Glasses windows and windshields shattered, metal became swiss cheese, and bodies were shredded
like pork that had been stewing slow and low in a pot. Blood spewed everywhere, misting heat and vitae in the cold March air. Screaming echoed throughout the dockyards as men were turned into crimson chunks, body parts flying into other men or flopping to the ground with wet thuds. Many died this way, unable to heed O’ Bannon’s warning to get to safety in time. Roughly three quarters of the police perimeter around the warehouse front melted away from the crystalline storm with an untold number of casualties on the inside of the warehouse, the survivors huddled behind whatever cover managed to keep them safe, some loudly praying to God, holding their weapons close to their chests like holy talismans. The seniors among the group ordered them to stand up and fight, trying to instill some modicum of order. Many joined their sergeants in getting back into position and paid dearly as the hard bangs from Aaron’s revolvers knocked back grown men into the ground, some sent back through the warehouse threshold from whence they came. His fire was joined by the harsh cracks of a rifle, Carmichael getting in on the butchery taking place with well aimed shots that cored .30 caliber holes through skulls, throats, and hearts.

Soon, heavy fire began to erupt from the warehouse interior, the machine guns starting to open up, the shells stitching up the ground as they tried to get a bead on Aaron. Divale bobbed and weaved eighty feet through the hailstorm of lead like he did in the Vienna exercise, using his wings to gust in random directions or shoot up in the air. His progress carried him to the furthest guardrail and he hunkered down behind a large rise in the asphalt, emptying his last two revolvers and casting them aside. Lucchini looked up at Shirley with concern. *I know what you’re thinking Francesca, but Carmichael’s orders were to wait until he gave us the nod to flank around the back.* Movement caught their eyes as they saw Aaron reach over his cover with both hands and yell, "Temperari flamma!" They watched as the iron guardrail started to glow with a red light, the rust flaking off in sheets, turning an old barrier into a giant’s serrated bread knife. Divale combat rolled over the asphalt bump in his way and grabbed the metal, wrenching it loose from it’s legs and holding it like a two handed great sword. Fifteen feet worth of the guardrail came away and ignited. Bullets continued to rain in, but Aaron had his shields and wings up, the incoming harm bouncing away from his layers of protection as he aimed for the lead police car and swung. The flaming blade whistled through the air and went into and through the vehicle as easily as shit went through a goose, the fiery mass touching the fuel tank. It went up into a ball of shrapnel and fire, decimating the survivors near that car. Still, the swing didn’t end. It continued through that obstacle and buried into anything unfortunate enough to be in the way. Vehicle, man, metal, weapon, all went like wheat before a scythe.

“Madre de Dio (Mother of God)!” Lucchini exclaimed in astonishment. Shirley merely looked on and said nothing, the words that she would say incapable of adequately describing what she was seeing. *It’s like a man among boys. No, that’s not it. More like a rabid wolf roaming in a nursery. They can’t harm him. It’s not even a fair fight.*

“Captain Yeager!” Carmichael’s voice barked over the communicator. “I need you and Pilot Officer Lucchini to get around the back way and head them off! I can see them trying to escape!”

“Rodger that!” Shirley relayed back as she turned the ignition. Sleipnir roared to life and she made sure that her Thompson submachine guns were properly strapped to her back. There were no box clips so she had to settle for the drums, the kind that the gangsters in the twenties used during Prohibition. While the extra ammunition capacity was nice, they made the guns that much heavier and the rounded clips drove into her back. Looking down at Lucchini, she could see the Italian placing the two M3 submachine guns over her back and racking the bolt to the MG 34 machine gun that they both jury rigged to the side care, adding to their collective firepower. “Hold on to your ass and stay sharp!” Yeager commanded as she cranked the throttle, sending the motorcycle into a narrow alleyway at breakneck speed. She navigated through the paper thin passage, deftly avoiding piles of trash and debris. They emerged out the other side within seconds, coming into a clear area that led to the back of the warehouse. Straining her ears, Shirley could make out the creaking of
They’re really trying to get the back door open quick aren’t they? Letting her left hand drop, she tapped Francesca on the shoulder to let her know that the beginning sweep would be hot. Lucchini nodded without looking at her and pressed the stock of the machine gun into her shoulder. The edge of the warehouse was getting closer and Shirley took a Thompson from her back strap, the bolt already racked. “Swinging around in three, two, one!” she cried as she hit the brake while keeping the throttle down, causing them to drift around in a half moon circle, tires squealing like a pen full of pigs.

Time slowed as they aimed at the enemy, who had just managed to get a space open just wide enough for a transport to squeeze through, some men already out, pushing the doors to try to help get them open faster. Two of them gawked as they saw the two witches scream around the corner, surprised as any would be when confronted with an unexpected ambush. None could raise their weapons in time to defend themselves as Shirley and Lucchini let loose. Aiming for the center of the opening, Yeager’s shots started low, shells slamming into legs, knees, and bladders and the recoil carried her hand and the subsequent rounds further up, bullets flying into chests. Arterial spray coated the enemy and the doors, bodies falling into lifeless heaps or bellowing in agony. Francesca settled for causing as much collateral damage as possible, pulling the trigger before Shirley had even got to the oh in one. The MG 34 rocked violently on the less than stellar mounting they made, but it held firm, pumping lead into and through the thin metal of the warehouse siding and doors, some of the shots cleaning up what Shirley left behind in a sea of .30 caliber shells. All this occurred within seven seconds, but it was enough to kill five men and however many more within the confines.

Knowing that making another pass was risky, Yeager searched for a place to dismount and regroup, a better position with which to punish from. She found it within a half second, a large coiled roll of aluminum bars that rested at the foot of the dock that led out towards the sea. “Bail out and get to cover!” she yelled, killing the engine and running at full sprint. Shirley took the second Thompson from her back and fired several more shots to dissuade anyone else from coming through the back door as she power slid behind the bars. Yelling could be heard on the inside, yells that didn’t sound all that encouraging. They know that there’s only two of us. Given what’s in front of them, they’ll take going at us any day, the fact that we’re witches be damned.

“Cover me!” Lucchini cried out, getting the MG 34 free and turning to run towards her wingman. Shirley popped her head back up over the lip of an aluminum bar and focused. While they took care of some of the door crew, the winches kept on going. Fuck! As to be predicted, more men came out, firing their rifles and supported by machine gun fire from an elevated position in the interior. Francesca saw the danger and tried to pick up the pace, but the sheer weight of the weapons she was carrying precluded any sort of appreciable speed. Hard barking fire came from Shirley as she doused everything in front of her. A few went down, spinning away behind crates or machinery, or being knocked back into the tail gates of the parked transports, but the machine gun was still up, the shells ripping up golf ball sized holes into the asphalt and were getting closer to Lucchini with every shot. Six feet, now three feet, now a half inch away from her feet and knowing that she had no choice, Francesca dove forwards in an attempt to get clear, but the weight issue came back up to bite her as she fell a half foot short of the mark. Yeager was still reloading as they both saw the machine gunner grin, aiming his weapon right at the now defenseless witch. A shot rang out, but not one from a weapon that size. It was a rifle, coming from far off in the distance, a bullet burrowing into the back of the man’s cranium, the force of impact sending him tumbling over the sandbagged emplacement head first. He landed with a sickening smack, the dead gunner’s head cracking open, spilling his brains out.

Regaining her wits, Lucchini scrambled on her hands and knees and got behind the cover just as Shirley racked the bolt. “Carmichael you are one good shot.” Francesca radioed to the detective.

“Thanks, but now is not the time to assign plaudits.” Carmichael anxiously relayed back. “The
combat is now too deep in the warehouse for me to support Aaron effectively and I feel that he’s getting bogged down. Try to lend whatever support you can while I relocate.”

A enormous balled right fist came crashing down on the corrupt cop’s head, the wallop audibly crushing the spine top to bottom, bone fragments from shattered vertebrae jutting out from the skin as the cranium went from above the shoulders to the middle part of the chest, the face disappearing into the flesh, the tuft of hair that remained on the scalp the only thing visible. Pushing the body away, Aaron ducked behind a crate and picked up a large shard of glass, a remnant from his initial attack and went through the numbers in his head. Haven’t heard Carmichael’s rifle go off in a while. Four possibilities: dead, out of ammo, gun jammed, or relocating. Money’s on relocating. Shirley and Lucchini have already done their sweep and are getting to cover no doubt. Which now leaves me alone for a bit. No big deal. “He’s behind the crate, flank him!” he heard someone say, that someone being McGrath who miraculously managed to survive this far.

“You want to fuck with me!?” Aaron shouted at the Chief Inspector. He heard several footsteps start to advance at the quick step towards him and Divale added while readying to throw the broken window pane fragment at the first thing he saw, “Then bring it on and say hello to my little friend!” I figure they go left then right first. Only one on the left and two on the right. As if the end of his train of thought spurred them to action, a lone crook came around the left corner, just as Aaron threw the shard of glass at him. The fragment sailed across the twelve foot distance and entered the neck, slicing through skin, flesh, throat, and backbone, tumbling out the exit wound and splintering into sand grain sized pieces on the ground, mixing with the blood that erupted like a geyser from the body. A cranium sporting a face of surprise slowly toppled off and hit the ground with a thud, rolling backwards under a transport. Not pausing for a second, Divale sprinted to the right corner, using his wings to protect his front and blindside. One of the two flankers got around the corner, but didn’t have enough time to send a word of warning to his comrade as Aaron bull rushed into him, pushing the enemy into his friend and keeping up the momentum until he rammed them both into the warehouse siding. The clatter of weapons falling to the ground from stunned hands made him know that one of the two was knocked out. Lowering his wing, he saw the heads and using his right hand, grabbed one around the top of the skull, his grip secure. Divale then cocked his right arm back a tad and began to slam one cranium into the other like an engine piston on full bore. Once, twice, three times, until the two split apart with the thunderous impacts, blood and gray matter coating his face and chest.

Placing his wings behind him, Aaron knelt down and picked up the guns, dual MP 40’s, and whipped around to get his bearings, rotating his wings. He was on the far right side of the warehouse, a just cleared section that was littered with empty crates that were to be used for whatever cargo came off the Odette. Most were broken now, victims of gunfire. To his immediate left was a vast swath of complete destruction and death. No one and nothing lived for the good twenty five feet that stretched from his left foot to the outermost perimeter of the old police blockade outside. Most of the remaining defenders were dead or trying to get out out the back. Go right ahead you fools. I’ve got two friends back there that will make that trek a bloody one. The acrid stench of burning fuel and human flesh still lingered in the air, the black hazy smoke swirling up into the steel rafters from what fires still raged. Looking to his right, Aaron could see that he was fairly close to a large radio, manned by a fellow who consistently mumbled as he frantically pressed button after button and turned dial after dial in an attempt to hail someone anyone to help them get out of this mess. We could use that to get into contact with Fleming’s team. Divale made his way towards him and the sound of his footfalls made the man whirl around on the spot, face draining of color. Some men nearby recognized what was going on and opened fire. Aaron deftly moved his left wing in the way of the incoming fire and calmly advanced, placing his return shots efficiently, aiming for heads, hearts, and the rotater cuffs. Crimson liquid flared up like sunspots and the interceptors met a quick
end. The gentleman, which Aaron instantly labeled Mumbles, tried to get out of the way of certain death, but a spray of lead in his general direction arrested his flight. “Going somewhere?” he asked mockingly. Mumbles wet himself instantly as Aaron loomed over him, a giant of a man that rendered the entirety of him in his shadow. Pointing back at the radio console, he ordered, “You will stay right here and not move a muscle. I’m going to leave and clean up this trash around here. I so much as see that you moved a fraction of an inch, I’ll rip off your face and use it as an ass wipe. You understand?”

Mumbles turned around and stood at the radio console, unmoving and whimpering like a dog that wanted to be let back inside on a cold day just an absolute deluge of gunfire came in through the back end. Looking down the way, Aaron’s heart leapt for joy as Shirley and Lucchini stomped in like storm troopers flushing out trench defenders during the Great War. No movement was wasted, no shot expended that didn’t hit the mark, and target after target went down. Eager to join his friends, Aaron flapped his wings and flew into the air, rotating around and emptying the MP 40’s at whatever looked like a head before landing on his feet right in between the two witches. “Nice of you to finally join us slow poke.” Francesca joked as she fished the ammo belt through the feed and slammed the cap over top.

“Police had traffic backed up a bit.” Aaron quipped right back while reaching down and picking up a shotgun. “The wait was killer.”

“Speaking of killer,” Shirley began, pulling the bolt back after loading a fresh clip, “how many more are left? We’re running a bit low Aaron.”

A figure tried to make a run for a better position, but one blast from Divale’s shotgun later made him back track. “Including that one and a man I left alive at the radio console, probably no more than fifteen. Any of you seen Carmichael?”

“He had to relocate as he lost line of sight to you.” Lucchini answered, letting the MG 34 rip at the back end of a transport, making sure that no one was lurking inside. “That was a good two minutes ago though.”

Suddenly, the crack of a rifle some ways in front of them sounded off again, followed by Carmichael screaming into the communicator, “Some of them are in the transports and are about ready to get away! Stop them!” As if on cue, two engines thrummed to life and gear boxes shifted.

“Get to the right! Now!” Shirley yelled, taking her own advice. Aaron grabbed Francesca by the left hand and galloped off to join Yeager who took shelter behind a pallet mover. The active vehicles threw their lights on, trying to blind their attackers as they moved forward as fast as they could, making for the rear entrance. The trio sprang up and fired everything they had, hosing the rear compartments and driver cabins, but the pair still kept going. A hard click from Lucchini’s machine gun was all the impetus that the Italian needed to throw it down and reach for a Gewehr 43.

Her brow furrowed and her face lit up as a plan started to form in her head. “Care for a toss?” she asked, regarding Yeager, a question that made Aaron stare at her in utter confusion. Shirley looked at the current situation and saw why Francesca suggested it. The transports are moving in synchronicity, matching their movements exactly, covering each other, but making them easy targets as well for Lucchini’s attack.

“Cover us Aaron!” Shirley ordered, grabbing her friend by the arms and standing up. Divale watched as Francesca jumped up as Yeager started to spin in place, turning her wingman into a human hammer throw. Blue energy began to emanate from Shirley as her magic charged something up while Lucchini glowed yellow orange near her arms and head. Speed continued to build as the two spun around faster and faster, creating a literal whirlwind inside the warehouse, picking up loose
dirt and debris from all over. Even blood trails got whisked into the vortex, making the aura around them that much darker and ominous. Aaron tucked in his wings lest he get caught up in the storm. *What in the fuck is going on? The enemy is getting away!* Suddenly, Shirley let go of Lucchini and the Italian flew through the air like a fiery comet at the front of the right hand transport as the two vehicles struggled to navigate the turn. She impacted the space between the rear compartment and the drivers cabin with force, going through the amalgamation of metal and canvas and toppling the truck over on it’s side. Unfortunately, the other transport had to slow down a tad, causing it to avoid complete disaster and rocket away down the dockyard towards the city proper, but not before getting caught in the heat wash of Francesca’s magic, the drivers cabin engulfed in flames. It swerved this way and that as it sped off.

“The hell was that trick?” Aaron inquired, very curious as to what had just happened as the two ran off out the back door to check on Lucchini.

“Lucchini’s magic allows her to concentrate her shields into a well nigh impenetrable barrier.” Shirley started to explain, eyes moving to and fro as she calmly searched for her friend. “Moreover, when she dives or goes forwards at a high enough speed, she can charge up her energy and discharge it at the point of impact, allowing her to penetrate almost any amount of armor that a Neuroi might have.”

“Like a HEAT shell fired from a tank.” Aaron surmised, marveling at the answer. He spotted the transport, or what was left of it as the vehicle burned from the end to the front. Movement caught his eye and he hunkered down into a standing crouch, aiming down the sights of his empty shotgun. *May not have a shot left, but they don’t know that.* The smoke obscured his vision for a brief second before Divale could make out the white of Francesca’s uniform as she walked back towards them, grinning like a child that was expecting a prize. “Nifty little bit of thinking there Lucchini.” he stated, nodding in approval. She walked around towards the back end of the transport and was about to answer Aaron, but a man emerged over from the flaming canvas. It was McGrath, his beard singed almost completely off, his forehead cut open, and his skin burnt, lunging at the defenseless witch. However, the Italian was ready and delivered a roundhouse kick that connected flush with McGrath’s jaw and he was sent on his right side, free from the fire, but dazed and prone. *Damn.*

“Get away from him.” a voice commanded from behind them. All three regarded the new arrival and saw Carmichael advance slowly, training his Lee-Enfield on his once mentor and friend. He moved in slowly, eyeing the Chief Inspector like a mouse does a cat while it’s sleeping, not trusting it in the slightest. When he got close enough, he took a real good look at the police officer, noticing the way that he cradled his side as well as his jaw, blood seeping from a hole in the blue fabric of his uniform. *Mortal wound. Nothing we can do for it now.* Carmichael knelt down and asked, “How much was it Evan? How much did they pay just for you to turn a blind eye to what they were doing? To betray the law?”

Coughing up reddish phlegm and blood from his throat, Evan McGrath turned and regarded Carmichael. “A way out of harm’s way.” he answered. “A plane ticket for me, my wife and three children to the United States, plus an additional deposit in my bank account that I already have over there. Was a good retirement plan and it would’ve worked out to perfection had it not been for you meddling lot.” More wracking hacks caused him to convulse and Carmichael stood back up, shouldering the rifle.

“Where’s O’ Bannon?” he demanded.

“Off, off, and away.” McGrath wheezed, cracking a smile as the look of failure crossed Carmichael’s face. “Before you do it, do me a favor and tell my wife that I died a proper Englishman.”
“Only heroes get that treatment.” Carmichael flatly responded as he squeezed the trigger. The bullet bored through McGrath’s skull and the former Chief Inspector of the Southend-On-Sea Police Department laid still, his blood pooling around his ruined head like a angel’s halo. “One out of two escaping isn’t bad I guess and the Odette is being hit right now.” he mentioned as he looked back at his companions.

“Oh the contrary,” Aaron countered with a sly grin, “when I was giving that song and dance I cast a spell on O’ Bannon, giving me the ability to track him for a good ways.”

Carmichael’s eyes lit up like Christmas tree lights. “Where is he now?!” he anxiously blurted out.

“Not far.” Aaron stated. A crash was heard down the way, and a plume of water from a ruptured fire hydrant shot up into the air. “Not far at all.”

“Excellent.” Carmichael replied and was about to say something more when he stopped and tilted his head. All three of the remaining group looked on as the detective listened in on the message he was receiving. *Judging by the way he’s walking and holding his posture, it can’t be good whatever it is.* After a few more seconds, he killed the link and looked back up at them. “Fleming’s hit a snag and his boys are in danger of being overwhelmed on the Odette. He needs help fast. Aaron? Go over there and get him out that jam why don’t you?”

“Oh it now, but I need backup to help me clear them out.” Aaron reasoned.

“Fine by me.” Carmichael answered, looking at Divale’s bike that was parked off to the side and somehow didn’t get hit by any stray weapon fire. “That motorcycle looks like it can only take two anyway, but I need someone to drive it.”

Shirley and Lucchini looked at each other and stared at each other with concern. *One we trust and the other we don’t, but each need help. Who’s going with whom?*

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Emilia kept the pedal down as the transport continued to traverse the streets of Southend-On-Sea in the hopes of trying to interfere with what Carmichael had planned for the O’ Bannons. Rounding another corner, Largo craned her neck to see if she could catch a glimpse of the warehouse that she was sure was coming up. Navigating the streets of the port town ended up being an absolute breeze for there was no traffic at all which was very strange for a early morning such as this, and it unnerved her immensely. For the past few minutes, the sounds of gunshots could be heard, loud and frequent, acting as beacons, and now… *And now there’s nothing. My God are we too late?* She looked over at one of her men that caught a front row seat to the action and gestured out the window, silently asking him if he saw anything. The Italian peered out the glass and moved his head all around as if he was a trapped boxer dodging uppercuts and haymakers. Suddenly, her man pointed down the street and Emilia turned just in time to see another transport speed past the coming intersection with reckless abandon. *Good work. That’s one of the O’ Bannon’s trucks. Some people made it out. Have to link up and- Her thoughts were cut short as all heard a crash. Through the unnatural symphony, Largo could pick out the shattering of windows, the grinding of impacted metal, and the shearing of something from its foundation followed by a gigantic plume of water that rose into the air. Not wasting time, she got to the intersection and turned in the direction that the other vehicle was going.*

It didn’t take long for her to catch up. As she slowed, she inwardly winced at the sight of things. The transport had skidded across a large puddle of water and the driver lost control, colliding with the corner of a storefront, the brick edge entering through the passenger and most of the driver’s side. A fire hydrant was unlucky enough to get caught in the fray and was taken completely off its moorings, water erupting from the severed pipe. Coming to a stop, she yelled as she opened the drivers side
“Fuori! Abbiamo bisogno di vedere se ci sono sopravvissuti (Get out! We need to see if there are survivors)!” Her traveling companion raced to the back of the transport and lowered the tailgate, allowing the rest of the party to join in the search. Emilia got to the wreckage first, the falling water coating everything in moisture. *Have to see if the driver made it.* She took hold of the door handle and opened the door. Inside the driver's seat was a large man who took up nearly all the space between the steering wheel and the back of the seat cushion, wearing a paddy hat. Emilia recognized him instantly. “Brian!” she called out, climbing up and checking for a pulse in his turkey necked neck.

It seemed to do the trick as Brian O’ Bannon came back to reality, shaking himself out of the funk he was in. “Fuck me that was a nasty one.” he mumbled as he got his bearings back. He looked at Emilia and confusion crossed his face. “Largo? What are you doing here?” Brian asked.

“Carmichael had a mole plant explosives at the electrical poles and blew them up.” Emilia explained, unbuckling the restraint and looking him over as he struggled to get out. “We knew that communications were down, so I tried to race on over here to warn you. Guess I was too late.” She looked on as Brian slumped out of the driver's seat wincing in pain and holding his right side. “You injured?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” O' Bannon mentioned with a wheeze as he staggered to his feet. “We need to go and warn Connor about Carmichael now. Shit’s going to be coming for us.”

“Anyone else-” Emilia started to say, but Brian cut her off.

“No.” O’ Bannon flatly replied as he walked to the back of her transport. “And if we don’t get a move on, we’ll be just as dead as they are.” Footsteps came from around the back of the crashed truck as Largo saw one of her men shake his head from side to side. *Just him. What the hell did Carmichael have up his sleeve here that caused this much death?* She gestured to the man who gave her the bad news and pointed at the driver's side, wishing him to take them back to Bawdsey. He caught the hint and ran up with the rest of the men, some of them piling in and lending a hand or two to O’ Bannon who was having a bit of trouble getting in the back, his injury and physical condition hampering him greatly. Largo was the last to vault up and closed the tailgate behind her. Brian was led to the end of the line and given a seat and he nodded in thanks. The transport started to move just as Emilia sat down across from O’ Bannon who fished around in his back pocket for something.

“What happened out there Mr. O’ Bannon? How many of them were there?” Largo began to ask.

“Everything started smoothly, by the book.” Brian explained as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and pulled one out with his teeth. He was about to reach for his lighter, but Emilia already had hers out and flicked it to life. “Thank you kindly.” he remarked as she lit his cigarette for him. O’Bannon took a deep drag and sighed, the smoke billowing out of his mouth in thick clouds. “Got McGrath and his boys to escort me to the warehouse to oversee things, to make sure that no one intervened. ‘Sure’ the bushy bastard told me, ‘We dispatched orders to all the inhabitants near the dockyards. Stay in your homes. Trust me, no one is going to be out for miles around.’” He laughed derisively, a feat that made him cough and clutch his right side again.

“You sure you’re okay?” Emilia asked with concern. “Even if you say it’s not serious, you should look at it.”

“It’s a rib.” O’ Bannon admitted. “Or two by the feel of it.”

“Then what happened out there?” Largo pressed.

“Got to the site and we’re in force. Had almost a hundred guys all over that place armed with enough
firepower to take on a battalion. In fifteen minutes, the Odette would be docked up and the show would progress to the second act. Then all of a sudden, this man walks up from nowhere, looked like a soldier from a nearby inn that overslept, and demands that we surrender. McGrath tried to talk him out of it, but the blighter stays. Then I give it a go, telling him to bugger off and it looks like he about to when he takes off his glasses and-” O Bannon paused and shuddered, the sight of how the man transformed before his very eyes still hauntingly fresh in his mind.

“Takes off his glasses?” Emilia inquired, cocking an eyebrow. “What was so special about him doing that?”

“He shows us his eyes and they are glowing lass, glowing like the fiery pits of Hell itself!” Brian answered in a low voice, one that was fraught with fear. “Then he sprouts wings, and they ignite as well! As sure as I’m sitting here Ms. Largo, I saw a demon made flesh! And he then screams an unholy wail that sounded like the damned rising from their graves and it shattered all the windows in all the buildings around him! The shards all gathered over his head and then he sends it right into the perimeter just after I told everyone to run and hide!” He took another deep drag off from his cigarette and took off his paddy hat, letting his hair down, figuratively more than literally. “That thing ran up over a hundred and fifty feet through all that firepower and guts anything in the way! It wasn’t a struggle for it at all, ripping people apart limb from limb like a slaughterhouse butcher does cattle! Some tried to get out the back, but they got ambushed. It was the two witches, but I couldn’t see them at the time. What was left of my boys bogged them down long enough for me and McGrath to get out the back in separate trucks, but the witches got him with their magic. No idea what became of him as I didn’t look back, pushing that pedal as low as it could go. Hit a slick I think and crashed.”

O’ Bannon leaned forward and extended his right hand after transferring the cigarette to his left. “Thank God you got there when you did Ms Largo, or else I’d be a dead man.”

Emilia took Brian by the hand and shook it, thinking about what he told her. *A man with glowing eyes, fiery wings, and casts magic? If this was the Middle Ages, I’d believe him, but this is the twentieth century. What he’s talking about is utter nonsense. Such a thing can’t possibly be real, could it?* Then her ears picked up a small cough and O’ Bannon heard it too, getting up from his seat in astonishment. Largo drew her gun and cocked the hammer, not so much as flinching in her seat. “Come on out from there whoever you are and keep your hands where I can see them.” she demanded. Slowly, two small hands came out, fingers splayed and they gripped the metal flooring. Inch by inch, Diedre O’ Bannon pulled herself and her wrinkled muddy blue dress out from under the draped seat that her uncle had sat on. “The hell?” Largo breathed, surprised beyond comprehension. Brian threw the still smoking cigarette down the compartment, bounded forward, and grabbed his niece , getting her to her feet in an instant.

“What the bloody fucking hell are you doing here Diedre!” he yelled, his mammoth hands gripping her shoulders so hard she yelped in pain. “You shouldn’t be here! How did you get in this truck girl! Out with it!”

Diedre couldn’t speak at all. In all her life, she’d never seen Uncle Brian yell at anyone, not even her, with such anger in his voice and it scared her to death. She started to tremble and cry, losing her footing and falling to her knees with a crash. Brian let go of his brother’s daughter and breathed in deep, calming down. He then got on his knees and embraced her, her blond haired head sobbing into his shoulder. “After you dropped me off I heard screaming in the woods and got curious. Followed my ears and saw all them torturing Dolores. Snuck into the truck and heard these booming explosions everywhere. I got scared and hid under the seat.” Diedre blurted out, tearing running down her face. “Uncle Brian, I’m so sorry!”

“I’m sorry too lass,” Brian genuinely admitted, knowing that he crossed a line that he never though he would cross, “but right now, you’re in grave dang-” He was interrupted mid sentence by the
sounds of a loud engine from outside the canvased confines of the transport and his face blanched. “They’re coming! Lord help us!”

“You two get down and stay down!” Largo ordered, getting up from her seat. “We’ll handle this!” The other five men in the back got up without being ordered to and took up positions near the tail gate with their rifles. She rushed to join them, but before she could, Emilia’s lone good eye spotted a black motorcycle being driven by a young woman, her long black hair whipping in the wind and teeth clenched, whizzed around the corner. In the side car was a man in a brown trenchcoat with a rifle slung over his shoulder, standing up and manning a machine gun that was precariously mounted on very flimsy pieces of bored metal, the large shells shining in the sun like slivers of gold. Time seemed to go in slow motion as Largo dove down away from the tail gate just as the man pulled the butterfly triggers of his weapon. Screaming bullets preceded screaming men as lead sailed through the air and burrowed into canvas, metal, cloth, flesh, and bone as Emilia pressed herself down as far as she could go. A large mass fell on top of her right leg and she cried out in pain. She could hear men, what was undoubtedly left of them, shouting and firing their rifles. Looking over her left shoulder, Largo could see one of the men lying dead over her leg, holes in his chest the size of quarters, blood pooling around him and soaking into her pant leg. Using her left leg, she kicked the body aside and crawled back up to where the O’ Bannon’s were huddled as the driver tried to lose them by taking side streets and zigzagging. Diedre was shocked numb while Brian held her close, shielding her the best he could with his rotund body.

“We can’t stay in here with that machine gun firing at us! We’re sitting ducks!” Brian yelled at Emilia as another salvo came in, plinking off metal and tearing through cloth.

“I know!” Largo shouted back, reaching into her back pocket and pulling out a knife. She crawled on her belly to the left side and started hacking away feverishly as hard impacts further up the way told her that more of her men had died. Diedre watched the chaos unfold before her eyes and wished that she was fully blind. Oh how stupid I was to let my curiosity trap me here! My God this is horrible! The blood, the death, I wish I was at home right now with dad! The two men left at the tail gate continued to fire at selected intervals, their aim wobbling this way and that due to the driver doing everything he could to throw the pursuers off the scent. Another burst of fire and an exploded cranium later told the remaining occupants that it wasn’t working. A tremendous rip drew the O’ Bannon’s attention from the carnage. They saw Largo pull away the canvas, revealing a large hole in the fabric. “Come on! Get into position! When we go around another turn, we’ll jump out!”

“Go first lass.” Brian told Diedre, letting go of her. Diedre crawled to Emilia and turned around, expecting her uncle to follow. Her face darkened when she saw her father’s brother wince and groan as he moved his right hand within his suit front. Brian pulled out his palm and it was slick with blood.

“Uncle Brian come on!” Diedre cried out. “Come on! Let’s go!”

Brian stared at his niece and shook his head no. “I’m not going anywhere Diedre.” he replied sadly. “They plugged me good and I’ll slow you both down. Get out of here and run.”

“No, don’t say that Uncle Brian!” Diedre wailed. “You’ll be okay now come with me! I’m not leaving without you!”

“Damn it girl, listen to me!” Brian retorted angrily. “You need to get out of here! Carmichael wants me gone and he’s not going to stop until he succeeds. If he finds you here with me Diedre, your father will be digging two graves and don’t think for a second that he’ll make it quick for you as he will with me.”

“Uncle, I love you.” Diedre sobbed as Emilia gently took her by the right hand.
“I love you too Diedre.” Brian said. “You’ve been a welcome spark in my life and I’ll treasure that always. Now go girl. Warn your father about what’s coming.” He looked at Largo and pointed a blood soaked finger at her. “Take care of her.” Emilia nodded and poked her head out of the hole in the canvas. They looked to be going down a long avenue with a turn coming up. Perfect. Adjusting her position so that she could get a view at the driver in the side door mirror, Largo opened her mouth to say something to her man when the machine gun barked from behind her and the door mirror became slick with fresh arterial spray as the rounds punched through the back of the crew compartment and out the front windshield. The driver convulsed like a electrocuted convict in an electric chair and slumped over the steering wheel. Emilia looked on in horror as the front wheels turned slowly to the left. We’re going to crash into a building!

Quicker than she thought she could ever manage, Largo ducked her head back into the crew compartment, grabbed Diedre, pulling her away from the hole, and screamed, “Brace!” The last three living people in that transport barely got secured when the transport crashed hard, the sound deafening, the impact sending everyone airborne. Up became down as their bodies rotated and slammed into each other, the seating, the canvassed walls, and the back plate separating the two sections. Emilia had her feet looped around one of the rungs of the seating nearest her and held on to Diedre for dear life. Brian wasn’t so fortunate as his head smacked into the metal back plate, a dent in his head clearly visible and bleeding profusely. She didn’t even have to think about if O’Bannon was alive or not. Even if he was, he won’t be for much longer. Covering Diedre’s eyes, Largo got her bearings back, regarded Diedre and gave her a good once over. “If you’re not injured, go out feet first and get to the nearest hiding place and stay quiet. Don’t wait for me.” she commanded, pulling her near the hole.

“Okay.” Diedre answered, still frightened by the whole experience as she slid her feet through the hole in the canvas and shimmied out. Her feet touched the ground and glass crunched as O’Bannon looked around. The transport had crashed through the storefront of a furniture parlor, tables, chairs, sofas, and cabinets coated with twinkling shards. Some of them were toppled over, broken, seams ripped in the expensive fabrics that flapped gently as a breeze picked up. Another pair of feet made earth fall behind her and she turned around just in time to see Emilia slither out of the hole. “Get there!” she demanded, pointing with her right hand down a small hallway that led to a left turn. Suddenly, the thrumming of the motorcycle could be heard, coming closer with every second. “Run!” she hissed, grabbing Diedre by the right hand and sprinting down the way, feet crushing window panes into grains. They both barely managed to make the turn when the driver killed the motorcycle engine. Emilia placed her right index finger over her lips and shifted Diedre over, allowing her to softly step up as close as she could to the edge of the wall, and pulling her pistol out of its holster. Largo didn’t chance a look, relying on her hearing to judge what was going on.

“Get around the front.” she heard the man state with authority. “Be careful. There could be survivors in there.”

“On it now.” the driver’s voice answered back. Footsteps on asphalt and glass could be heard going two separate ways. After a few seconds the voice called back, “Driver’s dead. No evidence of a passenger riding shotgun here. What have you got on your end?”

“O’Bannon.” the man replied, the sound of feet on metal letting Emilia know that he was now inside the transport. “Looks like he took a shot in the chest and bumped his head in when it crashed. He’s surrounded by five bodies here. Don’t look Irish at all.”

“Let me take a look.” the driver suggested, coming back around. “These are Italians!” she exclaimed in shock. Emilia heard a pair of hands rummage through a shirt and front pants pockets for a few seconds before it was followed by, “Oh boy, the Mafia are in on this too.”
“They don’t have the look of common thugs to me.” the man observed. “My gut tells me that they were a bodyguard of sorts, protecting someone important.”

“If that’s the case, that someone already made it out. Look at that hole there.” the driver pointed out. Largo made sure that the safety to her pistol was off as he swallowed hard, listening to the two moving through the storefront. “Interesting. There are two sets of tracks. They couldn’t have made it far, probably barely beyond that hallway there. We could easily track them down and we should for us Italians are like the Irish; never give us a chance at revenge or we’ll make you pay dearly.”

“Don’t bother.” the man said, making Emilia sigh with relief. “It’s for the best that there’s survivors. Makes for a good way to let Connor know that we’re coming for him and demoralize his support. If this high ranking mafioso is smart, he or she will get out of England as fast as they can.” There was a brief pause followed by the crinkling of paper being opened up. “Found this on O’ Bannon’s body. What does pace o guerra mean?”

“Peace or war.” the driver translated. “We should get going.”

“Right, lets get out of here.” the man agreed and Emilia listened intently as two pairs of feet left the storefront, got back onto the motorcycle, and left just as fast as they came. Her feet gave out and Largo slid down the wall until she was sitting in the floor, the gun limp in her hands. Diedre came up from next to her and knelt down, holding her arms out. Nodding in understanding, Emilia did the same thing and the two hugged each other.

“Thank you for saving me.” Diedre said. Largo didn’t say a word in reply, lost in her thoughts. I wouldn’t be so quick to say that little one. Carmichael has my note and it contains things within the letters of my message that don’t have your father’s best interests in mind, nor yours.

Aaron wiped the rag over his face for a third time, just to make sure that the last bits of brain matter and blood were gotten. I’m already a mess and I’m getting a lot of looks from the police, but might as well try to look decent. Sure that he did the best he could, he tossed the rag over the side of the Odette and looked over the vessel’s deck. Turned out, according to the records that Carmichael managed to get on the ship before the attack, the Odette was an old merchant freighter of French origin during the Great War, but was later purchased by a private Norwegian whaling company who had plans to refit it and plug it into their fleet. Never got around to it due to the current conflict and they decided to sell it for scrap rather than sink the thousands to bring her up to standard. Connor O’ Bannon purchased it in ‘40 and had been using it ever since ferrying illicit cargo to himself and his clients. Also had the mind to make repairs on it, judging from the crude welding jobs done around the sides and captains quarters further down the way at the center of the ship. Being a freighter, the deck was long and wide, the ideal for a vessel of that nature, with pulley systems and chains hanging limply from long iron poles. Three latticed grates were spread out from stem to stern, the entryways into the lower decks were crews would then take the cargo and secure it further down.

Speaking of the crew, most of them were killed during Fleming’s assault, the bodies being transferred to their patrol boats and sent off to hand them over to the awaiting coroner’s truck, which they nicknamed ‘The Meat Wagon’. Evidence of a fierce struggle were everywhere with casings, weapons, blood, body parts, and holes in the sides and deck flooring. Best guess is that the Odette was taken by surprise. Those impacts are coming towards the metal, not from. Many got waxed before they even knew what hit them. Divale picked up a handful of casings from the deck and looked them over. Small caliber. Rifles and pistols. Nothing really heavy in their arsenal. Very strange that they wouldn’t have explosives or even a few machine guns defending whatever they have inside. Some police officers were on deck, leaning over the side from time to time watching the
portholes from on high. From what Fleming told them when they arrived, the battle for the deck was easy, but the lower ones were an exercise in futility as the weapon loadouts of his force, excepting the shotguns of course, were ill suited for close quarters combat. The sailors who still lived used semi automatic pistols and sawed off hunting shotguns to great effect in the narrow claustrophobic confines. Many officers had fallen and ammunition was running low. Didn’t think that they’d resist that hard so you neglected to pack extra. Fucking idiot. Footsteps on the deck coming towards him made him look in the general direction. Shirley was walking down the far right side, where he was, and she was carrying two Colt 45’s and a small bag that looked to contain quite a few clips. “Managed to snag a little bit before their crime scene investigators showed up.” she explained when she got close enough, handing him one of the pistols.

“You’re a peach.” Aaron commented, letting the casings fall from his hands to the deck, the brass hitting the surface with a metallic tinkling. He took the gun that Shirley offered and waited for her to divide the ammunition that she scrounged up. As he stood to, Divale noticed that Yeager was agitated, her eyes focused on her task to the point that when he waved at her to get her attention, she didn’t even flinch or notice. And I think I know why that is. “Would you rather it be you that went with Carmichael?” he asked.

Shirley slammed the clip into the Colt and racked the slide hard before answering gruffly, “I wish it was.” She picked up the bag and handed it to Aaron.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that no matter who went with him that I would still be nervous?” Aaron went on, opening the bag and stowing the ammo in his pockets.

“I guess.” Shirley replied nonchalantly.

Aaron inserted a clip into his pistol and racked the slide harder than Shirley did hers and gave her a stern glare. “Then start feeling fucking better.” he stated emphatically. “Even if it was me, I’d be wary.”

“You don’t have to be like that with me Aaron.” Yeager protested.

Aaron let his gaze go and sighed. “I know and I’m sorry Shirley,” he apologized, “but it’s affecting you bad. If we’re going into the bowels of the ship like Fleming wants us to, you need to be sharp.”

“Trust me.” Shirley assured, pulling out her Bowie knife from its sheath. “I’m very sharp when it comes to pistols. Earned top marks.”

Of that I’m sure. I would expect nothing but high marks considering that your targets didn’t move or shoot back. “Any clue where the bastards are?” he asked, moving down the way and walking down a stairwell that led to the second deck.

“Chief Inspector says that they managed to corner them in a large receiving area, just before the main cargo bay. The doors are sealed from the inside. From the testimony of some of the sailors, they figure around fifteen at most.” Shirley relayed, following him at the half step.

“And that’s verified?” Aaron queried, going through an open door that was guarded by two officers.

“Thankfully, they got their hands on the captain’s ledger and did a bit of cross referencing, so I’d say that’s pretty accurate.” Yeager replied, going past the threshold and into a dimly lit metal interior that was narrow with rooms and passageways leading this way and that. Aaron’s large size made it virtually impossible to see further down so Shirley contented herself with tailing him, looking at the bullet holes in the walls or the blood stains on the floors. They weren’t kidding when they said that the old girl needed a refit. The walls are rusty, there are holes in the ceiling, exposed wiring, the
whole nine. And what the hell is that funky smell? God, it’s like a hold of fish was just left to rot. I wouldn’t want to be the poor soul that would have to open that door to see if it’s true. Divale took a right and was about to go down a small flight of stairs when the metal started to buckle and groan under his weight. He immediately stepped back and looked over at Shirley.

“Take my hand.” Aaron suggested, unfurling his wings a tad and offering his right hand. Taking his advice, Yeager took it with her right and got as close as she could get to him. “Jumping on three, two, one.” Divale counted down. At the end of one, they both jumped over the side simultaneously, the warlock’s wings slowing their fall. Within seconds, they made ground fall, their boots hitting the deck floor with a mighty boom, a sound that startled a young officer that was on duty near one of the doors so bad that he took his rifle and pointed right at Aaron’s face.

“Bloody hell.” the cop breathed as he shouldered his weapon and wiped his brow with the back of his uniform sleeve. “Don’t be doing that down here chaps, you’ll wake the dead.”

“Duly noted.” Divale said, not caring a wit about waking the dead or anyone else for that matter. He looked at the door that the policeman was guarding and asked, “This is it?”

“Yes sir.” the man replied as he stood off to the side. “There’s also another way in as well further down. Make a left at the second junction and follow it to the end of the line.” he added, pointing down a hallway.

“Thanks.” Divale stated and walked up to the door. It was a thick beast, like the kind you would find in a submarine, but it lacked a glass porthole that you could look through. The opening wheel that would normally be on the outside of the portal was rusted off. **Clever idea to make a stand here.**

Yeager looked on as Aaron spat into his right hand and drew a rather quick picture of some sort of symbol on the steel with his saliva. When he was done, he wiped his hand dry on his right pant leg and regarded Shirley. “You got this point. I’ll take the other. Wait for me to activate the spell and charge in.”

“Got it.” Shirley answered. “What is this spell going to do?”

“Send that door flying into the room.” Aaron merely answered as he walked away down to the other entrance, leaving her alone with the cop.

The officer watched him go and inquired with a cocked eyebrow, “Is he always this professional?”

“On his good days.” Shirley admitted as she took out her pistol. “And there’s quite a few of them.”

“He a gentleman?” the policeman asked.

“Above and beyond.” Yeager said. “What’s it to you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well luv,” the young man stated cautiously, taking another look down the way that Aaron went down before continuing, “I think a gentleman and a trained killer look an awful lot alike.”

Shirley was about to let the man, officer or not, have it good when Divale’s voice rang over her communicator. “I’m in position. You ready to breach?” he asked.

“Ready and willing.” Yeager shot back, getting into a standard breaching position near the door, standing with her right side against the wall, pistol drawn and cocked with her Bowie knife in her other hand directly under the weapon, blade pointed out.

A few seconds went by and Shirley heard one word, “Impulsum.” The thick steel door was suddenly ripped from its frame and flew into the room with the speed of a bullet. The policeman cried out in
shock, but Shirley didn’t pay him any mind, not now, and was through the vacant space and into the receiving area within a second. The room beyond the threshold was dimly lit, more so than the hallways they traveled through on their way here. Large wooden crates, oil drums, and cargo containers littered the space within, an obstacle ridden hell set up by the defenders to maximize their terrain advantage. Yeager advanced at the quick step for a good ten feet, using the hard impact of the door when it collided and embedded itself in a oil drum, the ruined container gushing oil like blood, to mask her steps and took a position next to a cargo container. Her ears picked up heavy footsteps coming in hot from several directions. Two coming up from that crate in front of me, another behind me making a round near the door, and one further down past the two in front. Question is, who’s going first? She took a deep breath and swallowed hard as she committed herself to action, moving herself forwards slowly, waiting for the two enemies to round the crate. Sure enough, the two men, armed with shotguns came around and Yeager fired one shot at the first man she saw, drilling a hole through his head. She grabbed the body by the shirt front as it fell, using it as cover as she placed the Colt flush with the dead man’s chest and fired point blank twice. The rounds went through clean and drove into the chest of the other man behind him, killing him quick. Shirley pushed the body away and slid behind a crate just as the one guy further down came into view. A double tap of the trigger later and he was sent staggering back the way he came, cold dead fingers dropping the pistol he had to the floor. Whipping around, Shirley instinctively fired three times at where she thought the last one would be. Her first shot caught the sailor in the upper part of his left shoulder, causing the body to turn violently right. The last two flew into his upper torso, just under the arm pit, piercing both lungs and severing major arteries near the heart.

Shirley jettisoned the clip and rammed another one in, racking the slide quick. She then crept up the way, listening for anymore footsteps, or any other shots from Aaron. Come out come out wherever you are. Suddenly, she heard a sneeze from around another corner that led down a small makeshift corridor of two corrugated cargo containers. That’s one. How many more? As she got up closer to the edge, she spotted some liquid on the floor. Making sure that she didn’t overextend herself and sound the alarm, Shirley craned her neck and took a look, using the puddle as a mirror that allowed her to see down the corridor. Well, well, well, one becomes three, two in front with pistols and the back minder with a shotgun. Have to get them to over commit, but how? Looking at the furrowed cargo container siding, a plan started to form in her head and she smiled. Oh that’s just dirty. Going forward with the scheme, Yeager leapt into the air, pushing off the ground with her left leg and stretching out her right leg. She fired a single shot at the skull of her first target, knocking him backwards. Her right foot found purchase in the grooved metal and she pushed off at an angle, just as the two men left in front of her fired. The bullets and pellets flew past her as she fired two more shots at the ground. .45 caliber rounds ricocheted off the metal flooring and found purchase. One found the throat of the lead enemy, blowing out the spine and sending tissue and blood in all directions while the second nailed the unfortunate fellow in the back right in the testicles, sending him to his knees, cradling his ruined man parts and yowling in pain. She graciously ended his suffering with another shot to the head as she landed, the one on his shoulders this time, and the mewling ceased immediately.

Without pausing, Yeager continued to move down, checking her numerous corners as she found herself near the far side of the room, daylight shining through portholes, casting slanted off white rays. She paused near a corner where she heard the sound of more footsteps coming in and transferred the Colt to her left hand. Adjusting the grip on her knife, Shirley waited for the enemy to come closer. Sounds like just one. Might spin into the hallway after putting his back to the wall. If that happens, move in quick, bat the gun away, and stab at the hands. Closer and closer the footfalls came, and she slowed her breathing. It was then she took into account her immediate surroundings. Shirley was just a good arm span away from the wall, a porthole pouring light down the way and into the face of whoever was coming. That will do nicely. Suddenly, the barrel of a shotgun being held by two firm hands came around the corner and started to point itself right at her. Out went her
left hand, a hard hook with the butt of the pistol that caused the weapon to wrench up hard and discharge. The blast blew a hole in the ceiling, sparks and metal fragments showering down. Quickly, Yeager followed up with her Bowie knife, slashing the exposed hands and wrists. The blade found purchase and the sailor leaned forward, crying out in pain as blood trickled down from three severed fingers. Shirley kicked out at the man’s left knee with her left leg, the joint giving away with a hard pop as ligaments and tendons snapped. Catching the body as it fell towards her, she pulled him out from around the corner and whipped him around, delivering a hard kick as she did so with her right leg into the midsection. The enemy was sent back first into the wall, his head smashing through the porthole glass. Moving in quick, Yeager dove down at his legs, took them up in her arms and corkscrewed in place, making the jagged edges of whatever was left of the pane slice into the man’s neck. A gargle was all she heard as the sailor’s life poured out of him, flowing down the side of the wall like a waterfall.

Whipping the gun she held onto all the while, Shirley then came face to face with another foe who had moved in around an oil barrel while she was finishing off his friend. *No time for an aimed shot, but just enough for.* Two shots rang out, one from her and the other from the man. Hers bounced off the wall and struck the weapon he held, but in doing so, caused his aim to go off center, the round knocking into her gun and sending both Colt’s into the air and away from the two combatants. Realizing that it was too far away to run down and fetch, the sailor reached into his back pocket and pulled out a long knife. “Come on wee girl.” he beckoned with a crooking of his right index finger. “You look like you could use a hair cut.” Obliging without a word, Yeager brandished her knife and hunkered down low as she advanced slowly towards him, keeping an eye on his stance. *He knows what he’s doing. Use your agility here to get the angle on him.* He lashed out with an upwards slash meant for her neck, but Shirley parried it with the flat of her knife as she rushed in. Reversing his grip and taking a quick step back, the sailor drove the knife down, tip first, aiming for her back, but again Shirley avoided danger, hopping up with a fantastic leap and pressing herself against the wall as the knife came down mere inches from her body. Not wishing to get trapped, she threw the Bowie knife at the man’s face. It sailed true and opened up a good sized gash in the right cheek and she drove her left elbow down into his back. The blow caused the man to go down to his knees and Yeager got around him, putting her arms around his back and grabbing the sailor’s hands tight, preventing him from stabbing backwards with the knife. Caught off guard, Shirley used her superior position to reverse the knife while it was in the grip of the man’s right hand and started using her strength to try to push it into his chest. However, the enemy recovered quickly and got to his feet, but Yeager wasn’t going to allow it. Waiting until he was mostly upright, she arched her back and pulled the man off his feet, maintaining her grip all the while, sending him backwards into the floor with a mighty crash. Rolling hard left, Yeager got on top and slammed the palm of her right hand into the butt of the knife. It entered the chest, right smack into the heart, and the air left the man’s lungs as his life force seeped out from within him.

Shirley breathed in and out hard, looking out towards the where the man came. Her eyes didn’t make it far when she saw the legs of another intruder advance. Wasting no time, Yeager combat rolled forward off the dead man’s chest, ripping the bloody knife out, and lunged at the end of it towards whoever it was that was coming in, blade out. With a speed that surprised even her, the unknown enemy reached out and grabbed her by both arms. Yeager locked her legs around the man’s waist as he whipped around and slammed her into the wall, the impact making no sense to the witch. *That wasn’t hard at all.* “Nice moves.” the man said in a voice that she recognized immediately as Aaron Divale’s. “And nice knife.” he added, eyeing the sailor’s knife in her right hand.

Yeager immediately relaxed and let the blade drop to the floor with a clatter. “Did you find my Bowie?” she asked.

“No, but you seemed to have found mine.” Aaron quipped looking down.
Shirley blushed and dropped down to the floor. “Sorry about that.” she uttered, looking away, too embarrassed to look at him.

“It’s fine. Said the same thing to Mio in France.” Aaron assured, looking at the two dead men behind Yeager.

“Major Sakamoto?” Shirley inquired with a cocked eyebrow and a grin. “What were you two doing?”

“Just what we are doing right now.” Aaron answered, walking down the way. “Making sure we get out of this in one piece. I took care of the far end. No one is alive in here now.”

**Must’ve went for the silent approach.** “Nice job, but I wish you made some sort of sound to let me know where you were. I could’ve killed you.” Shirley pointed out, spotting her knife glittering on the metal floor a good seven feet in front of Aaron as she fell in behind him.

“I knew where you were at all times due to my magic.” Divale calmly explained as he let her go by him to reclaim her knife. “You wouldn’t have killed me even if you had a running start.” He watched her crouch down and wipe the blade clean with the upper left part of the uniform sleeve before sheathing it back in its holder. “The door leading to the cargo room proper is this way.” he relayed, gesturing around a cargo container. The pair walked briskly to the door, one just like the ones he blew in with his magic, but this one had a wheel on it that wasn’t rusted out. Aaron took it in his hands and twisted it left. The door unlocked without a struggle and he opened it. After crossing the threshold, they looked upon a long and wide room with large and thick shelving that was stacked high with crate after crate after crate, each one stamped in red and branded with black lettering on the sides. Shirley moved in first and took a closer look at the first container she saw. Within the dimly lit interior, she could make out the hammer and sickle emblem of the Soviet Union along with single word that she recognized in an instant. “Napadajušij (Striker)! Aaron, these are Russian strikers! How the hell did they get their hands on these things?!” she exclaimed, doing a quick count of the crates in her head. There’s got to be easily a hundred and sixty pairs, maybe more if the stacked them in the containers vertically.

“Immaterial.” Divale countered, spying a crate sitting on a table that was long and thin, not like the ones on the shelves. “All that matters now is that they’re now in the hands of those they belong in.” He walked up to the table and saw that it was in fact not a crate but a chest, padlocked tight. Shirley came up to where he was just in time to see him take the padlock in his right hand and wrench it hard left, snapping the metal loop and clasp in one go. Casually tossing it behind him, Aaron opened the chest and were at a loss for words as their eyes saw piles upon piles of crisp Russian rubles, stacked to the very top.

“Holy shit!” Shirley muttered in a low voice, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. “Is that a payment?”

“Probably.” Aaron conjectured as he furrowed his brow. “When you take into account exchange rates, this is easily a million dollars worth.”

With a slight tremor in her hand Yeager reached into the bills and pulled out a stack of seven, holding them in her right hand. “Christ.” she breathed. Just with what I’m holding here, Mom and Dad back home would be able to put my two brothers and two sisters through college and have enough left over to retire.”

“Then take it.” Aaron stated.

His response made Shirley look at the warlock with a queer look. “What?” she asked, clearly
“It’s going to be sitting in a police evidence locker for a months if not years before it’s given back to
the Soviet government. No one will be able to touch it then. To be honest, instead of letting it gather
dust, use it if it will do that much good for you and your family. I’m serious Shirley, take it. I won’t
say a single word.” Aaron goaded.

Shirley looked at the rubles in her hand for another few seconds and placed them all back into the
chest and closed it. “It’s dirty money Aaron. It wouldn’t be right.”

Divale nodded in understanding and flipped the dial on his communicator. “Job’s done Fleming. The
coast is clear. Looks like they were smuggling Russian made Strikers and have a considerable cache
of rubles to go along with it.”

“Good job you two.” Fleming congratulated. “Get topside and have a rest. You both earned it.”

Speaking of you two- Shirley thumbed the dial to her ear piece and radioed Lucchini. “Francesca you
read me?”

“Loud and clear.” Lucchini replied back. “Is everything all right?”

“Me and Aaron just cleared out the Odette. How are things with you and Carmichael?” Yeager
inquired.

“We tracked down O’ Bannon who managed to get a ride from what we believe to be elements of
the Italian Mafia. It was a rough gun battle through the streets let me tell you. Didn’t make it far and
the truck carrying him crashed into a furniture store. O’ Bannon died in the crash, but there were
survivors that got out. Carmichael called off the pursuit and we’re coming back now. Make sure you
don’t let Aaron know we’re coming though.” Lucchini explained, her voice becoming fearful
towards the end.

“And why would that be?” Divale asked with a hint of menace in his voice for he had been listening
in on the other end.

“Um,” Francesca started to say, “well, uh, Sleipnir’s not looking so shiny anymore.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Carmichael informs Aaron and the witches that Operation Thunderball is called off, but is secretly hatching another behind the scenes. However, thanks to Lucchini, his machinations are found out and all three eventually come to understand that the enemy of one's enemy can be your best friend, figuratively and literally. All mysteries come to an end, except for one.

Chapter XXXII: Sins Of The Father

As everyone around me celebrated the results of the vote and Leclerc was lifted into the air by his friends, I played my part in applauding and cheering for the old man on an election well done and deserved. However, later on in Lucille’s, I sat alone at one of the corner tables, drinking my doubts and concerns away. Despite the fact that what I did was morally justified, I swirled my wine in my tumbler constantly, the liquid vortex mirroring my soul’s mood. I couldn’t help but wonder if that was the only way, if there wasn’t some alternative to bloodshed that I didn’t see. Maybe it’s for the best that I never find out the answer.

Diary Entry October 24th 1943

Several knocks on the bedroom door brought Diedre back to the here and now, causing her to sit up in her soft and warm bed. “Enter.” she called out. A lock was heard being inserted into the keyhole, the pins latching onto the metal as it went in. The brass doorknob turned and the door opened. Standing at the the threshold was Emilia, holding a silver tray, the contents of which Diedre couldn’t make out.

“Morning.” Largo stated as she walked into the room and took in the sight. If walls could talk, the surfaces of the interior would tell a tale of pure love and affection for the person within. The floor was hardwood and the walls were decorated with white wallpaper walls that had floral patterns along the edges. She could make out artistic renditions in the style of Monet of roses, violets, lilac, and marigolds, petals exploding with color and grace. A yellow plastered ceiling sat a good ten feet above her head with a sole globular electric light in the center, the opaque covering in the guise of a sun that had a smiling face. Everywhere around, Emilia could see expensive wooden shelves filled with books, a dresser with five pairs of drawers, the brass handles shiny and bright, a full body mirror in the left corner, two red curtained windows, and a walk in closet on the far wall. Diedre’s bed was magnificent with crisp white and blue sheets and thick goose feather comforters and pillows. The head board was teak, a hand carved scene of a starry night, the moon and the stars overlooking a meadow full of reposing sheep, the figure of an old shepherd still alert in the darkness. A small table with an alarm clock on it beckoned and Emilia walked over to it after closing the bedroom door behind her, placing the silver tray on it. The steam from Diedre’s prepared breakfast, a helping of
scrambled eggs, five thick cut strips of bacon, a pile of home fries, and a tall glass of milk, wafted into the air. “How are you feeling today?” Largo asked as she sat down next to her.

“Fine I guess.” Diedre admitted and looked out the nearest window. Through the slit, she could make out the grounds of Bawdsey Manor, and further on, the seashore. The sun was shining over everything, making all that it touched that much beautiful. Try as she might, O’ Bannon’s mind was disturbed by the events of yesterday. “I can’t believe Uncle Brian is gone.” she absentmindedly muttered under her breath.

“Neither can I.” Emilia comforted as best she could. “The moment I laid eyes on the man, I knew he was a tough one.” She looked at Diedre who slowly turned to regard her and solemnly added, “He died a true hero, you know that? He did everything in his power to protect you from Carmichael.” Cracking a small smile, she politely finished up with, “So be a dear and don’t go for curious walks in the woods again, alright?”

Diedre nodded and looked down at the sheets, moving her legs up and drawing them close to her. From the way dad acted last night, I’ll be lucky to see the light of the outside of this room. She shuddered when the memory of when Largo and her got back to the house crossed her mind again. Her father was at once grateful that she was back safe and sound, but his rage knew no bounds. For ten minutes in front of everybody, he yelled at her, berated her, telling her that she was stupid for getting involved in things that she didn’t understand and things that he didn’t want her to understand.

Then, he grabbed her by the arm hard and dragged her, crying and apologizing to her room, where he- “Ow.” she swore under her breath as she leaned back into the head board without knowing it. The response drew the concern of Largo who craned her neck to see what was the matter. Her eyes widened as she saw the exposed back of Diedre’s one piece pajama dress. Long thick black and blue marks crisscrossed along and over the spine. He beat her? Looks like it was with a belt. Spared her the buckle thank God. Is her whole back like that?

“Don’t pity me Emilia.” O’ Bannon said softly, moving away from the head board a tad. “I deserved it. Should never have disobeyed and worried him like that. Should’ve went straight home.” Diedre then moved right next to Largo and took the silver tray in her hands and balanced it perfectly on her lap. Taking up her fork, she speared a good helping of eggs and two strips of bacon and popped the whole thing in her mouth. “Thank you for getting my breakfast this morning. You didn’t have too.” she stated with her mouth full.

“I know,” Largo replied, “but I did it because I wanted to talk to you about some things your father and I discussed last night.”

Diedre’s hand put the fork down and she looked at Emilia with a mix of wariness and trepidation. “What did you and dad talk about?” she asked in a low voice.

“After he came back to his office, I let him know that my Scotland Yard contacts found out who Carmichael had with him when they killed Buchanon.” Emilia explained. “The two women were indeed witches, Captain Charlotte Yeager and Pilot Officer Francesca Lucchini, on loan from the 501st JFW.”

“And the other man he had with him?” Diedre inquired, taking a sip from her milk.

“The other gentleman is Aaron Divale and he’s what has me very concerned right now about you all.” Emilia relayed, deadly serious.

“Why?” O’ Bannon queried, pecking at her home fries now. “I’d be more afraid of the witches than him. He’s only a man.”

Largo then got up from the bed and looked at the book case. Squinting, she could see one of the titles of a rather thick book in black lettering, LEGENDS AND MONSTERS. “Did either your mother
or father ever tell you horror stories when you were little?’ she asked, as she walked to the shelf and pulled out the tome.

Diedre shrugged. “Mom never did, said it wasn’t good to fill my head with such nonsense.” she recollected. “Dad however used to tell me tales of banshees and the Spring Heeled Jack. Terrified me, but those are just fairy tales. They never existed.”

Emilia sat back down next to O’ Bannon and opened the book, flipping the pages. “Both my parents spun yarns like that to me long ago, but the stories they told me were far more real than I would’ve liked to admit.” She paused at one page and showed it Diedre. Looking over her left arm, Diedre could see an old picture, a wood cutting by the looks of it of a village square burning, bodies in various states of dismemberment littering the ground before a giant of a creature with large wings wreathed in some dark aura with strange symbols within the hazy smoke like miasma, the hands resembling claws that were a foot long, and brandishing an oversized barbed sword and axe dripping with blood, holding its head to the sky in joyous rapture at the death it was causing. “Out of all your father’s men that were at the warehouse at Southend-On-Sea, there was only one survivor, whose testimony I copied and showed to your father. He spoke of a man that came up to the warehouse front that changed into something, a creature with flaming wings and glowing eyes, who charged in with reckless abandon. It ran up, while under fire from over fifty weapons, ripped up the guardrail with it’s bare hands, and swung it like a sword, mowing down the entirety of the police barricade. When it finished off all resistance there, it entered the warehouse proper, under even more withering fire, but it ignored it all, going around and killing anyone it saw.”

Diedre started to shake with fright as she remembered what Uncle Brian said in the transport as they tried to get away from Carmichael. He said the exact same thing. But this can’t be. “But the warlocks were all killed long ago. How could one have survived undetected all this time?” she asked incredulously.

“You’re right,” Largo agreed, closing the book with a resounding thump and placing it on the coffee table, “they were. As for how it’s still alive after over a century, I have no idea, but what I do know is that if a fraction of the legends my father and mother told me when I was half your age were true, there is no way you, your father, or anyone else in his house can stop him and I told your father that, but he wouldn’t listen. He and your uncle were close and he wanted revenge. Said that he’d only flee with you when he had proof that Carmichael was dead.”

“We’re all going to die aren’t we?” Diedre dejectedly uttered, holding Emilia by the arm and looking up at her with her hazel eyes full of sadness and despair.

Largo regarded the little girl and gave her a hug to calm her down. “Not as long as I’m alive.” she declared with emphasis. “As far as I’m concerned, if I can’t get one of the two to stop, I’ll get the other to.”

“What do you mean?” Diedre inquired with curiosity in her voice.

“Before we made our escape, I placed a message on your uncle, telling Carmichael to meet me at a neutral location under a flag of truce to discuss a compromise.” Emilia whispered.

O’ Bannon’s eyes bugged out in shock. “You and him talk?!” she hissed dumbfoundedly.

“Listen to me,” Largo pleaded, taking Diedre’s hands into hers and holding them tight, “this is the only way that your and your father can possibly survive. True, you might have to give up the house to Carmichael or even flee the country, but anything is better than being siced on by his warlock. Do you really want to die? Do you want your father to die?” O’ Bannon swallowed hard and tried to stop herself from crying. Dad what do I do? I can’t let you do this, but I love you so much and I
don’t want everything you’ve sacrificed for me and mom to be taken away without a fight. “There are others within these walls that have heard about what I told your father about Aaron Divale.” Emilia continued, pressing her point home. “They too don’t want to die and are willing to help me make this a reality, with or without your father’s consent.”

“Why do you care what happens to us?!” Diedre suddenly blurted out, taking her hands out of Largo’s grasp. “We mean nothing to you or your don! I may be young, but I know the ins and outs of this business just as well as you and dad do. If a piece is about ready to be destroyed, it’s best to let it go rather than waste energy in trying to save it. Why are you willing to save us?”

Emilia stared at Diedre for a good while before answering, “You are right. Neither you or your father mean anything to me or my don and that this business doesn’t lend itself to much sentimentality, but my don and I are human and don’t wish to see two individuals suffer on account of someone’s pride. I’ll admit that I’ve grown fond of you and that in you I see the possibility of a future for you that is above and beyond this, just like your father.”

The mafioso’s response caught O’Bannon up short and she placed her still unfinished breakfast on top of the book on the coffee table. Then, she slid of the bed and paced the length and breadth of the room, hands to her face, her breathing slow and steady, but only just. She paused and looked back out the window, taking in the sights of her home’s environs one more time. God help me, for I know not what I do.

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The chair loudly creaked as Aaron adjusted his position. The noise drew the attention of Phyllis who gave him a sharp look that plainly said to keep the racket to a minimum as she then went back to filing the stack of papers on her desk. Divale nodded in understanding and leaned back, crossing his arms. Lucchini and Shirley sat to either side of him and had been doing so for the past half an hour at least. Fleming wanted an in depth report from Carmichael and the two had adjourned to his office, leaving the trio behind in the dust. Awfully strange that the Chief Inspector didn’t want to see us too. No matter, his office isn’t exactly the most welcoming of places. His eyes wandered again, looking around the station entrance. The foot traffic was still hectic and voluminous, but it seemed slower and less frequent. He looked at his watch and frowned. Eight in the morning. By now, things should be at peak with all the high ranking officers getting their marching orders for the day and case loads to sift through. “You okay?” Lucchini asked, making him look at her.

“I’ll be better when they finally get out of the office and we get to going.” Aaron answered.

“That’s all?” Francesca pressed, not truly believing him. Aaron knew why she asked the follow up question. When she and Carmichael came back with my bike, I did react badly when I saw how shot up it was. Gave her a piece of my mind in front of everybody. Almost reduced her to tears and the two avoided me for the rest of the day. It wasn’t until I went to bed without so much as getting a look from them that it hit me. Felt like a complete asshole.

“Listen Lucchini,” Divale began, putting on a soft face, “I’m sorry for blowing up yesterday. Should’ve been less angry and more happy that you came back in one piece. I was caught up in the moment.”

“Still gave you no excuse.” Shirley added from the other direction. “It’s just a motorcycle in the grand scheme of things. Machines can be repaired.”

“You’re right.” Aaron admitted. “I had no excuse to say what I did. And you’re right that it’s just an object that I really shouldn’t get attached to. I won’t do that again to either of you.”
Lucchini eyed him and offered her right hand. “I’ll hold you to that.” she pointed out. Divale nodded and took it, but instead of shaking her hand, he drew her in and gave her a hug. It caught Francesca by surprise, but she didn’t try to pull away, letting him embrace her and even putting her arms around him. Shirley joined the party from her seat and the three held each other for a good few seconds more.

“Thanks guys.” Aaron commented as he withdrew and sat back properly in his seat.

“Hopefully I’m not the reason why such an event had to come to an end.” a voice rang out from the staircase. Everyone looked and saw Carmichael come down, his boots clunking on the wood. He carried his head high, but Aaron could tell something was wrong. He looks downcast. What did they talk about up there? Carmichael walked right up to them and sighed deeply. “The corruption of the Southend-On-Sea chief inspector ran deeper than we both imagined. When you take into account the losses at the warehouse and further arrests that day, over eighty percent of the force there was in cahoots with the O’ Bannon’s. Such a massive turnover means that officers will have to be transferred up there until more come through the pipe proper.” he explained

“Does that include us?” Shirley asked.

“Fortunately no,” the detective assured with a hint of sadness in his voice, “but unfortunately, the Chief Inspector has seen fit to terminate all further follow up operations concerning Operation Thunderball indefinitely.”

“What?!” Lucchini exclaimed, getting a dirty look from Phyllis in response, one that she ignored. “We’re so close to wiping them out! I’m sure of it! Makes no sense calling it all off when we have momentum on our side!”

“I agree.” Shirley remarked. “We have them running scared and we should pursue any advantage we got to keep them that way. Besides, we have shown that we can handle dangerous assignments with just the four of us. Fleming doesn’t have to commit officers to support us.”

“I told him the exact same things that you both are telling me,” Carmichael stated, taking a paddy hat from his back pocket and putting it on his head, “but his orders stand. I suggest enjoying whatever part of the day you can before he reassigns you.”

“And where will you go?” Aaron asked. “Back to The Royale.”

Carmichael shook his head no. “Actually, I’m going to spend some quality time with my sister in Croydon. Elizabeth and I haven’t talked or seen each other very much in years and this seems just as good a time as any to get together and be siblings again,” he clarified. He then tipped his hat to them and added with an outstretched hand, “I’ll miss you three. You all did an amazing job. Couldn’t have done remotely half of it with you all.” Aaron, Francesca, and Shirley all shook Carmichael’s hand in turn and he then walked away and out the door.

Lucchini watched him go and after the door closed behind him, she looked over at Aaron and Shirley and gestured with her head towards a vacant water cooler. Puzzlement came over Aaron’s face, but he and Shirley got up from their seats and trekked over to the dispenser. When they all got there, Lucchini looked around, making sure there were no eavesdroppers and said flatly, “He’s not going to see his sister at all.”

“How do you know that?” Aaron inquired, cocking his eyebrow.

“I had Phyllis over there hand me Carmichael’s personal file. Concocted some bullshit excuse about wanting to know the man better so I could get along with him. It worked and as I sifted through it, I
saw his next of kin was blank.” Francesca illuminated.

“Which means Aaron that he was an only child.” Shirley commented. “Plus, yesterday when both her and him tracked down Brian O’ Bannon, Carmichael found a piece of paper with words in Italian written on it, the exact same writing that we saw at the farmhouse where we killed Buchanan.”

Aaron took this all in and remained calm, thinking it through. _Going from that, this means that there’s someone on the inside feeding him information, but why? _“Speaking of the note he found on O’ Bannon’s body, I saw faint numbers written within the letters. Me and Shirley stayed up a good portion of the night trying to figure out what it means.” Lucchini added as she reached for her back pocket. After a quick second, the witch pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Divale. “Can you figure it out?” she asked.

Aaron took it in his left hand and looked at the numbers which read 318152541514. “Were these figure all together like this or separate?” he queried.

“All separate.” Lucchini answered immediately. Both witches looked on as Aaron put his right hand to his chin and stared at them intently. After a few seconds, he smiled in triumph.

“These numbers correspond to the position of the letters of the alphabet.” Aaron said, handing the paper back to Lucchini.

“What does it say?” both Francesca and Shirley asked in unison.

“The name of the place where Carmichael is probably headed right now, Croydon.” Aaron intoned.

Emilia brought the car to a halt in front of an abandoned canning factory on the outskirts of the town proper that had been unoccupied for the past six years. A large chainlink fence surrounded the property, but it was painfully clear that people had once gotten past it judging from the numerous holes and bends in the barrier. Past the fence was a large empty lot for parking with faded painted lines in the ground, littered with cracks in the asphalt, trash, and dirt piles. Beyond that was the building, a large brick structure painted yellow six stories high, smokestacks rising into the sky like bare brown branches. Windows were broken in many places and stained with dust and grime. In the receiving area, the large pull down doors were padlocked shut and a sign was nailed up into the brick wall next to it, stating that the building was condemned and that any trespassers would be prosecuted. Looking out, she wondered why it ever closed to begin with. _Given the war, one would think that any defunct manufacturing complexes like this would be repossessed by the government and reopened to provide jobs and goods for both citizen and soldier alike. Such a tragic waste. _“I don’t see anyone else around.” Diedre observed, looking out the passenger side window.

“We’re early by a good ten minutes.” Emilia explained as she shifted the gears and drove around the meeting site. “Gives me time to see what I’m dealing with.”

“You mean us time.” Diedre politely corrected as Largo pulled the car into a dark alleyway about five hundred feet away and shut the engine off.

“You’re right.” Emilia replied as she opened the door and stepped out of the vehicle, O’ Bannon doing the same thing. The day was warmer and there was no wind at all. Skies were overcast and it made Largo miserable. _Is there no sun in this damned country? _Sidestepping an overflowing trashcan, she looked at Diedre who was dressed less to impress and more to conceal with a frilly and slightly oversized green dress. She had told her to wear it because it was the only one that could
manage to hide the listening bug on her person. “How do you feel?” Emilia asked.

“The bug is uncomfortable.” Diedre responded, fidgeting in place and looking very uneasy. “Did you have to put it down there?”

Emilia also told Diedre to place the bug in a location where not even a pat down could sniff it out, and much to O’ Bannon’s discomfort, the only place that was suitable was right up against her maidenhood to the point where it was practically inside. “Carmichael isn’t stupid.” she expounded. “He knows that he could be walking into an ambush or a setup. I’m sorry Diedre, but it’s the only way to get the evidence I need to really put him away for good.”

The girl frowned and shook her head dejectedly. *I also don’t like this plan you’ve concocted. True, some of the men you managed to see your side are covering for me and you and you’ve taken the proper precautions, this is just one cock up from getting us both in trouble or worse. “Will having him meet us like this be enough to get him in hot water? It seems awfully thin and any judge will see that and throw the case out.”* she pointed out.

“That’s why I have this.” Largo answered, pointing to her back where she had a folder taped on the inside of her uniform top. “It contains everything about the man that could incriminate him in schemes that have been years in the making.”

“What kind of schemes?” Diedre asked.

“Not here.” Emilia curtly replied, looking around warily. “All will be explained when Carmichael arrives. Let’s get going.” With that, Largo started walking down the alley towards the cannery, Diedre following her closely. “When you get inside, don’t squirm like you did when you got out of the car. He’ll get suspicious.” she added when she saw O’ Bannon shift her legs slightly as she walked in order to avoid any further chafing that the bug was causing.

“I’ll try.” Diedre said, getting her legs right.

Emilia regarded O’ Bannon with a serious look to her face and stated coldly, “Either you do or everything I’m trying to accomplish here will fail. This is a big risk I’m taking Diedre and I won’t have it dashed to shit because someone here can’t close their legs properly.”

Diedre’s face grew red with anger and embarrassment and rather than start an argument that she knew deep down that she couldn’t win, she concentrated on putting her mind at ease. Little success had as the two got closer to the chain-link fence surrounding the building. *She’s not kidding that this is a huge risk. We’re both unarmed and going in to meet a cop that has killed two members of my family in less than that many days and wants my dad out of the picture too. “I still think you should’ve brought a gun.”* Diedre commented as Emilia got on her haunches and maneuvered through a hole in the fence.

“Oh I’m armed,” Largo assured her as she waited for O’ Bannon to come on through to the other side, “just not in a way that you’d expect.” She let the question lie as they continued to walk to the receiving area door, their feet crunching on dirt, glass, and bypassing old newspapers and rusted tin can lids. Upon reaching the locked door, Emilia pulled a bobby pin from her hair and started to insert it into the padlock. “If you ever get yourself in a tight spot and have to break out of a room, use one of these.” she instructed as she fiddled with the makeshift skeleton key. “Next to diamonds, these are a girl’s best friend.” Suddenly, Largo twisted her wrist to the right and the lock popped open with a click.

“I’ll definitely remember that.” Diedre uttered in wonder as the mafioso took the lock off and let it drop to the ground with a hard clunk. Putting her hands to the door handle, she pulled up and they
creaked loudly as the way inside became visible. Stale air wafted through the opening and the scent of it made both women gag. “What the bloody hell is that awful smell?” O’ Bannon swore, putting her hands to her nose.

Largo swallowed deep and started to breathe through her mouth to avoid smelling any more of the foul stench. “Best guess it that when they closed down the factory, they couldn’t get all the existing inventory out, so they just left it to rot. Probably didn’t clean the machine properly either.” she conjectured. Turning to face Diedre she suggested, “Breathe through your mouth, that way you won’t smell it.” After O’ Bannon nodded, the pair entered the cannery. Though the windows were mostly knocked out by vagrants or mischievous school children, the interior was very dark the point where one had to squint. The receiving area had a solid concrete floor, remarkably still intact after being deserted for so long. Tall metal shelving that rose twenty five feet into the air was mostly empty. Under them, in numerous small piles, were packing crates and rotted out cardboard boxes filled with rusted out cans of whatever they had in them. Some were dribbling black liquid out of deep dents or popped tops, maggots crawling in and out, gorging themselves silly. Not wanting to stick around any longer than necessary, both Emilia and Diedre walked further in, taking care not to step on anything that looked decayed. They passed a long line belt that came out the far side of the wall, the rubber cracked and sagging in places, before coming to a thick metal door with a steel knob. Largo tested the portal and felt no resistance from a dead bolt or lock and opened it. They crossed the threshold and found themselves in the tail end of the labeling and boxing section, gigantic machines looking like steel skeletons of some long extinct beast from the distant past. Boxes and pallets rested against the wall, still waiting in vain for them to be put to use by people who would never come back. Looking up at the ceiling, one that was fifteen feet high, holes in the floor could be seen, but not much else. Thankfully, the smell ceased the moment that Emilia closed the door behind them, letting them breath normally again. “It’s not like the woods after a light rain, but it’s better than that.” Emilia brought up, as she continued to walk deeper into the room, looking for a way through the colossal maze of metal and feeder belts.

“Indeed.” Diedre replied, tailing Largo closely as she looked around, keeping her dress close to her lest a part got caught on a lever knob or a rusty bolt and tear. It took them some time, but they soon found themselves in a clear area with a way to get to another section of the production floor within three bounding steps in three directions. Nice spot. Gives us time to split up and run if things go bad. “You nervous?” she asked Emilia who was pacing to and fro, waiting for Carmichael to show up.

“Not at all.” Largo admitted confidently, stopping in place and looking at Diedre. “I’ve done this plenty of times over the years.”

“How many times did it involve someone who had a warlock at his beckoned call?” Diedre inquired.

“Never.” Emilia acknowledged. She looked around her surroundings, even going as far as looking up at the holes in the ceiling far above them before continuing, “But if Carmichael is a man of his word, he’ll come alone and in peace.”

“Can you even trust a man like him? He could’ve killed us you know.” Diedre retorted.

“He knew that there were other people in the transport.” Emilia explained. “You heard his accomplice say it. If he really wanted us dead, he would’ve rounded that corner and do us in.” Suddenly, the door from where they had entered opened up again, causing O’ Bannon to almost jump in the air with fright. Largo placed a hand on Diedre’s shoulder and calmly said, “Let me do the talking, speak and act only when spoken to, and keep calm.”

O’ Bannon swallowed deep and nodded, closing her eyes in order to will the unease in her mind and
stomach. She opened her eyes again and scanned the room in front of her, trying to catch a glimpse of this Carmichael, the murderer of her close kin. Through the labyrinth of old machinery, a shadowy figure weaved in and among the rust and dust, its footsteps soft and measured. The sound of a flapping cloth could be heard and soon, emerging from the side of a labeling machine, came the man of the hour himself, Carmichael, dressed in a long brown trenchcoat, black boots, and a paddy hat, looking at them both with a wary glance. For some strange reason, he didn’t advance immediately upon finding them, instead peering in all directions, making sure that there were no others around. The way he moved his cold cruel eyes and studied them with his hard unsympathetic face unnerved Diedre to the point where she nearly fainted at the sight of him, but remembering the words of Emilia kept her in the here and now, and she held her ground. Satisfied that he wasn’t walking into a trap, Carmichael moved further into the area, taking off his hat out of respect. He looked at her with a stare that bordered on malevolence and surprise and extended his right hand, “Pleasure to finally meet you at last Diedre O’ Bannon.”

Diedre eyed the hand like it was a snake ready to strike and didn’t want to shake it at all, fearful that he would break the truce and try to kidnap or kill her on the spot. She felt a subtle nudge from behind her and knew that she had no choice but to touch the hand that killed her uncle. Grimacing on the inside, but meekly smiling on the outside, she took Carmichael’s hand and stated, “Pleasure to meet you too Detective Carmichael. I’m surprised you know of me.”

“Believe you me little Diedre, I’ve known you for a lot longer than you realize.” Carmichael mysteriously commented, his words filling O’Bannon with questions that she wasn’t sure that she wanted the answers to. Regarding Emilia, Carmichael blinked only once and remarked, “Speaking of, you’ve haven’t changed a day when I last saw you in that hospital bed at Caporetto.”

“And you aged very well yourself Carmichael.” Largo deduced with a smile. “Of course, you’ve gotten some gray here and there and I’m willing to bet that your German accent is still shit.”

Diedre’s mouth gaped in awe and she couldn’t hold her tongue, blurtling out, “Hold on! You two know each other??!”

“Remember when I told you about the lieutenant that said to get out of the war because I had no business being in it?” Emilia answered with a question of her own.

*Mother of God, that was him*?! “You said that to her?!” O’ Bannon breathed in shock. “How is that possible? You don’t even look old enough to have fought in The Great War.”

“I faked my age in order to enlist back in mid ‘17.” Carmichael explained with perverse pride. “Convinced them that I had a decent grasp of German and was made a spy. High Command sent me over to Italy to keep a close eye on our friends there and regularly fed the Germans false information to keep them on their toes. Didn’t do much good considering that their intelligence was spot on when they figured out that the Italians were paper tigers just waiting for a gust of wind to brush them away. Found myself behind enemy lines when the attack came. Got attached to a forward element that stumbled upon what once was a hospital, one that was underneath where they detonated the mines. Not a lot of survivors, but I found her still clinging to life. Not wanting her to be victimized further, I kept her safe and treated her wounds as best I could.” He looked at Emilia again and observed, “Didn’t think you’d trade one devil for the other.”

“When the war ended and I tried to find another job in my profession, that word, Caporetto, made me a pariah, an untouchable leper. That battle cause me to be unemployable due to the failure of our men and commanders to hold firm in the face of the enemy, and they all had the nerve to lump in with them. I wasn’t an active combatant I said to them, but they didn’t care. Considered become a prostitute just to make ends meet until a man showed up looking worse for wear asking if there was a
doctor around. Told him I was a doctor and helped him out. Shortly afterwards, I got a visit from some other men in business suits who asked me if I was the one who helped that man. I said yes and they brought me to see their don who gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse. From that day forward, I was their main doctor, treating men who got sick or shot up. Over the years, I became the don’s personal physician and eventually his consigliere.” Largo illuminated.

“Why are you here?” Carmichael inquired. “This matter doesn’t concern you.”

“It does when there are shortfalls in profits and goods.” Emilia countered sharply. “The don and I suspected traitors in the midst of the whole lot and we’ve been weeding the flower bed ever since. I’ve also been trying to get Mr. O’ Bannon to leave the business and go into exile somewhere.”

“And this is why you brought her then?” Carmichael pressed, gesturing to Diedre with his right hand. “To use her as a bargaining chip? Connor would send everyone in just to get her back. Honestly, she’d be more trouble than she’d be worth.”

“Send in who?” Emilia retorted with puzzlement in her voice. “You’ve wiped out well over half his force and what little remains are petrified of that warlock you have in tow. If he were to show up, they’d run away on the spot rather than fight to protect him. For all intents and purposes, the O’ Bannon’s are out of gas, circling the drain, finished as a criminal entity. You have your victory Carmichael, what more do you want?”

“What was promised to me by her father those years ago when I helped him get his family out of the straits they were in after she was born.” Carmichael emphatically stated with anger in his voice. “And I’m not going to stop until he gives it to me.”

“G-Gives you w-what?” Diedre stammered, not believing for a second that he was once part of her father’s organization.

“When I, alongside Alec Buchanon helped carry the casket of his wife, he told me that if I wanted anything at all, just ask. So I asked him what I felt I deserved, I wanted to be his right hand man, but the fool refused and sided with his brother Brian. Brian did nothing to keep him and his safe, spending more time stuffing his fat with rounds rather than doing them himself.” Carmichael went on, steaming with hate.

“You’re wrong!” Diedre shouted, proceeding to walk up to the detective until Emilia grabbed her by the shoulders and held her fast. “Uncle Brian did everything to help protect us! You lie!”

“If he truly did help then why were his closest friends and confidants so willing to turn on him and you?” Carmichael coolly replied.

Diedre struggled to get out of Largo’s iron grip, but she couldn’t break free. “Enough!” Emilia shouted. She looked up at Carmichael and stated, “Given what I just said about the O’ Bannon’s it’s pretty clear that you’re not going to get back into Connor’s good graces fast enough to enjoy the fruits of your labors.”

“And my patience is nearing an end as well.” the detective shot back. “Make me an offer that will make me want to stay or I’m out of here.”

“I propose this: You take Diedre and have her be in the custody of the warlock. I’ll go back and stage a fake attack and tell Connor that he has her. At that point, I’ll contact you to have him bring her up and threaten her life if he doesn’t surrender all he has to you. Think of it, you get what you want and the O’ Bannon’s get the boot. It’s a win-win for you.” Emilia put forward in a pleading manner.
Diedre tried again to break free, realizing that she had been duped, and she started to cry. “No. No. No.” she sobbed, kicking back with her legs, hoping to cause enough pain to get Largo to release her. “I don’t want to go with him. Why are you doing this?”

With a feat a strength that surprised even the hardened detective, Emilia whipped her around and shook her hard. “You listen to me!” she screamed into Diedre’s face, shocking her stiff. “This is the only way that will make your father see the light and you know that!” O’ Bannon’s world and sense of control crumbled into the dust on the floor and her legs gave out. Largo released her grip and let her drop softly to the ground, mewing and crying like a baby. “Stay right there.” she instructed firmly before turning her attention back to Carmichael who just stood there, clearly assessing the situation and offer in his mind. “This is the best I can give you Carmichael. Ball’s in your court.”

Carmichael furrowed his brow and chewed his bottom lip in contemplation. “I’ll agree on one condition,” he stated. “You vanish from this country immediately afterwards. I’m not going to lie when the letter you wrote at the farmhouse gave me hope in finding you again, but seeing you here now in league with the enemy makes me sick. I don’t ever want to see you again. To think that I actually had feelings for you. I wish that the night we spent together when I took you back never happened. You are dead to me Emilia Largo.”

Diedre looked up from her position on the floor and though her eyes were blurry with tears, she could see that Emilia had them in her eyes too. She watched her contort her face, trying to keep herself from crying and maintain her composure. “Alright.” Largo choked out. “I’ll do what you ask, but on one condition of my own. When you held me that night in those fields overlooking my home, I knew that no matter how many years pass, that that moment will always live on in my heart. Please Carmichael, hold me one more time and I’ll promise you, I’ll disappear forever.” She spread her arms out wide, begging him to consider it. Carmichael looked at her for a long moment and walked towards her. Emilia’s lips quivered as her old love embraced her warmly, yet reluctantly. “Thank you.” she whispered into his ear, but suddenly, Emilia pulled him close to her violently and a gunshot was heard. The concealed pressure activated pistol between her breast went off, sending a single nine millimeter bullet into Carmichael’s chest and through his heart. The old detective tried to speak, but nothing but a bloody wheeze came out. His arms went limp and Emilia pushed his dying body away from her, his bulk landing on the floor with a thump. “I’m sorry Carmichael.” she said to him as the eyes glazed over and the blood from the wound pooled around him. “You broke my heart and in turn I break yours. Rest in peace you bastard.” She wheeled around and regarded O’ Bannon who got up from the floor and looked at the dead body and then back at her in confusion. “I’d never give you to that man even if I had a gun to my head.”

“Care to put that to the test?” a voice called out very close to them. The pair looked around in fear, trying to see who it was that spoke, but they saw nothing until a figure materialized out of nowhere right where Carmichael originally stood, that of a tall man with angel wings and glowing yellow eyes, holding two Webley revolvers at them both and cocking the hammers loudly. The warlock! God help us! Largo put herself between him and Diedre and then heard two more hammers being pulled back behind them. She whipped her head around and saw the two witches maneuver themselves around, blocking off the escape routes. We’re trapped in here with them. There’s no way out for us.

“Damn you Carmichael, you lied to me! You said you were coming alone!” Emilia seethed through her teeth.

“And he did,” Aaron informed, sidestepping what was once a living human being and giving the body a cursory glance, “however, he didn’t count on us finding out that he was playing both sides for fools.”
“How long were you standing there?” Emilia asked, slowly backing herself and Diedre up against an old machine.

“Long enough to hear everything that we needed to hear.” Shirley remarked, keeping an eye on them both always. “So you had Carmichael and us dancing to your tune the whole way didn’t you?”

Diedre looked up at Emilia and saw her bow her head in resignation. “Yes,” she admitted ruefully, “I intentionally left the note inside the farmhouse to get you pointed in the right direction.”

“What do you mean by that?” O’Bannon asked, getting suspicious about her friend and protector.

Before Largo could answer, Lucchini filled the void with a response of her own. “The note tipped us off to where the Odette was going to dock, Southend-On-Sea.” Diedre’s breathing stopped for a split second as the import of what Francesca said hit her psyche like a ton of bricks dropped from ten stories high. She slowly looked up at Emilia and Largo returned her stare with one full of sadness and remorse. *They didn’t kill Uncle Brian.*

“You killed him.” Diedre muttered in realization, backing away from the mafioso.

Emilia reached out for her, but the girl hastily got away from her outstretched hand. “Diedre listen to—” she began to say, but O’Bannon exploded with rage.

“All I’ve ever done was listen to you from day one! I trusted you Emilia! You murdered my Uncle Brian, tortured Dolores, got those men killed at the warehouse, and probably framed Brandon! How could you! Why!” Diedre screamed.

“She’s a manipulative Sicilian.” Lucchini commented with disdain. “To them, this sort of thing falls under business as usual.”

“Says the pompous Tuscan.” Emilia mockingly retorted.

“What did you say bitch?!” Francesca shouted, inching closer to her.

“Enough.” Shirley stated with emphasis. It got Lucchini to shut up and she glared at Emilia acidly as she fell back in line with her. “You had every intention of killing Carmichael didn’t you?” Largo, now all alone with her back against the side of the old labeling machine, nodded silently. “And you were probably going to plant something else to get us to go forward and do your dirty work am I right?”

“I have nothing of the sort.” Emilia lied through her teeth.

“Bollocks!” Diedre spoke up, pointing her uncle’s murderer. “She’s got a folder concerning who Carmichael truly was taped to the inside of her uniform and had me place a bug on my person to gather incriminating evidence to convict him of collusion! She lies!”

Upon hearing the young girl expose the truth, Aaron spotted a broom on the floor, holstered his guns in his back pockets, and picked it up, dust falling off it like rainwater from an umbrella top. He looked over at Diedre and commanded, “Come here.” O’Bannon just stood there. Though she didn’t want to be near Emilia anymore, she was deathly afraid of him. *According to the legends, they kill children and devour their souls.* “I’m not going to hurt you Diedre O’Bannon. I just want answers.” Divale assured. She swallowed deep and cautiously ventured to within a few feet of him, his shadow engulfing her totally. “Where is the bug?” Aaron asked.

Diedre squirmed out of discomfort, fear, and shame, pointing down at her groin and whispering, “Down there.”
Aaron nodded in understanding and gestured with his head towards Lucchini and Shirley. “Go over to them and they’ll get it off you in private. Don’t be afraid of them, at least you can trust them.” Without hesitation, Diedre strolled over and the witches took her away from the immediate vicinity, going behind a large pile of spare rubber machine belts, and leaving Aaron alone with Emilia. He eyed her with hate and walked towards her. His presence and stare clearly made the Sicilian uncomfortable and she looked at the now exposed escape route. “Don’t try it.” Aaron warned as he got closer and closer. “You won’t even get a fraction of the way before I catch you.” Largo looked up at Divale, pure terror in her eyes, her temperament shot to pieces as his eyes glowed like the mine explosions that disfigured her so long ago. With a calmness born from some innate cruelty, Aaron brandished the broom like a longsword and asked, pointing to the tip of the handle, “What part of the broom is this?”

“The handle.” Emilia answered quickly.

“You have seven orifices where this broom handle can go.” Aaron intoned with malice in his voice. “Since I’m a gentleman, I’ll let you chose where it will go.”

“She’s-” Largo began, but Aaron leaned in and got up right in her face, the broom handle barely an inch from her good eye.

“Lie to me again bitch and see what happens. I fucking dare you, you murdering manipulative cunt.” Aaron warned. “Give me the folder.” Emilia knew that the jig was up and nodded slowly, reaching up and behind her back with her right hand. She slipped her palm through the space between the uniform and her undershirt and gave a quick jerk, ripping the tape off the fabric. Another second later, she produced the folder, the color of a manila envelope and handed it to Aaron. “Thank you.” Divale said, moving backwards and dropping the broom to the ground with a clattering sound. “You’ve been most cooperative. Don’t move.” When he was back next to Carmichael’s body, he opened the folder and began to read.

The information inside painted a picture of incredible deceit and manipulation by the now dead detective. He was in fact an only child and did serve in The Great War and upon returning to England, was honorably discharged and enrolled in a local police academy. Excelled in all his classes and graduated with honors. However, he had a penchant for gambling and amassed a great deal of debt. Using his status as an officer, he started to bust more criminals than ever before, but instead of arresting them, he forced them to pay him off. The scam worked for a while, but it wasn’t enough to get his creditors off his back. Knowing that he needed to go for the big fish, Carmichael then went full on criminal, helping out the O’ Bannon’s for a few jobs in exchange for cash and providing them with guns or whatever they wanted from the police evidence lockers. Given his position and the total trust that Fleming placed in him, he fudged the records and his own paperwork to make it look like it never happened or was a mistake. It went on for years and years before the incident after the funeral occurred and he found himself stymied in his plans to take on Brian’s position and ultimately the entire organization. Undeterred, he continued to be of use, selling information as an anonymous informant to the highest bidder. He started out small, pointing out patrol routes and times where they had breaks so that criminals could commit their crimes without fear of being readily pursued or pressed for time. Towards the end, he sold out any information on his fellow cops, where they lived, who their friend were, where their families lived, all for money. Jesus Christ. The fucker was probably responsible for all the cop killings over the past few months if not longer. Hope the devil prepared a special place in Hell for you Carmichael.

Footsteps from where the witches and O’ Bannon went drew his attention momentarily from his reading. Shirley came out from behind the junk pile first, followed by Lucchini who had Diedre close by her side. Yeager shot a disgusted look over at Largo as she came up to Aaron, holding a thin listening device, connected by a black wire that entered a quartz crystal powered battery pack.
“The playback function on these models is easy to figure out.” Shirley reported, handing it over to him. After Divale took it and placed it within the folder, she asked, “What did you find out.”

Aaron closed it and handed it to her. “Carmichael has been in cahoots with the O’ Bannon’s for almost two decades. Bastard was solely responsible for the murders of those police officers.”

“Knew he was bad right from the start.” Lucchini said. “She’s no better than him I’ll bet, weaving her mind tricks on a young girl like that and making her wear one of those things practically inside of her v-”

“Very much would not like to hear about that.” Aaron interrupted, turning his attention to Emilia. “Come here.” he ordered, crooking his finger. Largo walked up with the gait of a prisoner being led to the gallows and stood before him, looking up in his eyes, doing her best to show no fear. “You ready?” he asked, pulling out a revolver and pointing it at her chest.

“My don will come for you.” Emilia stated.

“And I’ll bury him right beside you.” Aaron replied. He turned to Diedre and inquired, “What say you?”

O’ Bannon’s response was immediate and without doubt. “Send her to Hell.” she said through gritted teeth.

Aaron looked back at Largo and nodded. “Exactly my thoughts, but I’m afraid I will have to deny that request.” he apologized, decocking the revolver and returning it to his back pocket.

Diedre’s jaw dropped and she spluttered, “What? Why?”

Looking around, seeing the looks of utter confusion from his friends, O’ Bannon, and even Largo, Aaron explained, “She came here to make a deal.” He regarded Emilia and smiled. “So let’s make a deal.”

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Connor O’ Bannon swirled the remaining whiskey in his rock’s glass one last time before knocking it back, the burn barely registering in the back of his throat. He plunked the empty glass down on his desk and put his head in his hands again for the umpteenth time, hoping that this last shot will finally get him to get over the death of his brother. Brian. I used to remember us as stupid children in the hills overlooking Coleraine, using our father’s wire cutters to get through the fence of old man Johnson’s farm to get at his carrots and potatoes. Lord on high, I can still see the face of mother, looking at us like we were the worst felons in the world. And what did we do? We laughed, right in her face like the idiots we were. When father got home that night, we certainly didn’t laugh then. Fuck me Brian we’ve been through such crazy times, yet no matter what, we always made it out, you and I. Can’t believe you’re gone before me little brother. It’s not right, it’s not fair. Maybe it’s what I deserved. Maybe you died for a reason. Hopefully, that determination I made long ago and today will make your death worth something in the end.

A small series of raps echoed throughout his office and Connor called out, “Who’s there?”

Despite the full bottle of whiskey still being digested in his gut, Connor could see the door knob turn slowly. Drunken paranoia set in and he reached into his front coat pocket, his right hand clasping around the pistol that sat there. He started to sweat a bit, not caring if it was out of fear or an attempt by his body to get rid of the toxins in his blood. Then the door started to open and Connor’s breathing slowed, his eyes blinking himself sober in an instant. “Dad?” came the voice of his
daughter, her face not coming around the frame to where he could see it.

“Did I tell you that you could come out of your room Diedre?” O’ Bannon rumbled, hiding the fact that he was more relieved than cross.

“No you didn’t dad,” Diedre admitted sadly, “but I desperately need to tell you something. It’s very important.”

Connor pulled his hand out of his front pocket and grabbed the rocks glass off his desk. “If this is something that’s trivial lass, I will not be happy.” he warned as he leaned forward, holding his hands together in front of him. Knowing full well what she was risking, Diedre came around the frame and walked in, wearing her frilly red dress and holding a small bag with a smiling tabby cat on the front, walking hesitantly towards him. O’ Bannon saw the fear in his daughter’s eyes and it rent his heart in two seeing his own flesh and blood afraid of him, but she had disobeyed him and he punished her justly for it. That fact he would never back down from or question. “Buck up girl. You’re an O’ Bannon. We came up from nothing the hard way and you should be proud of who you are and where you came from.”

“I am dad.” Diedre replied as she came to a stop in front of his desk. “I need to show you two things.” She opened the bag and pulled out a piece of paper, placing it on her father’s desk and siding it towards him. Connor eyed the paper, then his daughter, and back at the paper. Curious and uncertain, he took the paper with his right hand and held it in front of him. It took a few moments for him to read the blurred words, but when he caught the meaning of them, he quickly grew annoyed.

“What’s with this transfer order?” he asked gruffly, turning the page over in his hands and holding it out to Diedre. “I thought you were happy in Woodbridge. Why are you doing this? Does Ipswich have a better business school you want to go to?”

“No it doesn’t,” Diedre acknowledged, “but-

“But nothing!” Connor roared, getting up from his chair violently and glaring a hole through his daughter. “Go back to your room!”

Father.” Diedre choked out, her throat constricted by the tears brewing in eyes. At that moment, all of Connor’s anger faded away and he began to see his daughter in a different light for the very first time. In all the years she’s been talking, not once did she ever call me father. The realization shocked him rigid. He couldn’t move and scarcely breathed as tears now fell down the little girl’s face. “You and mother were right about what you wanted for me. You both never wanted this to be my destiny, my inheritance, your legacy for me to continue, but I did. I wanted to make you proud to call me your daughter and did everything I could to follow in your footsteps. After yesterday, I now realize that the life you lived and continue to live leads to nothing but ruin and sodden nights trying to drink your grief away. I don’t want that for myself anymore. Ipswich has an university teaching program that I can enroll in if I get the grades. Most of the prerequisites I already have met from my business classes in Woodbridge. True, it might take me some more time, maybe a summer or two to catch up, but I can do it. Please father. You wanted me to be something better than what you were. Let me do it.”

Connor collapsed into his chair, the words hitting him harder than any death ever could, even that of his beloved Isolde. Tears of happiness came out and wouldn’t stop flowing down his cheeks. “Come here Diedre.” he forced out, his joy almost preventing him from doing so effectively. His daughter burst into smiles and laughter as she rounded around the desk and into her father’s outstretched arms. The two embraced each other, crying into each other’s shoulders for a good while. “I’m so proud of you.” he stated sincerely, breaking the bond for a moment. “And to that end, I have something to show you too.” He reached behind him and took a seemingly random book from the bookcase.
Confused, Diedre watched as he placed it between them and opened the cover. On the very first page was a piece of paper that didn’t match the yellowed aged ones found within the tome. Before his daughter could ask what it was, Connor answered her, “When you were born Diedre, I created a trust fund where I put five percent of everything I earned from every job done by this organization. When you become eighteen, or if I become incarcerated, or if I die before that occurs, you will be the sole beneficiary of not just this house, but all three and a half million pounds that I saved for you.” He watched Diedre’s face light up in astonishment. Then his memory returned and he asked, “You said that there was something else that you needed to tell me?”

Diedre nodded and reached into her purse again. Connor watched as her hands took the object out and furrowed his brow. That can’t be right at all. Must be a trick of the light or the whiskey, but that looks like she’s holding a policeman’s badge. However, as his daughter placed it down on the desk in front of him, the smoke and mirrors trick refused to dissipate. The light in the room made it glow and shine like a holy relic from the distant past, the numbers stamped into the metal clear as day, 007. The breath left his lungs as he reached out with trembling hands and wrapped his fingers around the cold tin. This is Carmichael’s badge! What the bloody hell is going on here?! “Where did you get this?” he anxiously inquired, directing his full attention to Diedre.

“Emilia gave it to me.” Diedre answered. “She wanted to present it to you, but felt that it would be more appropriate if I did.”

“Do you know where she is right now?” Connor queried frantically.

“I’m already here Mr. O’ Bannon.” Largo’s voice came from the still open door. Both looked up and saw the Italian enter the room confidently, the bullet hole caused by the pressure pistol still there. “And it seems like you are skeptical about the good news.”

“How did you get him to overcommit? To make a mistake that grave to get himself killed?” Connor wondered out loud.

“As they say in my country, the enemy of my enemy is also my friend.” Largo explained calmly.

“Truer words were never spoken.” another voice remarked from within the room, totally hidden from sight. The outburst shocked the father as the space to the right of Emilia began to warp slightly, like someone replaced the fabric of reality with a fun house mirror. His heart started to beat fast and he held his daughter for dear life as a ragged tear came into being, and from the fissure came a big hand, followed by a long muscular arm, and culminated with the rest of the body of Aaron Divale, standing head and shoulders above everyone in the room. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you at last Connor O Bannon.”

“It’s alright father.” Diedre assured, whispering in Connor’s ear. “He’s on our side.”

O’ Bannon looked at the tall warlock warily and positioned his daughter behind him. “Why did you aid in killing your former employer?” he asked, standing up straight.

“Found out that he had some ties that I didn’t like and wanted to bite off more than he could chew.” Aaron illuminated, adding a bit of emphasis through out his statement so that the meaning behind it was clear. “Also heard that you needed some convincing to leave the business.”

“How did you find that out?” Connor inquired.

“Emilia told me.” Aaron replied honestly. “And I shared this information with Chief Inspector Fleming who has now surrounded the area will all the cops in Scotland Yard.”
Connor’s eyes bugged out. “What?!” he shouted in awe. He looked at Largo with a look normally used by younger siblings who though that big brother would bail them out, but didn’t. “You said that the don would try to protect and save us. Why are you betraying me?”

“I’m not betraying you Mr. O’ Bannon,” Emilia responded coolly, “I’m saving you from a lengthy prison term and your daughter from being put in a foster home.”

Connor felt the urge to reach for the pistol in his pocket again but Aaron put to rest those plans with the words, “I wouldn’t reach for that gun Mr O’ Bannon. I promised all present that I wouldn’t harm you, but don’t push your luck.”

Defeated and now forced to listen, O’ Bannon sighed and gestured for Emilia to continue. “The warlock and I came to an agreement with Chief Inspector Fleming. He said that if you surrender peacefully, pay restitution to the families of the victims, and disband the organization in it’s entirety, that he will issue an order that will effectively pardon you of all the crimes you’ve committed.” Largo went on.

“And of the trust fund I’ve set up? What will become of that?” Connor asked.

“What you have squirreled away for your daughter’s future will be transferred to the courts who will hold it in trust for the duration of the set conditions of the trust fund document.” Aaron assured. “Restitution payments will not come out of anything rightfully due to her.”

“And of the don?” Connor inquired with a hint of fear in his voice. “The six month cycle has yet to be completed. Is he alright with losing out on the payments and products?”

“Aaron has taken care of the payments due to the don out his own pocket.” Largo replied.

O’ Bannon’s eyes widened. “That’s over a million pounds!” he exclaimed in shock.

“One million fifty three thousand seven hundred and twenty eight pounds and two pence to be exact.” Divale recited from the top of his head. “I’m actually surprised it wasn’t higher. Even had more than enough left over to afford the tickets for you two.”

“Tickets?” Connor queried, looking over at Emilia. “What does he mean by that?”

“The only way we could sell the entire proposition to Fleming was by guaranteeing him that not only would the organization be dissolved for all time, but for both of you to leave the country until your daughter reaches the age of eighteen. When that happens, you both are free to return, no questions asked. The tickets are for the state of Massachusetts in the United States.” Emilia illuminated.

Connor furrowed his brow. Amnesty and Asylum. I won’t get a better deal than this. Still- “What is in this for you Mr. Divale?” he asked, regarding the warlock.

“I only kill people who deserve it.” Aaron answered truthfully. “Listening to both of you talk and seeing the love you have for your daughter convinced me that neither of two warrant that fate.”

“For that I’m glad.” Connor said, very much relieved. “So I take it the Chief Inspector is nearby?”

“He’s right here already.” a voice called from near the door. Connor looked past the warlock and mafioso and saw the chief inspector standing some ways past the threshold, flanked by the witches. “Just about that time there isn’t it old chap?” Fleming asked after looking at his watch.

Nodding, O’ Bannon got up from his seat, posture ramrod straight and adjusted his tie. He looked down at Diedre who looked back up at him and the pair smiled, knowing that everything was going
to be alright for both of them. Side by side, they walked towards the door, but Diedre stopped in front of Aaron and stated, “Thank you for doing this for us.”

“Anytime.” Aaron answered, getting down on his haunches. Diedre then gave him a hug and Divale embraced her carefully. “Slán agus beannacht (Goodbye and blessings).” The little girl then kissed Aaron on the forehead and let go of him, returning to the side of her father within an instant.

As Fleming politely herded them out the door, he turned and asked, “Are you four coming along?”

“Not quite yet,” Aaron answered, “my friends have a few things to discuss.” Nodding in understanding, the chief inspector left the room and closed the door behind him. It was at that point that Shirley and Lucchini moved from their posts and sighed.

“I’d though for sure he wouldn’t bite on it.” Yeager admitted.

“If I was a hardened criminal who had a full pardon and a first class ticket out of here, I’d take it in a heartbeat.” Francesca agreed. “Surprised he took that long to make a no-brainer decision.”

“Not all of us see the light clearly.” Emilia pointed out. “For some it takes time.”

“Speaking of which,” Aaron remarked eyeing Largo, “I think it’s about time we discuss what happens to you next.”

Emilia looked at Divale and nodded, “You can only do what is right of course.” she stated sadly.

“What are you going to do?” Lucchini asked. She added with a start, “You’re not going to kill her right in front of us are you Aaron?”

“Nothing that terrible.” Divale responded. “What I will do is unfortunately end this little masquerade.” He regarded Largo and held out his right hand. “The clock has struck twelve Cinderella.” Without answering, Emilia took his hand and a twinkling light began to swirl around her hand that rapidly spread up her arm and the rest of her body in a flash as if she were overdried kindling that was exposed to flame. As the Lucchini and Yeager looked on in wonder, Largo’s appearance began to change. Gone were her facial scars and her eyes went from hazel to a verdant green. The brown and gray in her hair vanished and it grew longer and longer until coming halfway down her back. “È bello rivederti madonna (Nice to see you again pretty lady).”

“È bello vederti anche il mio amore (Nice to see you too my love).” Lucretia replied, giving him a deep kiss on the lips.

Both witches shouted in unison, “What the fuck is going here?!”

“Remember when I went to the bathroom in the Cormorant Suite at The Royale when we first met Carmichael?” Aaron asked. When Lucchini and Shirley silently nodded, he continued, “I didn’t have to use the loo, I collected my thoughts and refocused. From the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew that something was up with the detective, notably his posture when he stood. It was completely straight. Only being in the military grinds that into someone. Going off a hunch, I used the trick Shirley showed me and made a call to an old friend of mine, DeWiart, the very man who came up with me went I first arrived at Dover Castle. Told him to do a little digging on him and report back. He managed to get back to me at two in the morning as Lucretia slept next to me. Said that he did serve in The Great War as a spy in Italy and from his own hand, Carmichael did mention in various dispatches that he encountered a woman by the name of Emilia Largo, who was a nurse at the battle of Caporetto that he helped save and return to her hometown. Most would’ve ended the report there, by DeWairt was very thorough. He also told me that over the next three years, the two exchanged
letters with her expressing her feelings for him which, in typical Carmichael fashion, he shot down. In ‘20, he wrote her a strongly worded letter in which he told her to leave him alone, that he wanted nothing to do with her, and that he had his own life now. From that point on, nothing. Thanked him for his work and asked him if he could get one of those letters to me ASAP.”

Nodding as things made sense in her mind Lucchini observed, “You went on a limb thinking that the two had some sort of relationship and if Carmichael ever knew where we were, you could spring that on him by disguising Lucretia as Emilia.”

“Why put her in danger like that Aaron?” Shirley inquired. “If Carmichael even suspected for a second that she wasn’t Largo, she’d be dead.”

“I was heavily involved in theater when I was in school.” Lucretia countered. “Aaron gave me the letter when it arrived and told me how she would look and act with said limitations. Gave me my mask and got me out the back way.”

“Which then meant that he told you where we were going when Carmichael found Buchanon.” Shirley theorized. “And that explains why things in the house were the way they were. You copied the writing and placed it within the desk upstairs.”

“Nearly got caught too.” Lucretia admitted. “Had to get outside and hide in the trees.”

“Going off of memory, I knew where O’ Bannon’s main base was and had her go there to sow dissent. Managed to get within Carmichael’s personal logs and find out who his contacts were. Gave her the names and descriptions of each.” Aaron added.

“So she moseys right on in, gets in bed with the O’ Bannon’s, manipulates the daughter into helping her, and ties loose ends along a way.” Lucchini muttered, shaking her head in disbelief. Then she stopped as a revelation came over her. “Wait a minute. The transport that she was in had six Italians in it. Where did they come from?”

“They were crooked cops from The Royale who betrayed Carmichael for a modest sum that Aaron managed to procure from the Scotland Yard evidence lockers.” Lucretia answered sadly. “Can’t believe how little it took for them to turn on him. Must’ve been a horrible man.”

“Regardless,” Shirley piped up with a small smile, “it’s over now and we-.” Her train of thought was interrupted as she got a message over her communicator. All three people looked on as Yeager made small talk, moved her eyes, and her face brightened as the thin smile got larger as larger. “We’re coming back to HQ! Minna gave the go ahead!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. Lucchini whooped in approval while Lucretia winced at such a din ravaging her ears and Aaron thumbed his dial to Minna’s frequency.

“Guess we earned that little pardon eh commander?” Divale asked with a grin on his face, turning away from the group and walking towards the bookcase.

“That you all have.” Minna’s voice responded approvingly. “Fleming has submitted a glowing report about your conduct during the investigation. Also, I have some important news for you especially sergeant. The commendation I sent to Allied Command has come back in the affirmative. As of this moment, though I know you didn’t necessarily want it, you are promoted to Master Sergeant, congratulation.”

“Thank you commander.” Aaron replied sincerely.

“In addition, the Allied Command has declassified all knowledge of you. You are now considered a
known entity within the entirety of the Allies.” Wilcke added. Aaron was about to respond, but the phrase, ‘declassified all knowledge’, ripped the words from his throat. Noticing that the silence was awkward, Minna ventured, “Master Sergeant Divale? Are you alright?”

Snapping out of his shock, Aaron said, “Yes commander, but I’m not liking what I’m hearing.”

Though he couldn’t see her, Aaron could almost hear the look of puzzlement come over his superior’s face along with the expression of shock as she caught what he was implying behind the meaning. “You didn’t tell them about Houska did you?” Minna whispered conspiratorially.

“Absolutely not.” Aaron flatly answered. “I kept that under lock and key. I didn’t even tell Lucretia about it until the coven happened.”

“Thank god for small favors.” Minna uttered. “How soon can everyone come back to base?”

“We’re currently in Bawdsey and will have to go back to Lucretia’s to get our stuff. Maybe two, three hours tops.” Aaron offered.


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Sleipnir’s engine thrummed right along, but Aaron could pick up a faint hiccup in the right side whenever the pistons fired. *Probably a bit of damage there. Might have to go slow.* Looking over his bike again for the first time since the warehouse raid, Divale couldn’t help but marvel at how much of a beating it took. Bullet holes from small caliber rounds perforated the metal in the front and there were multiple grazes along the sides that went in a quarter inch deep. The tire had to be replaced from the get go for that was one of the first things that was targeted. He could still smell the distinctive ferric heat of the steel rim that Carmichael and Lucchini came back on. *Yet the bitch still runs like a dream.* The fastening of a strap drew his attention to the side car where Lucchini was situating herself on the cushioned seat. Or at least she tried to. The makeshift machine gun tripod had caused some denting along the top rim and some shots had penetrated the side car wall, going into and through the seat, sending stuffing everywhere and exposing springs. He noticed her looking at the damage with a sad look to her face and he whistled softly at her to get her attention. “At least they went into the motorcycle and not you.” he stated. Francesca smiled back at him as Shirley got on the bike, wrapping her arms around his sides. The late noon day cloud cover above them broke, the sun’s light shining down on the trio. Traffic seemed to be light for the moment, but Aaron knew that it could change an instant and was very keen on departing as quickly as possible.

“Drive safely.” Lucretia cautioned as she adjusted his uniform collar, her form still in the shadows.

“I will Lulu.” Aaron answered as she finished up. “You’ll be alright?”

“I’ll be fine.” Lucretia replied. She then looked away and down at the ground for a second and then back at him with her green eyes. “Out of curiosity, what ever happened to Emilia Largo?”

“Killed by a drunk driver in ‘37.” Aaron responded.

“A pity.” Lucretia said. “She truly loved him judging from the letters she wrote to him. What kind of man denies something so wondrous as that?”

“It’s one of the more ugly truths in life; not every story has a happy ending.” Aaron explained.

Domino leaned in and gave him a kiss on the lips. “Ours will.” she whispered.
Collective “awws” from the peanut gallery behind and to the side of him made the loving pair blush and Aaron backed up the bike. “I love you.” he said.

“I love you too.” Lucretia replied as the trio then sped away down the road back to Dover Castle. Looking behind him, Aaron extended his right arm up and waved goodbye. Domino returned the gesture and watched at the foot of her flat door as they rounded a corner and disappeared. Now to get some sleep on a pillow that doesn’t have a gun underneath it. She pulled out the key from her front pocket and proceeded to insert it into the lock, but something caught her attention. Peeking out of her black iron mailbox that was affixed to the right side of her door, was a single letter edge. Now that’s strange. It’s Sunday and Aaron said that there was no mail at all. She flipped the top and extracted the letter. The front was blank, no return address, no stamp. Flipping it over, her heart skipped a beat as she saw a red wax seal in the shape of two crosses keys. The Vatican?! In a flash, she opened the envelope and began to read. TO LUCRETIA DOMINO: YOU DON’T KNOW ME, BUT I KNOW OF YOUR REPEATED ENTREATIES CONCERNING GAINING ACCESS TO THE ARCHIVES OF THE HOLY SEE. DUE TO CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGING WITHIN THE LAST FEW HOURS, ALL NOW KNOW OF THE REASON WHY YOU DO SO. THOUGH MANY WITHIN THESE HALLS SEE THIS AS DIVINE PUNISHMENT, I’M IN AGREEMENT WITH YOU THAT SUCH A FATE IS TOO CRUEL FOR ANY TO SUFFER. FOR REASONS BEYOND MY PRESENT CONTROL, I’M UNABLE TO GET YOU ACCESS, HOWEVER, I HAVE DISPATCHED TWO INDIVIDUALS WHO WILL MEET WITH YOU IN THE COMING WEEK OR SO. YOU WILL KNOW THEM WHEN THEY COME TO YOU AND SAY, ‘THE SUN IS SHINING’, TO WHICH YOU WILL REPLY, ‘YET THE ICE IS SLIPPERY’. BEFORE I END THIS LETTER, I MUST TELL YOU HOW VITALLY IMPORTANT IT IS TO KEEP WHAT I HAVE JUST SAID TO YOU A CLOSELY GUARDED SECRET FROM ALL, EVEN THE WARLOCK HIMSELF. HIS HOLINESS DOESN’T LIKE DISSENTION IN HIS RANKS AND MANY WILL SUFFER HIS WRATH IF HE FINDS OUT ABOUT THIS ATTEMPT TO CONTACT YOU. NOT ONLY WILL MY LIFE AND THE LIVES OF MY MESSENGERS WILL BE AT RISK, BUT YOURS AS WELL. REMEMBER WHAT I SAID, COMMITT IT TO MEMORY, AND DESTROY THIS LETTER. GO WITH GOD IN YOUR HEART MY CHILD. SINCERELY, O.M.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Perrine whips up a great supper for Eila and Sanya before their night patrol, but Aaron gives it a bittersweet finish. In the night skies the pesky enemy is shot down, but Sanya uncovers a signal that hits close to home with some other language embedded within. Though neither know the words, the Russian lieutenant becomes hell bent on finding the one person who might. The next morning, despite Aaron's misgivings, Minna sends him and Perrine with Eila and Sanya to unravel this mystery, getting them passage to Russia aboard the KASPAR HAUSER, a vessel that more than lives up to it's name.

Chapter XXXIII: Dead Echo

Never let emotion get in the way of business they say. Better said than done I say. Emotion is a very powerful thing and it can easily overrule even the most logical mind. It can even get the better of warlocks, as I have demonstrated many a time throughout my involuntary service in this war. Do I hate it? Yes I do. Should I hate it? Only time will tell.

Diary Entry August 30th 1942

“So how much longer do I have to hold this pot?” Aaron asked Perrine as he clutched a full soup pan full of rapidly cooling vichysoise. He had used his magic to lower the temperature of the cooked soup, the tips of his fingers a deep blue, ice crystals forming around the digits.

“Not quite yet.” Perrine answered, looking at the thermometer she had in her left hand. “Maybe another thirty seconds more.”

“Hopefully the process will be worth it.” Eila remarked from the back of the messhall kitchen, cutting thick pieces of bread with which to soak up the broth. “If you weren’t around to guard that soup, I would’ve drank the whole pot up.”

“Perrine knows what’s she’s doing.” Sanya politely countered, placing the soup bowls, cloth napkins, and spoons down on the counter top softly. “Besides, it’s one of her national dishes. She’s guaranteed that it will be amazing.”

“Oh it is,” Aaron assured, looking up at them, “vichysoise is one of the better foods I had when I was in the Resistance.”

Clostermann paid the conversation no mind as she gazed intently at the mercury line within the thermometer, waiting patiently to for it to fall under the thirty nine degree mark. *Most just wolf it down at forty, but it’s at it’s best when it just hits thirty eight.* As Sanya was the dedicated night pilot they had, she needed to eat a filling meal every night in order to get through the patrols. Minna made
it a point to assign someone to cook an additional dinner for her every week to augment her regular supper. It was Perrine’s responsibility this time and she was determined to make the best meal that she could. Together with the rest of those present, she had managed to speed cook a masterpiece within a very short time. If it wasn’t for Aaron, this cooling process would take at least an hour. Slowly, the mercury line dipped down and down until finally reaching the desired temperature. “And with that my friends,” she announced happily, pulling the thermometer out of the cream broth, “dinner is served.”

“And with today’s society being so fixated on rushing through the day not a moment to soon.” Aaron quipped as he put the soup pan down and reached up for a ladle hanging from a hook. He twirled it like a marching band leader’s baton before handing it off to Perrine. “Après le chef cuisinier (After you head chef).”

“Merci.” Clostermann replied, taking the metal ladle and dipping it into the soup. Ah, just the right consistency. She stirred it around, being careful not graze the soup pan lest it generate heat. Sanya and Eila grabbed their spoons and bowls and held them out, looking like Dicken’s Oliver Twist asking, ‘Please sir may I have some more?’ Perrine scooped up heaping helpings of the vichyssoise and dumped them with graceful elegance into each of the bowls, portioning everything right as she then poured the remainder into a two other bowls, one for her and the other for Aaron. The best part of doing this is that the cook and the hired help get to enjoy the meal too. She placed the ladle into the now empty soup pot and placed it in the sink. The Russian and Finn stood by the door and Perrine picked up her bowl and spoon. Looking over at Aaron she noticed that he was blowing into his hands, trying to get some warmth back into them. “You coming?” she asked.

“I’m going to stay and clean up real quick.” Aaron replied. “I’ll be out in a hot minute.”

“We’ll wait for you then.” Sanya said, drawing a frumpy look from Eila who, despite her sour mood, held the door open for her wingman and Clostermann before letting the door close behind her once they all left the kitchen. The messhall was empty and the trio made their way to the main table, Sanya and Eila sitting next to each other and Perrine sitting across from them.

“Thank you for making this for us.” Eila said, doing her best to be polite by making small talk to curb her hunger. I knew I should’ve ate more at supper, but I just don’t like German food very much. Too little fish.

“You’re very welcome.” Perrine responded with a smile.

“I have to say,” Sanya piped up from her seat, “that I’ve never had this type of food before. Usually it’s, what do you call them, cassoulets if I remember correctly.”

“I wanted to try something different.” Clostermann admitted. “There’s only so many ways you can make a cassoulet before it starts to get dull.”

Suddenly the door to the kitchen opened up and out stepped Aaron who attracted a few puzzled looks from his peers for her help in his hands a covered platter. “And now for something completely different.” he proclaimed, walking towards the table briskly. Sanya and Eila looked over at Perrine for an explanation and Perrine returned their silent questions with a stare that made it perfectly clear that she was just as much in the dark as they were. “I actually was saving this for tomorrow night, but I figured that now was as good a time as any.” Aaron vaguely explained as he placed the covered platter on the table. “I hereby present,” as he pulled the lid off, “fois gras terrine with a sorrel dipping sauce.” The witches looked at the dish and saw a pile of fois gras sandwiches and a silver boat filled with a viscous green sauce with a spreader nearby.

“Aaron you shouldn’t have!” Eila gasped, snatching a sandwich and putting it on her napkin.
“What is fois gras?” Sanya asked curiously.

“Goose liver that has been molded, pressed, chilled over several days, and seasoned only with a pinch of salt and pepper.” Aaron explained, sitting down and taking a spoonful from his soup. He smiled as the cold liquid went down his throat. Mother of God this is better than Lucille’s! Regarding Perrine, he nodded and commented, “This vichyssoise is amazing.”

Clostermann meanwhile was still stunned at the sight of one of her national dishes on the table in a country that was not amicable to French cuisine. Her jaw was wide open and it took her a good few seconds to recuperate and stammer out, “W-Where did you g-get that? F-fois gras is p-practically nonexistent in England.”

“Oh I know.” Aaron agreed, taking a fois gras sandwich and taking a bite. “I made a call to Lynette’s mother Minnie when I got back to HQ, asking if she had any geese that were getting a little too far along. She said she did and I came by and whisked them right up.”

Perrine took a sandwich from the pile on the platter and gave it a look. Hmm, the grade of liver is very high. Consistency is right on point. Smell is fantastic. Here goes nothing. She took a bite and immediately her taste buds went haywire with the silky smooth rich liver that was salted and peppered just right spreading to every corner of her mouth. Losing control for a moment, Clostermann leaned back in her seat and smiled, practically moaning in ecstasy. “I think you made a favorable impression.” Sanya observed, dipping her sandwich into her soup.

“This is absolutely amazing!” Eila exclaimed, taking another sandwich and adding a bit of the sorrel sauce to it. “Thank you both!”

“You’re welcome, but you might want to slow down.” Aaron advised, pointing his spoon at her. “You’ll give yourself a stomach ache if you wolf it down like that.”

“You made this?” Perrine finally queried. When Divale nodded in the affirmative, she went on, “Where did you learn the recipe? Was it in France?”

“Actually, it was in Austria.” Aaron answered truthfully as he spooned more soup into his mouth. “Learned it from one of my commanders, Jonathan Jeroboam, head of the Tenth Coterie, The Bloodhounds. Scouts par excellence and finders of all manner of curious commodities. We sent them forward if we needed a place to stay when the weather turned bad. They would find lodging, food, drink, entertainment, you name it, they sniffed it out. One time as a joke, David told them to find a golden eagle when we were around Saarbrucken.”

“Did they find one?” Sanya asked curiously asked.

“One?” Aaron replied with a raised eyebrow. He leaned forward and stated, “They found three. Gave us all a big stir I can tell you, so much so that David told them to put them back where they found them. Good bunch of guys they were. Never complained and never expected any reward in return for their services. Just like their commander.”

“What was Jonathan like?” Eila pondered out loud.

“To answer that, I’ll have to go back to when we had our first real conversation with each other.” Aaron began. “It was about two days after we were released. We were in Pilsen and I had just caught a salmon from a stream near our camp. I could’ve simply dug into one of my MRE’s, but I wanted something fresh, something real. Descalled the thing and was about to cut it up with my knife when all of a sudden, I here this voice behind me asking me mockingly, ‘Who taught you how to fillet a fish? Genghis Khan?’ I turn around and see this painfully short fellow, around 5’8” and
probably one sixty soaking wet with his arms crossed staring at me in disbelief. Unlike many of us,
he had this color to his skin that was almost olive like as if he was from the Mediterranean. His dark
brown hair was cut short to the point where you could almost see skin and his hazel eyes just looked
at me in wonder and expectation. Looking at the fish and then at him, I honestly replied that I had no
cue what I was doing. He answered, ‘Well, whoever this I had no clue what I was doing is, they are
a piss poor excuse for a cook. Let me show you how to properly fillet a salmon.’ He walks over and
whips out his knife and a sharpening steel. ‘Always start out with sharp knife,’ he explained to me as
his hands were moving a million miles a minute, grinding a fine edge for his knife. He takes a hold
of the fish and starts to teach me. ‘Take a firm hold and locate the gills. Lift them up and cut down until
you hit the bone halfway through and down throughout. Flip it over, tilt the the fish, and clean your
knife. Always clean your knife and keep it sharp when cutting. Press your hand flat on the head near
the gills, use the tip of the knife and glide it along the length. You’ll know you’re doing it right when
you here a ticking sound as you cut. That’s the rib cage. Then lift up what you just cut and make
another cut while keeping the knife flat. If you don’t keep the knife flat, you’ll ruin it. Remove the
fillet and remove the spine of the fish by going near the head with the tip of the knife and move
straight down. Always keep an eye on what you’re doing. Discard the head and spine and move on.
Now, no matter how skilled you are, there will always be some rib bones left over. Gently remove
them with the knife. Never go deeper than you need to. Move the knife along the dorsal fin here and
take that part off completely, but only a little bit. Notice that when I cut, I’m taking off the absolute
minimum of meat.’

I was spellbound as he moved his hands knife this way and that, and before I knew it, he had filleted
and portioned the entire thing in front of my eyes. I thanked him for teaching me and asked him his
name to which he said Jonathan. So I tell him if it was alright if I had him teach me and others how
to cook for the MRE’s wouldn’t last forever. He said sure but, and I quote here, ‘they better watch
fucking carefully’.

“Sounds like he was a harsh.” Perrine deduced. “Was he?”

“That and more.” Aaron chuckled, combing through his memories. “Jonathan was a head chef from
hell and a stickler for quality and efficiency. You cut corners or plate up something that was
overcooked, raw, or bland, he’ll chew you out for it with some of the most fantastic cussing you’ll
ever hear in your life. Would make a sailor sound like a saint. I still remember how he lambasted me
for being lazy when instead of mincing some mushrooms for a soup, I chopped them. Never gave
him guff though. Just took my lumps and carried on. Gabriel hated him because he thought Jonathan
was an elitist prick and Jonathan wasn’t particularly fond of Gabriel because he thought he was a
lazy fuck. But you learned under him though. Cooking, he always said, was ‘a fine art that needs to
be practiced and honed to a fine edge. Without good cooks, you can’t have good food and if you
have no good food, we can’t do our jobs’.

“Truer words were never spoken.” Clostermann agreed between bites of the fois gras and spoonfuls
of vichyssoise. “What happened to him?”

Aaron’s smile left his face as the memories of one of his truest friends came rolling back. “He was
the one that got his brains blown out in Blatce. What you’re eating now was the last thing he taught
me before he died.” No one spoke for they knew what he was talking about. “He was good friend.”
he muttered to himself, eyes moving this way and that, never focusing on anything for too long.
“After what happened, one of my men gave me a note that he found on Jonathan’s body. Opened it
up and it was detailed instructions regarding the disposal of his personal effects, a last will and
testament of sorts. He bestowed upon me his cookbook and told me to copy all the recipes into my
diary. I still have the original manuscript at Pont-du-Hoc.” He shook his head clear of the past and
regarded Sanya, “Speaking of disposal, have you two managed to bring down that Neuroi
interceptor? The one that is giving you trouble?”
Sanya shook her head no. “It’s a slippery one. The moment I think I have it in my sights and pull the trigger, it just evades. It’s like it’s in my head, knowing what I will do before I do it.” Eila looked over at her wingman and dearest friend with concern. She’ll never admit it, but it’s not just the speed of the bogey, but the tactics it’s employing. Somehow, it’s making these strange series of sounds that sound just like the song her father used to play for her on her birthday. Throws her off something fierce. “Thankfully, Commander Wilcke is sending Eila and Yoshika with me tonight to help bring it down.”

“Yes she is.” Eila absentmindedly replied, nodding her head slowly as she swirled her soup with her spoon. “Yes she is.” she reiterated softer than before.

Aaron’s gazed at Eila and his brow furrowed slightly. I know that train of thought. That posture, that stare, that pout. Can it be? Trying to lighten the mood, he said, “Ten to one Yoshika is going up with you guys just so she can get some night flight experience.”

Eila rounded on him. “And the one to ten?” she asked in a demanding tone.

Aaron put down his spoon on the napkin hard, the clatter of metal on wood sounding like a gunshot, never taking his eyes off of the lieutenant. He leaned forwards and steepled his hands in front of his face. Eila started to get uneasy and Divale confirmed in a second what this was all about. Jealousy. Why jealousy Eila? I’d be more concerned with the fact that I’m willing to bet that this is about Minna’s reservations about you raising a shield. Don’t get angry, get to raising them and it will sort itself out naturally. “You really want me to answer that question?” he asked. “Right in front of everyone?” When Eila looked back down he added, “As I said to Minna at the coven, out of respect, I’ll keep my opinions to myself.”

“Thanks.” Eila replied through gritted teeth. She got up and wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Thank you for dinner Perrine.” she stated, regarding Clostermann.

“Thank you for dinner Perrine.” she stated, regarding Clostermann.

“You’re very welcome.” Perrine replied. With that done, Eila turned and looked at Sanya, expecting her to join her, but the Russian merely stared at her with a look that was on the border of pleading and concern. The two exchanged silent pleasantries for a few seconds before the lieutenant walked away from the table and out the door without looking back. The trio watched the door swing open and shut, everyone feeling bad at what transpired, none more so than Aaron. And yet again your damn mouth gets you into trouble.

“I don’t know why she gets like that with everyone that tries to get closer to me.” Sanya muttered, going back to finishing her soup.

Perrine heard her and asked, “This has happened before?”

“Oh, many times,” Sanya admitted. “Yet it didn’t start out that way. In the beginning, she was very skittish when we first met. It was to be expected considering that our two countries always had this love hate relationship with each other. After a while, Eila calmed herself down to where she could be around me. However, the more comfortable she got, the more protective and possessive she became. Didn’t dare come up to my fellow Russian friends to tell them off, but certainly everyone else. After we got transferred to the 501st, I thought there was going be a confrontation between her, Gertrude, and Erica.”

“Now that would’ve been a tall order to overcome.” Aaron pointed out, now full and fully engaged in the conversation. “I can see Erica being someone that she’d want you to stay away from on some days, but Gertrude? You don’t look a thing like her sister so you’d be safe.”

“And that was what I told her.” Sanya retorted. “I said that they were our friends now and that we
should try to get to know them better. We did have a heated argument about it that lasted for a long

time and I still think somehow that she holds it against me that I managed to get her to see me way.
Even agreed to let her be within watching distance if she felt that she needed to be.”

“How did it go?” Perrine inquired.

“Erica and I got to be good friends, though I absolutely refuse to take part in her scheming. Gertrude

was a little harder to get a handle on, but when I did, she proved to be a reliable.” Sanya illuminated.

“Still, despite all the things she’s seen, Eila’s still-”

“Jealous.” Aaron finished.

Sanya nodded and sighed. “I just wish I knew why she was so jealous and talk to her about it.”

“Why don’t you?” Aaron queried. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“Or maybe it could.” Perrine countered. “Opening up a wound like that out of the blue could have

consequences.” Divale acknowledged that point with an almost imperceptible nod. Lord knows I’ve

been on the receiving end of those said consequences.

“I will one day.” Sanya proclaimed, getting up from her seat. “Until then, I’ll just have to wait and
see.” She regarded both Perrine and Aaron and said, “Thank you for the meal. It was very good.”

“And it’s about to get better.” Aaron remarked as he reached into his front right pocket. Litvyak

looked on as Divale pulled out a pair of those chocolate kiss shaped candies that he was so fond off

and held them out to her. “I know it’s not much considering the occasion, but happy birthday Sanya.
Send my regards to Yoshika on hers as well?” he added.

Sanya smiled at the gesture and took the candies with her right hand and put them in her front right

pocket. “I will and thank you.” she said sincerely, giving him a hug. The embrace lasted for only a
few seconds before the witch gave her farewells, walked to the door, and left the same way Eila did,
without looking behind. Aaron watched her go, full of thoughts and questions about the dynamic
between her and her wingman, but dispelled them as his stomach purred in happiness upon finding
itself full. He gazed over at Perrine, looking down at her vichyssoise with a contemplative look to her

face, one that resembled a villain in deep thought about some sort of threat, and immediately knew
what it was concerning. Divale adjusted his seat, the legs of the chair grinding against the floor,
tentionally getting her attention fixated on him. Then he pantomimed, taking off a hat from his head
and putting on a new one.

Puzzled, Clostermann asked, “What are you doing?”

“Putting on my serious hat.” Aaron replied, mimicking the standard pinching of the brim all way

around. He leaned forward and clasped his hands. “Okay Perrine, I need to get some answers here.
What is it about Yoshika that has you completely at odds with her? Is it because she’s a civilian, a
pacifist, or something else?”

Perrine glared at him, but not in a bad way before balling up her right fist, bringing it up to her mouth
and holding it there for a split second. Slowly, she then moved her right fist away and off to the side.
With a dejected smile and nod, Aaron knew her answer. Not willing to talk about it. At least not now.
Fine. “I respect that,” he said, leaning back, conceding the matter, “yet before I let this drop, I want
you to know my two cents. Yoshika is here for the same reason that you, me, and everyone else is: to
help and do all she can. Is she raw? Yes she is. Has she been largely insulated from the horrors of
this war? Definitely. But, Perrine, who wasn’t when they first joined up? I certainly wasn’t ready and
I’m pretty damn sure that you weren’t either. I admit I’ve only known her for a little while, but she’s
proven herself in my eyes. She’s saved your life and Gertrude’s as well. Plus, thanks to her, I think I
can finally get my drinking problem under control. If that’s not worth something, what is? In regards
to her unorthodox dealings with Major Sakamoto, I’m under the impression that it’s either a part of
their culture or that the major herself is encouraging it to build some kind of camaraderie or respect,
which in an of itself is an admirable goal”

Across the way, Perrine nodded as she listened, having that same look to her face as Gertrude at the
coven when Aaron talked to her about her inability to let go. Very well. “I’ll take that into
consideration.” Clostermann deadpanned while getting up. “Let’s clean this up.” Aaron got up from
his chair and collected the bowls, spoons, and the empty platter from the table while Perrine took the
platter lip, inverted it, deposited the napkins inside. When everything was picked up off the table,
they migrated to the kitchen. “Jeroboam.” she mused. “Never heard of it before. Is his last name a
flower?”

“No.” Aaron responded, keeping his shock to a minimum. *Fuck me girl, you’re a Knight of Saint
Michael and you don’t know Jeroboam?* “It’s actually the name of a Biblical king.”

“I thought that you all had last names that were plant based.” Perrine recalled as Aaron pushed the
door open and held it open for her.

After Clostermann crossed the threshold and he let it close, Aaron answered. “Jonathan was one of
the last ones to get his name chosen. By that point, all the names in the herbalist dictionary were
taken so they had him pick twice from the Bible. He was one of five who had that ignoble
distinction.” He then walked up to Perrine who had already plugged the sink and turned the faucet
on. As the warm water came pouring out of the spout, Clostermann looked out the window over the
sink and got lost in the blue skies.

“Sometimes I wish I didn’t have powers.” she suddenly stated nonchalantly.

The quip drew Aaron’s attention as he loaded the dirty dishes into the container. “What?” he asked,
clearly confused as he turned the water off.

Realizing that she made a blunder, Perrine hastily commented, “I didn’t mean totally, just have
something different.”

“Like what?” Divale asked, getting a drying cloth from a nearby drawer.

“Honestly, what you have.” Clostermann replied sincerely. Aaron stood there in astonishment and
blinked several times as his brain tried to wrap itself around what she was saying. “You can adapt to
and deal with any situation on the fly. I don’t have that luxury and it limits and pains me. I hate being
hamstrung by my inability to do more for others and for my people. Many times, either during the
day or at night when I look into the sky, I can’t help but wish that I was up there all the time, taking
the fight to the enemy wherever he could be found. My father always told me that when times get
hard, you find out who you are and where you belong, and I belong up there more than I’m now.”

“I have a saying too Perrine.” Aaron said as he plopped the aspirin sized soap tablet into the water
and swished it around with his left hand. “Be careful what you wish for.”

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The three witches traveled through the night skies and moved further towards the outskirts of the
perimeter. Yoshika who lingered towards the rear shivered as the cold winds blew hard into her face
and body, chilling her to the bone through the heavy bomber jacket she wore. *This is unreal, but at
least it has nothing on the winter winds in Japan.* The thought of her homeland, now so far away,
made her sad, knowing that at this point in the year Michiko would be helping her grandfather plant crops and walk to school for the spring session alone without her. I hope everyone is alright. I know mother and grandmother can take care of the clinic by themselves, but I still worry about them. I would love to see them again, even for a moment, just so I know everything’s fine. Looking out at the stars far above her head, twinkling like glittering diamonds, another thought came coming back to her, the promise she made to her father so long ago. Well father, I know this is probably not what you wanted of me, but I’m doing all that I can to protect people, just like you said. Wherever you are, I want you to know that I miss you.

“Yoshika!” Eila called out, bringing her out of the past and back into the present. “You’re starting to lag behind. Keep up!”

“Right!” Miyafuji blurted, revving her engines hard for a brief moment so she could catch up. The pair of Eila and Sanya kept their pace so it took her a bit longer to get back into position and hold level speed and altitude. “I’m sorry Eila. It won’t happen again.”

“It better not.” Eila advised. “A lone pilot is a dead pilot. If you want to make it out of a night patrol alive, you need to stay close, mind your surroundings, and above all, pay attention.” She hefted her MG42 and took another gander around. They were traveling far north of the mainland, almost on the fringes of grid A9, which was a vast expanse of the North Sea, twenty miles west of the old Norwegian port of Stavanger. The skies had a good deal of low lying cloud cover and they were flying over it by a good two miles, out of reach of unexpected ambushes. That's good. Out of their reach. If they want to engage us, we have the high ground and the momentum on our side to give chase. Looking back behind her, she saw Yoshika with a melancholic look to her face, one very similar to Aaron’s when she caught him off in the la-la land of his memories, and not the nice kind either. Putting aside her feelings about her closeness with Sanya for a moment, she asked, “You alright?”

“I’m thinking about my home, my family, and how they’re doing.” Yoshika answered. “I miss them.” She then had a though and inquired, “If you don’t mind, do you have any family?”

“I do.” Eila replied, seeing no fault in making small talk. “I have an elder sister named Aurora who’s a part of another joint fighter group. My mother and father managed to get out of Finland when the Neuroi invasion started to go north. They’re in Iceland now. They don’t tell me much about what they’re doing or how they are, yet they write to me constantly asking me how I am.”

“You miss them?” Yoshika queried, adjusting the strap to her 20mm cannon.

“All the time.” Eila admitted, her hardened heart resisting the pangs of homesickness. “I especially miss the times we had together and the summer holidays we would go on during the winters in Russia, Poland, and Sweden. When this war is over, you should definitely go to Sweden Yoshika, for they have some of the best medical colleges in the world. Believe me, they will teach you right.”

“Thank you.” Yoshika said sincerely with a smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.” She then moved her eyes towards Sanya, a gesture that made Eila’s spirit darken a bit and asked, “What about Sanya? Does she have a family?”

Instead of replying on the spot, the Finn regarded her Russian counterpart, who turned and gave her a look. Miyafuji saw this and wondered what it was for, but then it hit her moments later. Rushing forwards past Eila, maneuvering around her lest she get caught up in her engine wash, she pulled up next to Sanya’s left and started to apologize. “I’m sorry Sanya. I-”

“Next time, tell me before you do a dumb thing like that!” Eila shouted as she moved back up and moved in on Sanya’s right side.
Not wanting to be caught in the middle of a spat, Litvyak raised her hands, both holding her Fliegerhammer, above her head, quieting the quarreling parties. “It’s okay Yoshika.” she said when there was sufficient silence. “I’ve coped with their absence for some time now.” Her face brightened as she reached into her front right pocket and pulled out one of the chocolate kisses that Aaron gave her in the messhall. Handing it out to Miyafuji, Sanya explained, “This is from Aaron to you. Happy birthday.”

“Thank you.” Yoshika happily stated, taking it and marveling at the tiny present. She unwrapped it, placing the silver foil wrapper into her front left breast pocket of her jacket, and popped it into her mouth. She smiled as the treat melted in her mouth, it’s richness hitting very single taste bud. Sanya took hers out bit of half of the candy before offering the other half to Eila, who nodded and took it. “I’d never thought I’d ever say this, but I’m glad I’m here. Everyone is a good person here. I’m honored to have you all as my friends.”

Eila stopped swishing the chocolate around in her mouth and gazed at the Japanese witch. Deep down, something stirred with her. Was I wrong about her and her designs? Is she truly as selfless as she appears to be? “It’s an honor to know you too.” she replied, swallowing the liquefied mass down in one go.

“Aren’t you two cold at all?” Yoshika inquired, noting the fact that her wingmen had their regular uniforms on and seemed impervious to the climes they found themselves in. “I’m bundled up like a postman in a blizzard, but I’m still freezing.”

“We come from a climate unlike yours Miyafuji.” Sanya illuminated. “Winter where you’re from may last probably three or four months, but in Russia, the first snow could come as early as September and not stop until May. I remember some years when I was growing up that the snow arrive earlier and didn’t leave until mid June. That was ’38 I believe, right Eila?”

“I think so.” Eila acknowledged. “Finland gets the same weather at the same time as Russia. I lived further north than Sanya and in combination with the snow, we also had darkness since we were so close to Arctic Circle and the sun was so far away. We lived in perpetual night for months.”

“Wow.” Yoshika said awestruck. “Not seeing the sun? How did you not go insane?”

“We’re a social people.” Eila explained. “We do a lot of get togethers and watch each other’s backs.”

Sanya watched the two make good conversation and smiled on the inside. See, I told you that she’s not a threat or trying to steal me away from you or some bullshit rot like that. She just wants to get to know us better. Speaking of know, where are you little Ubljudok (Bastard)? Since the early days of the war, Litvyak had been up in the night skies, fighting the enemy from dusk to dawn during the retreat up north. She had seen all manner of horrible things and brutal combats, but survived each and every since one, bringing down scores of the Neuroi in the process. This one however is different. It seems to know what ails me, playing my father’s song in order to get under my skin. Almost cost me the first time, but this time, I’m bringing that bitch down. She focused and closed her eyes, projecting her magic out further beyond due to her new and improved communicator array. The device had the unusual quality of making the world appear in shades of blues and violets when she opened her eyes, but she adjusted quickly to it. Hmmmm. Nothing too out of the ordinary. The usual residual morse chatter and outlying patrol traffic from England. What a minute… There! A large segment of violet blobs started to quiver like water in a pond when an earthquake started. It’s low, minding the coastline. Has no idea that we’re here it seems. No other signals in the immediate vicinity. She whipped her head around and signaled for everyone to take their comms offline as to not alert her quarry. As soon as everyone had do so she hastily said, “It’s out there, coming towards us below the cloud cover. Stay on my six and don’t break through. We’ll ambush the sucker. Let’s
She revved her engines and dove hard, Eila and Yoshika right in her heels. In her mind, Sanya’s thoughts moved in and out like water through a sieve as her Strikers took her deeper into the voluminous cloud. Judging by the patrol path it’s taking, it will turn up north soon. These batch of clouds will do nicely as they go near the shoreline. However, we will be outside of comm range of the perimeter patrol network. I could boost my signal, but that will drain my magic quick. Need to rely on myself and my team here. Litvyak noticed the natural cover breaking at some points and knew that they were close to the low ceiling. “Hold up in three, two, one!” she ordered. At the conclusion of the countdown, Sanya killed the main flight mode on her Strikers and put them into a hover, her friends copying the tactic. Carefully, she flicked the safety off on her weapon and craned her neck forwards, placing her neck from the cloud into the the open air. In the distance, despite the lack of appreciable moonlight, Sanya could see the coastline of Norway with it’s numerous fjords and islands. Squinting, she could make out the familiar outline of a Neuroi interceptor, but this one had a different look to it. It was conical shaped with a rounded rear and a sharp point at the front. Five beamer pods were arranged in the middle and the main propulsion was composed of five engines in the back. On the very tip of the pointed front was a cross shaped device, one that Sanya knew was a projector of some sort as that was where it blared her father’s song the last time.

“Looks to be doing a routine patrol around the coast.” Eila observed, joining her friend.

“And it also doesn’t look like it knows we’re here.” Yoshika pointed out, gesturing with her head. “Good call on going radio silent.”

Sanya kept her eyes glued to the enemy interceptor and shouldered her Fliegerhammer, aiming away from the Neuroi. “You have a projected flight path for me Eila?” she asked without looking at her wingman.

“It will come closest to us there, three thirty o clock with a twenty degree decline in forty five seconds.” Eila replied quickly, knowing that the moment was nigh. She turned to Yoshika and ordered, “Keep your eyes peeled for any other interceptors.”

“Right.” Miyafuji responded and gazed intently in every direction.

Eila then looked over at Sanya who had already maneuvered her rocket launcher into the proper position and prepared her stance. “You have the second chamber ready to go?” she inquired.

“I won’t miss this shot.” Sanya curtly replied. “I won’t allow it. It ends tonight Eila.”

Eila then moved closer to Sanya and whispered in her ear, “The fire’s back.” Litvyak took her attention off the Neuroi for a split second and looked at Eila with a puzzled look. The fire? What is she- oh. The meaning behind her words came back swiftly. It was the battle of Stockholm, a great and terrible day. Many of Sanya’s Russian friends had been killed within the first hour by the swarming enemy and the Soviet command ordered a general withdrawal. All pilots left the battlefield except for Sanya who was so consumed by grief that she hurled herself head long into the fray. Not wishing to see her get killed at such a fruitless act of resistance, Eila joined her and together they not only blunted the Neuroi advance, but forced them into a fighting retreat. I lost myself that day and disobeyed an order. I could’ve been put before a firing squad for such insubordination, but they awarded The Hero of the Soviet Union to me and Eila’s first Mannerheim cross. It was unbelievable. Sanya then returned her attention to the Neuroi interceptor, relocating her Fliegerhammer to the optimal position once more. It was still moving casually along the coast. It still doesn’t know we’re here. Excellent. She silently counted down and moved her right index finger over the trigger. Almost there. Steady Sanya. Steady... Now! A quick squeeze and the firing pin inside the weapon ignited a rocket in the upper right tube. With a shriek it sped out, the guide fins
making the ordinance spin like a bullet from a gun. It streaked through the night sky, flying straight before the winds started to naturally curve it, changing its trajectory. Sanya watched as the seconds until impact ticked by. *Come on, come on, come on and kill it you b--- (bitch).*

After what seemed like forever and an age, the missile came within detonation range, but suddenly, the Neuroi craft started to split apart into five equal pieces. One of them sped headlong into the rocket, taking out the munition and itself in the process. The other four came around and about, linking up and gunning for where the shot came from. *Oh fuck, it was a hydra variant in disguise!*

Sanya immediately shifted the mode on her Strikers into normal flight mode and rose up and away to the left quickly. Eila and Yoshika followed her, not wishing to be left behind and face two to one odds. After putting her communicator back in, Litvyak barked, “Get back to our original cruising altitude! Move it and stay sharp!” The cloud enveloped them fully, the wispy air coiling and streaming around them and their Strikers. Enemy beams lashed out, carving long channels, hoping to get a lucky shot. However, shifting positions while in the cloud caused them to miss badly. Soon, the three witches were over the cloud cover and back into the clear. Further and further they climbed before Sanya called out, “Hold at this altitude and get into formation!” Eila moved to her lower right side while Yoshika took the opposite. Again Sanya focused, using her magic to seek out the Neuroi. Then it hit her, her father’s song blaring at full volume. It threw off her concentration and for the life of her she couldn’t get a bead on them.

“Don’t strain yourself Sanya.” Eila advised. “Instead of relying on what doesn’t work, use what does. They can blind every instrument but your eyes.”

Taking her friend’s tip, Sanya gave up her attempts on finding them magically. *Now if I knew that I had some bogeys above me, shrouded by cloud cover, I would send out one to scout, to determine how many we’re facing and then get the other three to attack in echelon as a group when the lone fighter has the enemy distracted.* “Yoshika!” she called out. “Stay close and don’t pursue! They want to break us up!”

“Understood.” Miyafuji relayed. Then she saw something glow red within the clouds moving circling like a shark does with it’s prey before coming in with it’s jaws wide open. “There! On my nine o’clock low!” she shouted as she pointed her 20mm cannon at the Neuroi and pulled the trigger. Recoil buffeted her shoulder as the shells spewed out the barrel. Her shots were off centered, doing nothing but breezing by the interceptor, yet it caused it to turn to the left and bleed off precious speed. Eila took the opportunity within a second, sending a good burst of .30 caliber bullets from her MG42 after it. The lead storm hit the interceptor and the sound of an explosion reached her ears, the death cloud masked by the other.

“Kill partially confirmed.” Eila stated flatly. Suddenly, she saw three black darts exit the cloud and climb, catching them all off guard. *Damn! Too far away and too fast to get a good shot lined up.*

“Split up and watch their ascent angle. Get into a spot where they can’t maneuver effectively behind you and engage on your terms.” Sanya called out, keeping an eye on the interceptors. Eila and Yoshika split up away from her, taking their targets and going off at various speeds. The Neuroi far above them then stalled out and flipped end over end, bringing their propulsion systems back on when their noses were pointed down, firing away. *It’s on now. Zigzagging to and fro, Litvyak avoiding the incoming fire and rolled almost underneath the cloud, the furthest reaching tendrils grazing her rotors. Eila deftly moved in all directions, getting out of trouble before her bogey could even think about firing. Yoshika however, still being new and unused to night fighting, couldn’t dodge very well and a beam struck her shields, the clarion of impact echoing far and wide. Knowing what she had to do, Sanya flipped up onto her back and fired her weapon at Miyafuji’s pursuer without aiming. The rocket came out and narrowly missed being shot down by her bogey. She dipped below the cloud cover for a moment to avoid incoming beams and popped up again like a*
swimmer during a race. She quickly found the contrails of the explosive and it successfully caused
the Neuroi to break off the pursuit of Yoshika, peeling hard left. Sanya didn’t have much time to
congratulate herself. Still leaves me with this meddlesome gnat. More red beams burst forth from the
interceptor’s lone beamer pod, some well aimed while others were prospective. Again adopting the
bobbing tactic with the cloud, Sanya then got an idea. “Eila! Lead your bogey to my position!” she
ordered

“Rodger that! On my way!” Eila responded, the harsh freem of enemy beams almost drowning out
her message. The Finnish witch then made a high g turn, the Strikers screaming as she rounded the
corner and sped off, dancing around the Neuroi’s vain attempts to shoot her down. Under most
circumstances, getting into a head on dogfight with an enemy fighter was not recommended, even for
experienced pilots. But I’m not any so called experienced pilot. They can’t hit me even if they tried. I
got this in the bag. Far ahead, she could see Sanya, peeking up at different spots form the clouds like
the plastic bobber on a fishing rod being tugged at by a crafty fish. Now confronted with two threats
with one closing in, Litvyak’s bogey had to make a choice: either break off and expose yourself to
return fire from below, or risk a head on and stay on target.

“I’ll pop a shot to get it to go left. Let me know when you’re in range.” Sanya shouted into her
communicator.

“Rodger that!” Eila answered, doing a barrel roll to avoid two sets of beams. Closer and closer they
came, the fusillade getting thicker and more urgent from both her front and rear. “In range!” she
yelled, aiming down the sights of her machine gun. Another missile streaked through the air and
predictably, the Neuroi on Sanya went left, just as Eila’s right index finger pulled the trigger. Bullets
buzzed out of the barrel and collided with the target, peppering the underbelly until it died, the white
shards the only reminder of it’s passing.

“Break hard right now!” Sanya bellowed. Eila did just that and the Neuroi didn’t have any time to
change course. Litvyak fired another rocket as she dove backwards under the clouds to avoid the
concussive wave. It buried itself into the interceptor and was erased from existence by a catastrophic
boom, the white death shards mixing with the red of flames. Eila then whipped her head around to see
where Yoshika was. Surprisingly to her, Miyafuji was right behind her bogey, matching it well and
firing burst after burst from her gun. Not bad Yoshika. You’re learning quick. “Regroup on my
three o clock Sanya,” she said into her comms. “Yoshika may need our help.” Without so much as an
answer, Litvyak erupted like lava from a volcano, the clouds parting just so as she conducted an
Immelmann and spun. Revving their Strikers, the two longtime wingmen set a course to link up with
their occupied third member.

Yoshika fired another small burst at the Neuroi, but it spun left. This is a slippery foe! Going through
her memory, she did a mental count of how many shots she had left. Maybe another thirty rounds
before I have to reload. “Yoshika!” Sanya’s voice echoed in her ear. “Don’t just spray and pray. Get
the angle on him to reduce his options.” Get the angle on him. Let’s see. If I go a tad low and left
and come up like so. The 20m cannon jarred her body as the shells came out. Miyafuji watched as
they hit the very back end of the fighter. They killed the propulsion system it had and it bled speed,
getting closer and closer.

“You got this Yoshika.” Eila encouraged. “You own him.” Again, Yoshika pulled the trigger and
raised her shield up in front of her. At this point, the Neuori resembled less of an interceptor and more
like a black barn door. With such a target, missing was an impossibility. The remaining 20mm shells
buried themselves into the enemy’s rear and for a moment it looked like it would still keep going, but
then, a large section of the craft broke off, the two pieces twirling off to the sides before exploding.
The concussive wave was devilishly hard to navigate through, even with shields raised, but Yoshika
gripped her teeth and plowed a path out it. She went into a hover and looked behind her, the cloud of
white shards looking like a nebula. *I killed it. My first real kill as an official pilot.*

“Nice shot Yoshika.” Eila congratulated and she meant it. “That’s your first kill as a member of the 501st. How do you feel?”

“Pretty good I guess.” Yoshika replied. “It all happened so fast I honestly don’t know what to think.”

“Well,” Eila began, putting her right arm over Miyafuji’s shoulder, “here we had a tradition. Those that get their first kill are thrown a party and given a drink.”

“Umm, that’s awfully kind of you, but I really don’t drink alcohol Eila.” Yoshika apologized.

“Well then, I will drink for you. Right Sanya?” Eila asked, turning her head towards Sanya with a devilish smile. That smile soon faded away when she saw her friend with her back turned, head downcast, not moving a muscle. *Looks like she’s listening or crying.* Filled with concern, she let go of Miyafuji and flew on over to her. “Sanya?” she inquired softly when she got close enough. “Are you alright?” Nothing, not so much as an acknowledgement of Eila’s presence came from Sanya. Deciding to put her hand on her friend’s shoulder, Eila reached out and placed her right hand there. It finally made Sanya break out of the strange funk she was in and look at her. Eila nearly gasped as Litvyak’s vacant eyes regarded her, two orbs in a pale face that was a cross between afraid and resolute. Yoshika saw the situation from afar and flew to join them. She was about to ask what was wrong, but Sanya reached up with a trembling right hand and removed her communicator.

“Listen.” she breathed, setting up the device to play on the loudest volume. She pressed a tiny button and the communicator started to project what she had been listening to. From the speaker came the most angelic piano melody that anyone could remember hearing. Yoshika was enthralled by the sounds, but Eila’s eyes bugged out of their sockets.

“That’s her father’s song!”

“Are there anymore?” Eila hastily asked, looking around for targets.

“No.” Sanya shakily replied with confidence. “They are all dead. This signal is coming from far away. Past the Urals Eila.”

“How can you be sure?” Eila countered. “It could be a trick of the radio. Dead echoes and such.”

Sanya eyes then glowed with slight irritation and anger, two things that nearly made her friend back away. “It isn’t a mistake.” she growled. “This song is coming from my father. He is alive. I’m sure of it.”

As the two had their conversation, Yoshika continued to listen to the song and suddenly picked up something most unusual. “Does this song of your father’s have words?” she asked Sanya, ending the tense moment between her and Eila.

“It has no spoken words.” Sanya explained. “It’s a straight instrumental piece. Why?”

“Because there seems to be words.” Yoshika pointed out. “They’re very faint, but they’re there. Listen.”

Curious, Sanya and Eila both leaned in and did their best to uncover what Yoshika had found. Sure enough, something was indeed buried within the music. Eila furrowed her brow after a few seconds and muttered, “I an’t figure out what it’s saying, but it sounds like—”

“Like Aaron when he casts his spells.” Sanya finished. The statement hung in the air for a good while as Litvyak killed the communicator and placed it back into her ear. “We’re heading back to base.”
Surprised, Eila responded, “What? Sanya, we have a good few hours left to do our-”

In a flash, Sanya grabbed her wingman’s uniform top and pulled her in close to her face, silencing that train of thought for good. “We are going back to base Eila,” she said, placing emphasis on each word. Shock was evident in Eila’s face. Under normal circumstances, Sanya knew she wouldn’t act like this towards her friend. But this is not an normal situation. I haven’t heard this song played on my birthday for five years. Only three other people know this song as well as I and only one can play it perfectly. My father is alive and I’m going to find him.

Recovering quickly, Eila nodded, knowing that to argue the point would be pointless. “So what do I tell the patrol network?” she queried as she took Sanya’s hand off of her.

“Tell them the truth. We found and engaged an enemy at the fringes of A9 and are RTB to refuel and resupply.” Sanya ordered.

“But we’re so far away that by the time we get back, it will already be time to end our patrol.” Yoshika commented with sudden realization.

“That’s right.” Sanya answered. “I’m counting on us to arrive at that time.”

“And when we do arrive, what then?” Eila asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“I personally don’t know.” Sanya admitted, turning her head back towards home. “But all I do know is that someone is going to get a rude awakening.”

Aaron circled the pool table like a pack of hyenas getting into position around a herd of prey, watching and waiting for some opening to present itself. There was only one ball left on the green felt, the eight, and his cue ball was around two inches to the left. However, both balls were in the middle of the lower right section and there was no clear way to pocket the eight without scratching and conceding the match, and Aaron was determined not to lose, especially to Ismenoth, who was sitting on a chair made of human bones, dressed in her usual attire, craning her neck from time to time to see what he was doing, or looking lustfully at his crotch or rear. He paid the stares no mind as he stopped circling and placed his hands on his sides, the eighteen ounce cue stick butt hitting the mysterious floor of the dream world that both individuals found themselves in. All around, all was darkness, save for the area near the pool table, illuminated in stark white by a strange hole far above them. “You know,” Ismenoth quipped, placing her right hand onto her chin, “no matter how long you stare at them, they will still be balls.”

“Considering you’re the expert on such things, I’ll take that under advisement.” Aaron shot right back, coming to a decision. “Eight ball lower left corner from off the opposite rail.”

“You should chalk your stick Aaron.” the demonness added with a sly grin. “Wouldn’t want to misfire now.”

“Chalk is for jittery, bad postured, ill focused amateurs who have no business being at the table. All you need is proper posture, focus, and accuracy.” Aaron retorted, keeping his eyes on the eight ball and hunkering down. Concentrating, he moved the stick in his hands and through the shooting grip he had with his left hand, the wood grazing against his knuckles and forefingers. You don’t need to English here or slam it hard. All you need is a deft touch and it’s all over for the bitch. Divale slowed his breathing and played the shot over and over in his mind, the same one that he had taken over and over at Perrine’s chateau. Finally, he shot forward with the cue and struck the cue ball, angling it at the bumper. It caromed off and bounced back into the eight, striking it off center. The eight ball
moved down the way at the perfect speed, perfectly angled towards and into the called pocket.

As the object ball disappeared from sight down the hole, Ismenoth hollered from the opposite side of the table, “Fuck this game!” She got up violently, toppling the chair. It fell to the ground and shattered with a hollow sounding clatter as each bone came loose from their settings and scattered to the four winds.

Chuckling at his victory, one of many he had against the fiend, Aaron tried to be the good sport. “You’re just angry because you can seem to get over the hump and kick my ass. You had every opportunity, but you failed to capitalize.” he remarked politely.

“I don’t know why you love having dreams like this with me.” Ismenoth muttered. “It seems you have a fetish for beating me senseless.”

“It’s either that or you’d have me be center stage at some debauched bacchanalia.” Aaron pointed out.

“But debauched bacchanalies are so fun though.” the demoness complained. “I not only get to watch, but enjoy the fruits of my labors.”

“Now, let’s see, this make this win number sixty nine.” Aaron recollected, placing his stick into a cue holder that lay near his chair, a simple wooden construct with a wide back.

“Oh la-la.” Ismenoth chirped, licking her lips with her tongue slowly and seductively. She took a quick gander at the table and then back at him before propositioning, “Want to have a little go on the table? I promise to clean, refelt, and rebalance it afterwards.”

“No, no, and lastly no.” Aaron replied, shooting down her vain attempts to get him in the sack.

Dejectedly, Ismenoth sighed, grabbed her stick, and threw it at Aaron who caught it with his right hand and placed it into the cue holder. “What’s gotten into you?” she asked. “Ever since that little night a few weeks ago, you’ve been avoiding me like the plague. Is she keeping your balls empty that well?”

“None of your business.” Aaron retorted, seeking an end to the present line of conversation.

“You were never like this in the old days, even when all the ladies threw themselves at you.” the fiend pointed out walking towards him. With a wave of her hand, her broken chair remade itself and faded out of sight until it reemerged right next to Aaron’s seat. She sat down and reminisced, “Those were some times you know.”

“And the worst that comes to mind was that German housewife back in, oh, what was that town again?” Ismenoth inquired.

“Stuttgart.” Aaron replied without mirth, the memories of that particularly rough night coming back to him.

“She may have been a German wife on her feet, but when you got her on her back, you would’ve swore that she was Dutch one. Out of all the trysts that you’ve had, that has got to be the single most uneventful, boring to watch display of human copulation that I’ve ever seen.” Ismenoth ranted. She looked at Aaron sitting next to her and added with emphasis, “And I’ve been around for a long, long time.”
“Least I know now that I can’t do worse.” Aaron deduced.

“But the best night you’ve had was long ago, back before you were freed.” Ismenoth began again with a smile. Aaron turned to look at her and saw that expression on her face. It wasn’t one of joy or happiness, but some cruel sadistic glee. Suddenly, images flashed before his eyes in his mind. Bruised arms, a black shard, a revolver in trembling hands, a blood stained alter made of a single stone slab. Without speaking, Divale got up, his breathing hard and fast and cold sweat began to flow down his face.

“We do not speak of that.” he uttered while regarding the demoness who still sat down with that smug look on her face, a rage building from within him. “Get me out of here.”

“One day, you will have to-” Ismenoth countered, but Aaron put a stop to that by balling his right fist and driving it into the pool table so hard that she could hear the slate crack and splinter from underneath the felt.

Divale began to tremble, his arm shaking like a noodle in boiling water. Slowly he took his fist off the now ruined pool table, small flecks of slate that pierced the felt falling away from his knuckles. He pointed at her with his left index finger and stated with emphasis, “Get me out of here now or your face will be worse.”

“First you have to pay the toll.” Ismenoth cooed, letting her right index finger graze her lips.

Aaron’s anger subsided, but just barely, and he rolled his eyes. “I’ll never understand why every time we have to do business that this is the only form of payment that you ever agree to.” he muttered as he strolled up to her.

Quick as a leopard, the demoness grabbed Divale by the shirt and pulled him close to her body. Her eyes regarded him almost lovingly and her scent wafted thick through the air. “Shut up little man and kiss me.” she demanded. Reluctantly, Aaron puckered up and planted his lips onto her own softly. Ismenoth closed her eyes as she stuck her tongue into his mouth. If only you knew Aaron why I do this, but I’ll never admit it, not out loud anyway. Hold on… what’s that sound? Oh goody. Looks like I was just in time. Someone’s about to get some company.

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As Aaron returned to an awake state, his ears picked up a sound that he knew he shouldn’t be hearing. What in the world was that? As if it heard his thoughts, the sound returned, coming from a good distance away from him. That’s the sound of a batch of knuckles rapping on my door. Who the hell would visit me this time of night? “Who is it?” he called out in the pitch dark of his room.

“Aaron.” the voice of Sanya called out from beyond. “It’s me Sanya and Eila. I need to talk to you.”

Sensing urgency in the tone, Divale sprung out of bed and said, “Okay. Just give me a few seconds to get decent.” As usual, he had slept in the nude and though no light shone in the room, he had memorized where everything was. Reaching out with his left hand, he grabbed the bathrobe that Lynette’s mother gifted him and put it on, tying the sash good and tight. Please God don’t make me have morning wood. Aaron slipped off the bed and his feet hit the rough wooden floor. It felt not too bad considering that spring was here, making the trek less icy cold to the touch. Still, he walked briskly to the door and opened it. Standing outside the threshold was Sanya and Eila, both now out of their Strikers and looking up at him. “Out of all the people who I thought would pay me a visit tonight, you two were at the very bottom of the list.” he quipped. He leaned forward and craned his neck past the frame, looking up and down the hallway.
“We weren’t followed.” Sanya assured. “Took the scenic route.” Convinced that nobody would see this meeting, Aaron nodded and stepped aside, allowing both witches to walk into his room. When they crossed the threshold, he closed the door, masking all in darkness once again.

“Ignis fatuus.” Divale intoned. Eila and Sanya then saw a bright blue light appear in the upper right corner, it’s false flames flickering as a true fire would, illuminating the interior. Sanya was about to open her mouth to say something when she noticed something odd about the walls.

Rough hewn stone doesn’t reflect but is doing so now. Curious, she reached out with her left hand and felt the surface. Expecting to feel the harsh grate of unpolished rock, she nearly gasped as she found it to be smooth. *Paint.*

“Did you do some interior decorating?” Litvyak asked.

“That happened before I got back from my little adventure with Scotland Yard.” Aaron explained walking up to his bed and sitting down. “Courtesy of the black devil herself. She chose pink for this masterpiece though you can’t see it very well given the light.”

“You don’t appear to be mad at all.” Eila noticed, looking around the room, taking in everything the light touched.

“Of course not,” Aaron replied sincerely, “for the place needed some brightening up.” He glanced over at his watch that lay on his nightstand near his bed. It read 3:00 AM. “And it seems that so will I.” he added, regarding both of them. “I sincerely hope that what you have to discuss with me is worth waking me up at three in the morning for.”

Without hesitation, Sanya pulled her ear communicator out and handed it over to Aaron. “I need you to listen to this.” she simply said.

Divale looked at the communicator without moving and then back at Sanya. What did you pick up now? He reached out with his right and took it carefully from her palm with his thumb and forefinger. Holding it up close to his right ear, he nodded, giving her the silent signal to play the message. Sanya did so and no sooner did two heartbeats worth of time passed than Aaron violently recoiled. His grip on the communicator slackened completely, the device clattering to the floor and he threw his body up and over the bed, somersaulting to the opposite side and threw his body into the painted wall. A look of sheer terror was etched on his face and cold sweat began to bead on his forehead. His breathing came out like he was suffering from a nasty bout of pneumonia, wet and heavy. “Impossible.” he squeaked out.

Sanya and Eila back up out of instinct, unsure what was going on and how to feel about it. “What is impossible?” Sanya cautiously ventured.

Slowly, Aaron began to circle around his bed towards his dresser chair, eyes moving in his skull as if they had a mind of their own, never focusing on on thing for more than a second. “It was buried deep. No one else knew where it was. No one could possibly know.” he murmured.

“Aaron,” Sanya commanded in a tone of voice that even surprised herself in it’s forceful projection, “calm down.”

“T-this can’t be happening.” Aaron stammered. “This is a d-dream. It h-has to be.”

Sanya looked over at Eila and gestured with her head towards Aaron. Knowing what she wanted to do, Eila nodded and the two walked slowly over to him. By now, Divale was a nervous wreck and he moved his hands over this forehead and down the sides of his face, a slight tremor overtaking him. As soon as they got close enough, Eila placed her right hand on his massive shoulder and said,
“Relax Aaron. Breathe deep. Calm down.” Taking her advice on the spot, Divale did so, taking in deep breaths and holding them in for a few seconds before letting them out through his lips, sounding like steam escaping the spout of a barely boiling kettle.

“You know what is was you heard.” Sanya observed, her height now matching Aaron’s sitting frame. “What was it?”

Aaron gently picked Eila’s hand of his shoulder and began to explain. “Back when we first started out towards the isthmus in ‘40, we were given all manner of tactical equipment. Most of it was completely useless, so we either sold it, traded it, or simply dropped it wherever we thought was appropriate. However, for reasons I still can’t figure out to this very day, we kept one such relic, an old radio made during the tail end of The Great War. Given the it was a good twenty years old and weighed forty five pounds, it was as obsolete as you could get, yet someone had juryrigged it in order to keep it relevant. There were so many jutting wires, tubes, buttons, and dials that it looked like the mechanical version of Frankenstein. During the ambush, we placed it down into the snow and covered it up so the enemy would be able to hear or see it. Despite our best efforts at camouflage, it took a few stray beams, yet lo and behold, the bitch refused to die, instead sending out this nasty blast of feedback every ten minutes that could split a skull in half. Not wanting to take it with us, I, with strips of thick cloth plugged in my ears, held this beast as some of my men dug a hole into the ground. I simply threw it in, they covered it up, and we left it to die in piece.”

“Could it be possible that this radio could still be broadcasting after all this time.” Sanya inquired.

“No way in this world or the next.” Aaron firmly replied. “The hits it took were smack dab in the power nexus, rupturing some key wires. It was going to die eventually on it’s own wither through the rapidly draining batteries or having it’s life force leeched out by the cold.” He then looked into Sanya’s blue green eyes and shook his head. “I know that this must be the song you told me about during the coven and that it is only played by your father, but Sanya, I wouldn’t pursue this if I were you. I trust your hunches, especially after what Mio and I went through in France, but this is beyond plausible belief. Don’t get bewitched by ghost lights.”

“Let me ask you this Aaron.” Sanya conjectured, her tone making it perfectly clear to everyone present that she was dead set on her current course of action. “If you knew who your parents were and, after having no luck in locating them for years, suddenly get handed a golden opportunity to see if they’re alive after all this time, what would you do?”

Aaron looked down, brow furrowed in thought. *This can’t possibly be the genuine article, no way in Hell. Minna would assuredly agree with me in not letting her go to see if this is true. Too dangerous.* He then resumed his gaze at the Russian and answered, “I’d go.”

“So it is settled.” Minna declared, looking over everyone seated before her in her hanger office. “Lieutenants Litvyak and Juutilainen will investigate the signal and be accompanied by Lieutenant Clostermann and Master Sergeant Divale. Lieutenant Litvyak will have operational command.” She leaned back in her chair, content that all was made clear. Mio, as always, was by her side, standing like a statue, overseeing the debriefing. Wlcke’s brown eyes moved from person to person. Sanya was ecstatic, practically jumping out her seat at the prospect. Eila’s reaction was more subdued, yet she couldn’t hide the pleasure at seeing her wingman be this enthusiastic. Perrine was a mixture of both, maintaining her composure well. Aaron however was having a devil of a time trying to mask is displeasure, almost cringing as he heard those words come out of her mouth like he had caught a whiff of something disagreeable. “You seem to be a little on the fence about this endeavour Master Sergeant Divale.” Minna observed. “Care to elaborate to the rest of us?”
Aaron’s reply was direct and immediate. “I’m not on the fence commander, I’m as far away from it as possible.” he replied. His response drew a nasty look from Sanya and Eila, Perrine swallowed hard with the expectation that there was going to be a nasty argument, and Minna crossed her arms.

“I seem to remember somebody saying that they would never second guess an order if a naysayer was around.” Mio remarked sternly. “Do you have a problem with Commander Wilcke’s judgment?”

“No.” Aaron flatly answered. “My mood is in no way due to the commander’s judgment, but rather the facts as I see them.”

Cocking her eyebrow, Wilcke stated, “Explain.”

Taking a deep breath and swallowing the last dregs of doubt down his throat, Aaron prepared to defend his ground. “As it has been made clear to all, last night I informed Sanya about the radio. However, I neglected to mention that the hole I cast it in was not just barely beneath the surface, but twenty five feet deep into the frozen earth. It’s inconceivable that it could’ve survived the fall. Even if it did, the damage it received and the surrounding environment would preclude it from broadcasting that much longer. Also, given what you have just told me about that little minor quake that region had about a week ago, I will concede the possibility that it could’ve been brought up to the surface. Now, let us say that for some ungodly reason that this thing is still sending out a signal. Here is where I’m very skeptical about this. The frequency we had it on was Finnish military. A force of nature cannot tune a radio to a Russian one that just so happens to pick up the song. When you add to the fact that after the signal was triangulated, it shows up beyond the Urals. That means that someone found that bucket of bolts and took it a distance of over a thousand miles back over the mountains. Who that person is, how they found it, and why they took it in the first place is still unknown.” He paused to catch his breath and let his train of thought get back on the rails before beginning again. “As for the pilot assignments, I feel that out of all those present that Sanya and Eila are the best equipped and knowledgeable of the local area. I have complete confidence that they could do this mission on their own and adequately complement and protect each other. The inclusion of me and Lieutenant Clostermann make no logistical sense as she’s never been to Russia, and while I have, I’ve never been that far east. We’d just be excess baggage that would be best left at the door. And that is all I have to say on that.”

Minna steepled her hands in front of her face and pondered what Aaron said. Those facts are irrefutable and this operation does have F.U.B.A.R written all over it master sergeant, but this needs to be done. If I didn’t think that this would help give Sanya proper closure to a mystery that she’s been trying to solve for five years and that I still have issues of confidence in Eila’s ability to raise her shields in combat, I’d wouldn’t allow this. Then she saw Aaron nod his head, almost as if he knew what she was thinking, resigning himself to fate. Does he know what I’m thinking? “Your call Lieutenant.” Minna offered, regarding Sanya.

Litvyak’s reply was immediate and to the point, “We get suited and kitted up now. We leave within fifteen minutes.” Minna then pushed the button that brought up the elevator, which came up within seconds. The witches and Aaron got up from their seats and stood at attention as the lift opened up. On the inside, Divale groaned as the thought of being in that cramped elevator washed over him. It was a devil of a time trying to fit with just Mio in there. Add three more to the mix and I’m cramped. However, his mood brightened as he looked again at the dimensions. Aaron’s jaw dropped and he turned to Wilcke, completely flabbergasted.

“You enlarged it?” he asked incredulously. Minna only smiled in reply. “Anscheinend gibt es doch einen Gott (Apparently there’s a God after all).” Aaron finished as Sanya lead the way into the elevator with Eila hot on her heels. Perrine went past the threshold next and stood off to the side.
allowing Aaron to occupy the right section. When everyone was inside, Sanya closed the iron crisscrossed mesh door and punched the button on the console next to her. Slowly, the lift began to descend, the office, Minna, and Mio disappearing from sight. Divale leaned against the metal, closed his eyes, and smiled. *So this is what it’s like when modern technology actually fits you. I might get used to this.* Then he felt the sensation that he was being watched and cracked open his right eye just a smidgen. Through his eyelashes, he saw that Eila was looking up at him. Opening both eyes fully now, Aaron asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Thanks for saying what you did back there about us two.” Juutilainen answered sincerely. “It really does mean a lot to know that your friends have confidence in you when your superiors don’t.”

“Anytime Eila.” Aaron responded.

“We know our role on this mission.” Perrine added, seizing the moment from her wingman. “We’re here as shadows not shields. Our place is behind or to the side, the front is your job.”

Eila nodded in gratitude and faced the front of the elevator door. *I will protect her with everything I got, shield or no shield.* Out of the corner of her right eye, she saw Sanya standing perfectly still, but could sense that her mind was moving at a breakneck pace. *I’ve never seen her so this focused before, even during the night flights at the beginning.* Light began to appear from below, shining through the slits between the metal lift and the concrete wall. “Alright everyone,” Sanya stated with authority, “listen up. Gear yourselves for Arctic weather conditions. It may be springtime, but that doesn’t matter when your that close to the North Pole. Whatever weapons you want to bring is up to you.” Everyone either grunted or nodded an answer as the elevator hit rock bottom and the doors opened up. Pouring out of the lift like marbles from a children’s tin can, they scattered in all directions, gathering supplies, weapons, and appropriate gear. Perrine and Aaron separated and Clostermann understood why. *Doesn’t want to intrude on our privacy.* She busied herself gathering all the essentials; her Bren, ammunition, a backpack containing water in an insulated canteen, food, basic medical supplies, a compass, and most importantly, gelled ethanol tins for helping to start fires to keep warm. *Never been to Russia, but people say its cold this time of year still.*

“This should fit you.” Eila surmised, holding a large white parka with a fur lining along the hood. “Try it on and see if it fits.”

Perrine took the heavy uniform from Eila’s hands and slipped her arms through the sleeves. Instant warmth was had as she pulled the zipper all the way up to her chin. “Wow.” she exclaimed in a low voice. “This is cozy.”

“Not only that,” Eila pointed out, “but it is perfectly camouflaged.”

Clostermann smoothed out the front of the parka and as she did so, her left hand came across a hard bump of some kind inside her left breast pocket. Puzzled and curious at the same time, she opened the pocket and pulled out a pair of heavily tinted sunglasses. “Sunglasses?” she inquired.

“The snow might not be fully melted up where we’re going.” Juutilainen explained. “During the day when the sun bears down, the snow acts a mirror, reflecting dazzlingly bright light. The glare is so harsh that it could blind you.”

Understanding, Perrine placed them back in her pocket and zipped it back up. *Good to know, but it will be a pain to put them over my glasses.* Sanya then came up to the group, carrying her Fliegerhammer and an MG42, the latter of which she causally tossed to her friend who caught it with two hands. “Just about done there Perrine?” she asked.

“All set.” Clostermann answered quickly, grabbing her machine gun.
“Now where is Aaron?” Sanya mused, looking around. Her friends tried to locate him, but no trace of him could be found. “Where are you master sergeant?” she called out.

“Right where he should be.” Aaron answered, rounding a corner. The three witches turned as saw Divale coming towards them, dressed in a white parka and armed to the teeth with his Torkarev’s tucked into his front pockets, his Ithaca in its holster that was strapped to his right leg, his machine gun in his hands, and the long form of a PTRS-41 antitank rifle slung over his back, the final weapon pressed flush against his flesh by a bulging backpack. A bandolier of German stick grenades was looped around his waist. He looked for all the world like a yeti with guns.

“Looking good Aaron.” Eila admitted, looking him up and down. “Can you take off is the question.”

“I can take off whenever I want.” Aaron quipped. “We all ready to go?”

“Let’s get this expedition underway.” Sanya declared, rounding about and walking back to the elevator. Not a single peep came from anyone when they strolled back into the lift, closed the door, pressed the button, and waited those agonizingly long twenty seconds for them to reach the surface. Upon the doors opening again back in Minna’s office, they found the door open and walked out into the hanger.

Minna and Mio were finishing up pre-takeoff preparations near the launch dais as they came to the steps leading up to the raised platform. “Master sergeant!” Wilcke called out. “A quick word if you don’t mind.” Aaron furrowed his brow, but obeyed, hopping down and briskly trotting over, the sounds of Striker engines being brought to life echoing in the hanger bay. “Wussten Sie, woran ich im Büro gedacht habe (Did you know what I was thinking back at the office)?” she asked in her native tongue, not wanting the others to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“Sie sind vielleicht gut darin, Motive in Ihren Mitpiloten herauszufinden, aber Sie können Ihre eigenen nicht besonders gut verstecken. Deine Augen sagen mir alles, Kommandant (You may be good at finding out motives in your fellow pilots, but you're not very good at hiding your own. Your eyes tell me everything commander).” Aaron answered.

“Vielleicht sollte ich anfangen, eine Sonnenbrille zu tragen, wenn wir uns dann unterhalten (Maybe I should start wearing sunglasses when we talk then huh)?” Minna ventured with a grin.

“Würde nicht schaden (Wouldn't hurt).” Aaron chuckled. His mirth died as he put on a serious face. “Abgesehen von den offensichtlichen Gründen, warum gehen Perrine und ich sonst auf diese Mission (So besides the obvious, why else are Perrine and I going on this mission)?”

“Es ist höchste Zeit, dass Sie beide Ihren ersten Kampfeinsatz haben. Sanya und Eila werden ein wachsames Auge darauf haben, wie Sie und Ihr Team die Lücken füllen (It's high time that you both have your first combat sortie together. Sanya and Eila will keep a close eye on how you two perform and any gaps will be filled in by your diary).” Minna explained. Content with the explanation, Divale nodded. “Mach es fertig und komm zurück in einem Stück (Get it done and get back in one piece).”

Aaron gave a salute, had it returned by both Wilcke and Sakamoto, and dashed back up to the dais. “What was that all about?” Perrine asked as his situated himself so that his takeoff wouldn’t negatively impact his fellow squadron members.

“Eh, the usual do well and don’t screw up bit.” Aaron fibbed.

“All those words for just that?” Clostermann inquired.

“German is a strange language.”Divale simply replied.
“Alright everyone.” Sanya announced. “All pre-launch checks are a go. Take off and climb to five thousand feet. We head for Dover harbor in three, two, one, liftoff.” As one, the quartet flew up into the air, moving straight up and splitting up incrementally upon passing the hole in the hanger ceiling. Up and up they climbed into the overcast skies of a late March morning. Beads of rain were coming down, but nothing too heavy as they leveled off at the aforementioned altitude and made a beeline for Dover harbor which was not much more than four miles south west of the castle.

“So what’s our ride?” Aaron queried, looking over the bustling harbor.

“It’s a freighter called the KASPAR HAUSER.” Sanya answered, peeking over her right shoulder. “Dock number 21.”

Aaron peered back down at the harbor and saw an enormous cargo hauler, long riveted plates of steel stretching a distance easily that of a destroyer in length and twice as wide. The captain’s roost was a white bunker like structure towards the rear and a massive propeller lay in the water just waiting to be turned on. The name of the vessel was written along the right front in bold white reflective lettering. His brow furrowed as details started to emerge, curious ones that gave him a moments pause. *Freighters are build for speed, but that propeller prop is too small to generate that. Plus, if this is a cargo hauler, where is the cargo lift crane and the holding cages in the center? I smell a rat.* Sanya began to descend and deftly landed on the surface of the vessel, the remaining three touching down soon after. She looked around for any sign of activity on the main deck, but was confused as to why there was none. “That’s strange.” she commented, craning her neck left and right. “You’d think that the captain would be out and about somewhere expecting us.”

“I know.” Eila acknowledged, taking a few steps forward. She yelped as she lost her balance for a moment, her left Striker getting snagged by a raised section in the deck, before righting herself. She look down and gazed at the veritable bump in the deck and noticed that other bumps were evident at selected intervals, too orderly to be random. Juutilainen signaled everyone to come over by crooking her right index finger and pointed out a long bolted line that ran perfectly straight from the prow, across the deck, up and over the captain’s roost, and down to the propeller prop. “You all thinking what I’m thinking.” she asked when everyone had plenty of time to think on the possibilities.

“I smell a lemon.” Perrine stated flatly. Suddenly, the front door of the captain’s roost opened up, startling everyone except Aaron, who point his machine gun right at the person standing at the threshold. It was a man, stocky, 5’7” with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. His tan uniform was immaculate, the bars of a captain on his collar. The captain’s hair red and cropped short, mostly hidden by a small beret. A bushy beard that looped from his sideburns and connected at the lips drew attention to his strong chin. Aaron laughed and laughed mightily, his gun sloping downwards towards the deck as he recognized who was standing there.

“Hello ladies and gentleman.” Edmund Peterborough announced to all present like a showman at a circus. “Welcome aboard the Kaspar Hauser and please refrain from pointing your weapons willy-nilly about the place. Spooks the crew.”

Stifling his guffaws for a moment, Aaron turned to his friends and confirmed, “You were right Perrine. You did smell a lemon and it has a hefty bit of ginger added in.” *Fuck. My. Life.*
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

At dinner, Captain Edmund Peterborough explains to Aaron, Perrine, Eila, and Sanya what's really going on, an answer that doesn't sit well with one particular warlock. After a heart to heart and a heart to hearts, Divale is convinced to have some faith in the endeavor. When dawn breaks, the enemy is engaged and defeated with a combined force of arms. Towards the evening, Eila leads the group to an abandoned hideaway where the quartet warm up and talk about esoteric forms of communication and the need to exercise formal ones when needed.

Chapter XXXIV: Masquerade

A part of me wondered if I would ever see my friends again. I even wondered if I actually wanted to. It would be so easy to disappear and never come back. They wouldn't be able to find me even if they tried. I know seven languages and virtually all the local customs and traditions of the peoples who live in Europe. There would be no more war, no bloodshed, just the rest of my life being someone else and with someone else. All these thoughts rushed through my head as remembered looking at her face as she slept before I walked out the door to Larissa’s house.

Diary Entry June 6 1941.

The cook took his ladle and dipped it into the massive steaming hot steel kettle pot and pulled up a preportioned amount of tomato sauce. With practiced ease, he poured it in a circular motion over the bed of noodles on Aaron’s tray, taking care not to get any on his hands or in his cup of coffee. After he was done, Divale nodded in thanks and moved away from the line, letting the other sailors behind him come up that much closer to dinner. He turned around in place and looked around the messhall of the freighter Kaspar Hauser, also known as, the destroyer Ramses from what Edmund had told him and the rest of the group. It was crowded with people, long metal tables and unipole stools bolted down into the deck. Despite the sardine can cramped nature of the place, it was pretty quiet, with the crew busying themselves with eating rather than idle chitchat. The sounds of scraping utensils on trays, plunking cups, and the random burp filled the air. In the right corner, just slightly askew of where he was, was a stack five feet high of trays like the one he was holding on a rolling rack. Through the sea of bodies, he saw a hand go up in the wave. The signal has been sent.

Knowing where to go to find his friends now, Aaron moved into the room proper from the threshold of the main line. His bulk made it difficult to navigate and his head came close to hitting some pipes that lined the tops of the ceiling, but he managed it well, bobbing and weaving this way and that like a rugby player on the pitch trying to avoid being tackled. Finally, after about half a minute, he came to a largely deserted table, occupied by Perrine, Sanya, and Eila, who out of courtesy waited for him to get his food and join them before they ate. “You ladies didn’t have to do that you know.” Aaron remarked as he sat down both himself and his tray next to Perrine and across from Sanya and Eila.

“Where I’m from, a family who eats together must first sit down together.” Eila answered. “We may
not be blood related, but we are like a family in a sense.”

Aaron thought about the explanation for a second and conceded the point by saying, “I would agree with that.”

Next to him Perrine took up her cup and offered, “A toast to a fruitful journey.” Everyone raised their cups as one and clunked them together before taking a drink.

Sanya took a few extra swallows of the coffee. *This is not bad, for ersatz at least.* Setting down her cup she took up her utensil, a combination spoon and fork that the crewmen on board called a spork, and looked down at her meal. The sight of the meat sauced morsel made her cringe and her stomach do somersaults. *I don’t mind Italian food, but this wasn’t made by Lucchini.* Tentatively, she poked the noodles and was met with a wet squelching sound, like withdrawing a boot from a muddy patch of ground. It immediately put her off her appetite and Litvyak muttered, “Kakogo khrena eto dolzhno byt (What the fuck is this supposed to be)?”

“Judging by the look, it should be spaghetti with meat sauce.” Aaron responded, twirling his spork into his mass of food.

“Could’ve fooled me.” Eila quipped, also put off by the poor effort. “Looks more like tiny breadsticks and dog food slathered with ketchup.”

“Lucchini would have a field day with the cooks if she saw this travesty.” Perrine agreed, shaking her head as she scooped up a bit of the sauce and watched it drip like water through the tines.

“Don’t knock it til you try it folks.” Aaron feebly pointed out. “It could be like haggis. It might look like crap, but it doesn’t taste like it.”

“Oh yeah?” Sanya countered, leaning forward and pointing her right index finger at Aaron’s food. “You try it then.”

Not wishing to be thought of as a chicken, Divale quickly finished twirling his spork and popped the whole thing into his mouth, sauce catching on his lips and falling down his chin and back onto his tray. As soon as it hit his taste buds, Aaron had to admit that it was vile stuff. *Fuck me running that is bad. Pasta is undercooked, the meat is stone cold, and the sauce is so bland and thin I can see the bottom of my tray. Reminds me of the first time I made eggplant parmigiana.* Everyone watched him and he chewed and swallowed, waiting for a verdict and watching for any sign that he didn’t like it. Divale calmly picked up his napkin, wiped his dirty face clean of the sauce, and let it drop smack dab into his dinner. He thought for a moment and declared, “I’ve eaten food from vacated prisons that was better than that.”

“Not so loud now Aaron.” a voice hissed softly off to the far side of the table. All four heads turned and saw Edmund, holding a tray with one hand and carrying a small box in the other. “The cook gets awfully sensitive about such things being said about his food and besides, ersatz rations aren’t the easiest things to make palatable most days.”

“A sensitive cook is a crap cook.” Aaron countered. “Anyone will tell you that and who knows, maybe that will convince him to put some damn effort into his craft.”

“Would you like to sit down Captain?” Sanya politely offered, remembering proper protocol. “We can leave if you need privacy.”

“Thank you lieutenant.” Edmund stated. “You all moving will not be necessary because I need to talk to all of you.” He walked over and sat down next to Aaron, placing the small box on top of one
of the stools.

“So what’s in the box?” Eila asked.

“The intermezzo.” the captain replied with a grin while he tied his napkin around his neck like a handkerchief. After he pulled the knot, he took up the box and opened it. He reached in with both hands, pulled out four oversized cans that looked like coffee tins with pull tabs, and slid them over to each person like a bartender sending drinks down to customers on a bar top. “A full English Breakfast and,” he said while reaching back into the box for a moment and extracting a small flask of whiskey, “an aperitif.”

“Well I’d never.” Aaron’s mouth gaped in annoyance and indignation. “You think you can waltz in here like the lord of the manor and bribe the likes of us with these trifling things to make up for your shit cooking staff?” He and Edmund looked at each other for a good second before the master sergeant smiled. “Of course you can you ginger bastard.” he added with laugh. “Let’s dig in.”

“What exactly is an English Breakfast?” Sanya asked opening up her can, the pull tab coming off with a sound like a slicing knife.

“Eggs, bacon, sausage, baked beans, potatoes, cabbage, fried tomatoes, fried bread, mushrooms, and fried onions.” Perrine answered, vividly remembering the first time that Lynette made it for her.

“It amazes me that you know that.” Eila commented, sticking her spork into the can. “You were on your second day of no sleep.”

“And you were on your third.” Clostermann recalled. “We all looked rough at the end of that stretch.”

“Best of times and the worst of times.” Sanya brought up as she took a sporkful of tinned breakfast into her mouth.

“Speaking of time,” Aaron said, taking the up the bottle of whiskey and removing the cork with a subtle pop, “I believe the good captain has something to tell us.”

“That I do.” Edmund admitted, reaching back into the box and pulling out a folder. He set it in front of him and gave everyone a quick stare, the kind of look that made it clear that what he was talking about wasn’t allowed to leave this table. “Officially, we are the Kaspar Hauser, a merchant freighter on route to the ports beyond Archangel, delivering supplies to the Russians. Unofficially, we are the HMS Ramses, sent on a mission to discover what has been happening to our supply convoys around the region of Titran, a deserted small town north of the islands of Smola and Hitra on the Norwegian coast.” He opened the folder and took out a sheaf of papers and aerial photographs. “Now, originally, we were supposed to be getting a force from the 507th JFW to aid us in this endeavor later in the week. That all changed when we heard through command that you four were seeking passage up around that particular route.”

“By that explanation, that would mean that Commander Wilcke would’ve had no knowledge of what you were truly doing here.” Sanya deduced.

“That makes no sense.” Eila pointed out figuratively with her words and literally with her spork. “Why go to the 507th when the 501st are right there?”

“We needed people who had knowledge of the terrain. With the exception of you and Lieutenant Litvyak, no one in the 501st has been to Scandinavia.” Edmund replied. “No insult to you lot, but that’s what command wanted.”
“And why the deception?” Perrine asked. “Why keep this information away from the proper channels?”

“The mission probably comes straight down from the top of the Admiralty, maybe even the lips of Churchill himself.” Aaron theorized after taking a deep swig of the alcohol. “The old codger always had a love for his little boats and if someone is breaking them, he’ll want to figure out who and why discreetly.”

Peterborough affirmed Divale’s theory as the truth by illuminating, “Ten to one, that’s probably where this came from.”

“So any idea what’s going on up there?” Sanya inquired.

Edmund pulled two black and white aerial photographs, the kind taken by cameras by high altitude fliers. He directed attention to the first, one of a small island north of two big ones. Then he produced a red butcher’s crayon from his right breast pocket and made two massive circles, both failing to overlap at the point where the islands lay. “Our convoys obviously don’t run this close to land, maintaining a distance of roughly forty miles from shore. This area, which we have dubbed the soft underbelly of Norway, is the sole point where our ships can stop and cool their engines or make emergency repairs. For close to two years, this has been a safe zone, until now. Two weeks ago, command started getting reports that ships were being taken out at a rate far higher than usual. Testimonies of ship captains told us that when they were coming into that supposed safe one, they came under fire from something truly massive, something they had never seen before. Further investigation proved fruitless in determining the direction so the next convoy was sent out with recon fliers equipped with cameras in the hopes of catching a glimpse of what was tormenting our boys out there.” Edmund then placed the next photograph over the previous one, one that captured a mountainside at first glance, but as everyone began to focus on the image, the shape of a long black line appeared, the tip facing the off colored, the sign of either charging up a shot or the residual afterglow of a spent round. “Of the six pilots that went with the convoy, only one made it back, and this is the only image we have of this thing.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that.” Sanya stated, squinting at the photo. Perrine graciously took off her glasses and placed them over the strange object, magnifying it. Litvyak turned to Aaron and queried, “Have you seen anything like it?”

“Not to my recollection.” Divale answered, looking down at the enhanced image. “However, they appear to be similar to a Strategos’ main gun.”

“Did the surviving pilot have anything to say about what this is?” Eila posited to the captain.

“All she managed to say was that it appeared out of the mountainside and started firing. It managed to get off several shots at the convoy before it got out of range. Three ships were struck and simply exploded into gigantic fireballs, taking everyone and everything it carried to the bottom. Enemy short range fliers also appeared and began harassing the survivors. Though they were beaten back, the damage was done. Four more ships were sunk. However, if there is one silver lining here it’s the fact that this weapon seems to be inaccurate, relying on the element of surprise to get in the first strike.”

Edmund went on.

“Any idea of the maximum range?” Perrine asked, putting her glasses back on and blinking hard as her world came back into focus.

“None at all.” Edmund replied. “We’re going in as close to blind as we can be.”

“But no defenseless and unawares.” Sanya countered with confidence. “We know it’s out there and
that gives us the advantage. So what’s the plan?”

“The plan is to lure it into revealing it’s position and having you folks go in and take it out before it can escape.” Edmund simply said.

“If you get hit by an errant shot Captain Peterborough, this mission is going to come to an abrupt end.” Eila warned.

“She’s absolutely right on that point.” Aaron agreed, setting the bottle of whiskey down.

“True, but this disguise of ours is more than just a pretty façade. It’s also made of reinforced materials that will protect us from at least one shot at most, judging from what kind of firepower it takes to knock a merchant freighter out of commission in one hit.” Edmund assured, though Aaron detected a hint of doubt in his voice. “Like our home, we can take it.”

All the while, Aaron sat there, listening and looking at the photographs with a gnawing feeling in his gut. This isn’t F.U.B.A.R, it’s mandatory suicide. Going in with just a picture and whole lot of faith in nothing just to get shot at in the hopes of getting a return in kind? This is all sorts of f*cked.

Suddenly, he got up and walked away from the table, making a beeline for the messhall exit without excusing himself. Everyone stopped talking and looked up at him. “Where are you going?” Perrine asked with concern.

Aaron turned around while backtracking out the door and answered, “Just getting some fresh air in the underside.” Clostermann was about to say something else, but he was go without a trace. She looked over at Sanya and inquired, “Should we follow him?” Sanya nodded and looked at Eila who reciprocated the gesture with a wink.

“I’ll help us find him.” Juutilainen declared. “He won’t be too hard to find.”

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Aaron’s boots clunked softly on the deck of the Ramses as he made his way towards the bow. Despite his best attempts, his footfalls echoed within the shell that was the Kaspar Hauser which surrounded him, blanketing the area with perpetual night. Slits from above him cast the waning moments of the sunset outside all around, forming shafts of yellow, orange, and red. The main gun deck of the Ramses was deserted save for a skeleton crew that manned the anti aircraft batteries one level below him or up along the gun towers and citadel roof. A few more stood near two of the eight torpedo tubes, scrubbing the interior of the launchers of debris buildup. Massive armored gun turrets took up the bulk of the deck space, each of the four mounting two 120mm batteries. He ducked under one of the barrels, letting his right hand graze the cold steel.

“...These are good guns. Wish we had some of these babies in the old days. Load them up with HE rounds, nothing would be able to survive. Continuing his walk, his mind wandered back to the messhall and he shook his head at the sheer ridiculousness of the whole plan. We are blind, no matter what Edmund says. Plus, the enemy wouldn’t just have short range fighters protecting it. There will be ground forces ready and waiting within that mountain. This is a briar patch and getting in or out will be a struggle. Soon, Aaron finally came up to the bow, just short of the raised gun deck and askew of the anchor hoist. He could feel the subtle lowering and raising of the vessel as the Ramses traversed the North Sea outside of his sight and hear the lapping of water against the sides. The sun continued to set, making the multicolored shafts bend towards the horizon line, crawling up the deck like a searchlight at a prison searching for escaping convicts. Within moments, the shafts centered on him, showering him with color.

A bright light and a pair of eyes open. The world is blurry, as it always was upon stirring from a night’s sleep. Pain registers along the spine as weary bones and muscles act in concert to sit up a
body from a wooden pew bench. Old wood creaks as the world again goes dark, courtesy of the hands coming up to the eyes and rubbing the debris of yesterday away. Quick blinks follow like the shuttering of a camera lens as each flap of the eyelids brought the interior of the abandoned church. It was spacious, as all places of worship are, with concave niches at the front and near straight walls along the stone sides. The front doors to the place far behind the line of pews, two massive oak constructs with metal knockers the size of truck tires, were closed. Prayer benches lined the middle left and right parts of long processional, each equipped with a slot where one could still find a Bible or two tucked within, the yellowed pages to the leather bound scriptures dull and lifeless in the darkness. Towards the front was a raised marble dais, covered in a once luxurious red carpet that now had holes from rats seeking material for their nests in the roof and rafters above an unseen head. A giant cross depicting the Lord and Saviour in his final moments was front and center, a few feet above and behind a pulpit where the priest would deliver his fiery sermon to his flock. Various sections were bathed in shafts of colored light, illuminating dust particles that wafted through the stale air like snowflakes. A neck cranes to see where the strange light was coming from. Along the walls, far above the pews, were intricate stained glass windows, depicting various important scenes from the Bible. The one that gave off the most light which at present showered he tired one with warmth the most, came from Dante’s Inferno, that of of the demon Minos coiling his lengthy tail around himself, each revolution denoting the circle an unfortunate soul must dwell forevermore within a chamber of fire and torment, the multitudes yet to be sentenced wailing and writhing in anguish at their lot. A mind silently laughs at the sheer irony and then hears something near the church doors. Theories come and go in an instant. Couldn’t be thunder or rain for none was forecasted, artillery barrage was ruled out for there wasn’t a battery that could hit the church for miles, so that just left a knocking at the portals, one that sounded urgent as if it wanted to help.

Aaron harshly blinked the memory away and suddenly had an epiphany. That’s it. Help. And there’s one person that I can talk to that may just help me calm down. He took out his ear communicator and fiddled with the internal components. When he was done, Divale placed it back into his ear and softly cooed in a singsong manner, “Dov’è la mia madonna (Where’s my pretty lady)?”

“Proprio dove dovrebbe essere (Right where she should be),” Lucretia’s voice rang clearly at the other end of the line, “proprio al tuo fianco (right by your side).”

“(Come te la passi) How are you doing?” Aaron asked sitting down on the deck itself and crossing his legs. “Ti sei ripreso dal travestimento (Have you recovered from the disguise)?” he added, knowing that there were usually feelings of nausea associated from wearing the magically glimmer for that long of a time.

“Sto bene grazie (I’m well, thank you).” Lucretia reported. “Ho ancora qualche problema a vivere quello che dovevo fare per stare al fronte. Tutte quelle persone (Still have some trouble living down what I had to do in order to keep up the front. All those people).”

Aaron couldn’t help but feel like a son of a bitch as she said those words. It was the only way to protect you, but I desperately wish there was another way. You didn’t deserve to be put through that and do what you had to do to weave the web of lies. “(Mi dispiace Lulu) I’m sorry Lulu.” he sincerely apologized.

“Hai fatto quello che dovevi fare per essere sicuro che stavo bene (You did what you had to do to make sure I was okay).” Domino answered, reminding him that his actions had a benefit. “Stai bene amore mio? Sembri un po ’distante (Are you alright my love? You sound a little distant).”

“Non so cosa pensare in questo momento (I don’t know what to think right now).” Aaron admitted. “Ho molto in mente e mi sta davvero distruggendo (A lot is on my mind and it’s really crushing me to a pulp).”
A cosa stai pensando (What are you thinking about)?" Lucretia asked. "Forse posso aiutare (Maybe I can help)."

"Sono su un incarico che sembra e sembra una commissione da pazzi (I'm on an assignment which looks and feels like a fool's errand)." Aaron explained. "Uno che è molto pericoloso e dove potrei vedere me stesso e gli altri farsi male per nessuna ragione strategica (One that’s very dangerous and where I could see myself and others getting hurt for no strategic reason at all)."

"Vieni su (Come on over)." Lucretia offered. "Ti aiuterò a superare questo (I'll help you get through this)."

"Lo farei se potessi, ma in questo momento sono nel mezzo delle parti orientali dell'Atlantico settentrionale, dove tutto ha avuto inizio (I would if I could, but right now I'm in the middle of the eastern parts of the North Atlantic going back to where it all began)." Aaron dejectedly answered.

The line went dead for a second as Lucretia correctly surmised where he actually was. "Madre de Dio (Mother of God)." she murmured. "Tornerai là? Per cosa (You’re going back there? For what)?"

"Non sono libero di dire (I'm not at liberty to say)." Aaron responded.

"Capisco (I understand)." Lucretia said, accepting the fact that he couldn’t go into particulars along unsecured channels. "Se questo ti ha spaventato, deve essere serio. Hai parlato con il comandante di questo (If this has got you spooked then it must be serious. Have you talked to the commander about this)?"

"Provato a (Tried to)." Aaron went on. "Non mi ha fatto molto bene, anche se ho potuto vedere che era d'accordo con il mio ragionamento (Didn’t do me much good though, even though I could see that she agreed with my reasoning)."

"Veremente (Really)?" Domino inquired. "Come puoi dirlo (How can you tell)?"

"Come pensi (How do you think)?" Aaron countered. "Sono un chirurgo di classe mondiale quando si tratta di psicoanalisi. Se necessario, posso sezionare i motivi di una persona fino all'osso più velocemente di quanto possa strappare la buccia da un'arancia (I'm a world class surgeon when it comes to psychoanalysis. If need be, I can dissect a person’s motives down to the bone faster than I can rip the rind off an orange)." He paused and smiled forlornly. "A proposito di buccia d'arancia, mi manchi (Speaking of orange peel, I miss you)."

"Mi manchi anche tu Aaron (I miss you too Aaron)." Lucretia stated lovingly. "Ogni giorno che non sono al tuo fianco sembra un'eternità (Every day that I'm not by your side feels like an eternity)."

"Similmente (Likewise)." Aaron replied. "Non hai idea di quanto vorrei essere al mio fianco adesso, il tuo corpo accanto al mio tra le braccia, il mio naso che inala il tuo profumo, le mie mani che ti passano tra i capelli (You have no idea how much I wish you were by my side right now, your body next to mine in arms, my nose inhaling your scent, my hands running through your hair)."

"Quando tornerai, forse il Comandante Wilcke ti concederà un po' di tempo libero e potremo sentirlo di nuovo (When you get back, maybe Commander Wilcke will give you some time off and we can feel that again)." Lucretia suggested.

"Si può solo sperare (One can only hope)." Aaron answered. He then had a small idea creep into his head and began to sing ‘I'll Get By (As Long As I Have You)’ in Italian, his baritone being shortly joined by Domino’s alto, and the two sang eloquently for a good three minutes, their voices complementing each other well.
When they finished, Lucretia sighed. “Questa è una delle mie canzoni preferite (That’s one of my favorite songs).”

“Anche il mio (Mine too).” Aaron acknowledged. “Odio farti questo, ma andrò in pensione per l'amante della sera (I hate doing this to you, but I’m going to retire for the evening sweetheart).”

“Tesoro (Sweetheart)?” Domino replied with shock in her voice. “Non mi hai mai chiamato così prima (You’ve never called me that before).”

“Beh, ti ho chiamato tutto il resto (Well, I’ve called you everything else).” Aaron responded with a broad smile on his face.

Lucretia laughed on the other end and Divale could almost hear her blushing. “Che tu hai, tranne per un altro titolo, uno che spero di sentire presto un giorno (That you have, except for one other title, one that I hope to hear one day soon).”

Aaron nodded, knowing what name she meant. “Infatti. Fino ad allora, buona notte dormi Lulu. Ti amo (Indeed. Until then, have a good nights sleep Lulu. I love you).”


Aaron killed the link and leaned back until he lay flat on the deck, looking up into the sparsely lighted darkness. The vibrant colors of the sunset had disappeared and were now replaced with the silvery white of the moon above. Then he heard it, a small sniffle over by a nearby torpedo tube on the port side. Immediately, he knew that he got eavesdropped and his anger built up within him. His mind however quicker than his ire.

Whoa there Aaron. Bring it back down now. They probably had a good reason for seeking you out. Yeah, they intruded on a private moment, but none of them can speak Italian so you’re okay. No harm done.

“It’s nice having some time to one’s self every now and then.” he said outloud while sitting up and turning around. “Don’t you all agree?” Silence greeted him. Now standing up, Aaron ended their little game of hide and seek, declaring, “I know you are behind that port side torpedo tube. So be a dear and come on out.” A few seconds passed before the figures of Eila, Sanya, and Perrine emerged from behind their hiding place. All three of them.

“I never knew Italian to be such a wonderfully crafted language.” Perrine ventured, trying to not look like she was the reason that the group got sniffed out.

“It’s a very old and wonderful language.” Aaron informed. “Even better when spoken in private.” His well directed barbs had an effect and the witches looked at each other and him in shame.

“We were only concerned about you Aaron.” Eila explained. “We need to make sure that you were okay.”

“The plan Captain Peterborough has concocted seems sound enough. We know where the enemy is, what weapon it uses, and that there’s fighters protecting it. The intelligence we have-” Sanya started to say but Aaron cut her off with a violent shaking of his head.

“Is complete utter shit.” Aaron interjected. “Are you really believing all that half baked bull that’s coming out of your mouth right now? Just, just shut the fuck up Lieutenant Litvyak and let me explain something to you. Something to all of you. We know only the rough position of the enemy. It could’ve relocated further up or down the slope of that mountainside in the meantime. As for protection, come on folks, do you really think that the Neuroi would deploy a weapon like that with
just air forces guarding it? There’s bound to be infantry and heavy ordinance around that thing. On a
scale of one to ten, this registers as a nine point five on the this is a very bad fucking idea meter.”

Sanya’s eyes flashed with anger. “Are you scared Aaron?” she inquired with a hint of seething rage.

“You’re damn right I am.” Aaron answered without hesitation. “So much is riding on this needlessly.
There is too much risk involved. If had any say or power in this situation to affect the outcome, I’d
tell Edmund to abort mission in a heartbeat and steam full speed ahead as far away from the coast as
possible and get us to where we need to go without fuss. True, we’ll be found out by the enemy air
patrols, but they will have to engage us on our own terms. We go into that narrow passage between
those islands, they have the advantage. That weapon my be inaccurate according to our so called
intelligence, but if just one of those beams hits the Ramses, we’re looking at a lot of men, one of
which is a good friend of mine, getting sent to the great dockyard in the sky and us being stranded in
a hostile environment in enemy controlled territory with nothing but what we are carrying.” He ran
his hands down his face and muttered, “This is bonkers.”

Sanya stood there and sighed, crossing her arms and looking down at the deck, shaking her head
sadly. She looked up at Aaron and implored, “Sit down Aaron.” The delivery was so soft and
stirring that Divale had no choice but to obey, his legs moving his body to the raised metal near the
bow and setting him down. Litvyak then moved up and placed her tiny hands on his shoulders, her
height now nearly matching his, staring into his eyes with her own. “You’re not the only one who’s
scared out here Aaron.” she said. Turning around she gestured to Eila and Perrine. “They feel the
same way and so do I. You may think that you are the most afraid of what tomorrow may bring, but
I assure you that no one here is more frightened of that potential bounty than I am.” She withdrew
her hands and sat down on a small space next to him. “This is the first time I’ve commanded an
expedition much less a unit in the field, trying to find a man who I’ve almost given up for dead years
ago. My anxiety is through the roof and I haven’t slept since yesterday evening. Add the fact that not
only do I have doubts, but so do yo, just adds tons more pressure on me and kills my confidence in
my ability to get this done.”

“I have complete confidence in you.” Eila answered. “I’ve always have.”

“Even though I haven’t really gotten to know you very well, you seem to have a good grasp on what
you’re doing.” Perrine added.

Sanya smiled at her comrades and looked back up at Aaron. “Do you have confidence in me?” she
asked

“Of course.” Divale replied, almost shocked that she would even suggest that he didn’t.

Meekly smiling, Sanya looked back down at the deck and then at her hands that fidgeted viciously,
her thumbs and forefingers twirling like a workman’s lathe in a factory. “But yet you disagree.” she
uttered.

Aaron readjusted himself and turned his body to directly face hers. “You misunderstand my dissent.”
he explained. “I have no problems of confidence with you or your judgment. The only issue I have is
the judgment of those crackpots that pass for the Allied Command, nothing more.” She’s awfully
vulnerable right now, hanging by a thread. Strengthen that Aaron, just like you did with Lynette. “I
was in your shoes not so very long ago. Like you, I was selected for a job that looked way over my
head. True, I’ve had training, engaging in mock battles and such, but that was all with toy soldiers
with paper and pen. The moment I got into the here and now and took a look around, I said to
myself, ‘Oh shit. These are real people with real lives, lives that I could get taken away from them if I
make a mistake.’ I understand the pressure you feel.”
“How did you deal with it?” Sanya queried.

“I had friends that backed me up when I needed them the most Sanya. Very good friends who looked out for me when it looked like I was about to get overwhelmed. As for me personally, it was one part training, one part skill, one part luck, and seven parts flying by the seat of my pants. For the mistakes I made, yes I regret them, yes I got people killed, but war is like that. I couldn’t save everyone, even though I wished I did, but we got the job done. All of us. Just like what we are about to do.” Aaron responded. He stood up and added, “Come the morning, you are my boss. You lead, I follow. You command, I obey. All without question.”

Sanya looked at him wide eyed, thinking that somehow she’d misheard him. What a strange man. One second he’s all doom and gloom and now he’s back to his old self again. “You mean that?” she asked, looking like she was about to cry with joy.

Aaron got on a knee and leaned in. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.” Litvyak erupted from her temporary seat and grabbed Divale tight around the upper chest with a massive bear hug, squeezing him as hard as she could. “Ty moj drug, i ja ne budu ostanavlivat’sja nijednoj veci, čtoby ubedit’sja, čto ty v porjadke. (You’re my friend and I will stop at nothing to make sure you’re okay),” he emphasized as he held her and returned the hug with one of his own, one much less backbreaking that the one the Russian was delivering. Looking away, Aaron could see Eila and Perrine standing there, looking at each other with gazes of happiness and approval. Seeing an opportunity to make the moment that much greater, he took his right hand away from his embrace and held it out to them. “We are all your friends.” he solemnly declared. Knowing what he was doing, the two remaining witches walked up and hugged the pair together in a display of solidarity.

After a few seconds, everyone let go and Sanya wiped tears from her eyes with her right uniform sleeve. “Does this mean that I’m in your circle of trust now Aaron?” she inquired.

“That you are.” Divale affirmed with a grin. “You all are. So, any idea what we do tomorrow lieutenant?”

“After you left, Captain Peterborough and I discussed the best course of action. Most of it you’ll like, but there will be some parts that you won’t. Want to hear it?” Sanya replied.

“Bring it on.” Aaron said.

The wind was whipping like a hurricane outside, kicking up plumes of loose snow from the tips of the highest point on the island of Hitra and sending it into Eila’s back as she shielded herself from the worst of it. This is nothing compared to what I’m used to. She glanced over at Sanya who was crouching in a small dip in the side of the small rocky outcropping, focusing all her magic on detecting anything resembling a signal that could be used to pinpoint the exact location of the Neuroi weapon. “You have anything at all?” she asked walking towards her, the sound of snow crunching beneath her feet which were clad in her Strikers.

“No signal from Titran. They appear to have gone radio silent.” Sanya answered, her breath visible as she spoke. Litvyak looked up past Eila and squinted her eyes in order to make out the black soles of Aaron’s boots sticking out behind him as he lay flat on the very top of the crag, looking out through the scope of his PTRS-41. “Anything on your end Aaron?” she inquired.

The return was grainy due to the whistling winds. “Just a whole lot of water, snow, and zippo.” Aaron replied. “I think they won’t show themselves until they see a target worth shooting at.”
“Hopefully that’s not the case.” Perrine relayed from her position just behind him, the sounds of her
teeth chattering clearly discernible. “We agreed that we’d only send in the Ramses as a last resort.
We’ll keep trying to eyeball it Sanya.”

“Rodger that.” Sanya said. “Continue with observation.” She killed the link and sighed. *Not a damn thing so far and we’ve been here for the past ten minutes. Any longer and we’ll be statues no matter where we hide from these winds.* “You thinking what I’m thinking Eila?”

“That Aaron was correct in that it could’ve moved?” Juutilainen deduced. “Highly doubt it as the attacks are consistently coming from Titran. It’s still here. I can feel it.” Her face brightened up as she got an idea. Reaching into her backpack, she pulled out her tarot deck and hunkered down next to Sanya. “Ask the cards and they might have an answer.” Sanya gave her wingman and close friend of many years a quizzical look.

I’ve never liked these things, but if she’s confident that they can be of use, might as well. We’ve got nothing to lose at this point. Litvyak closed her eyes, thinking about her question and took the top card from the deck with her right hand. Flipping it over, she saw the Wheel of Fortune card for the briefest of seconds before a tiny bit of snow fell on the card face. Instinctively, Sanya started to bring her left hand up to wipe the snow off, but hesitated.

Maybe this is the sign. Instead of cleaning off the card with her left hand, she used that same hand to open up her front pocket to her thick parka and pulled out a map of the area that Edmund gave her. Aligning it with the cardinal points, she drew an imaginary line from where they were and saw that it crossed Titran at an angle that Aaron wasn’t really looking in.

“Aaron.” she called into her ear communicator while putting the map back into her pocket and zipping it up. “Shift right by about ten degrees.”

“Wilco.” Divale replied from the top of the rocky point and started to readjust his position. His perch was open to the elements and the winds blew in his face mercilessly, making him squint most of the time. Now that he moved right it wasn’t so bad, but it still stung like knives. He reached out with his right hand and gently flicked off some bits of snow that had gathered on the rim of the scope.

“Jesus it’s freezing out here.” Perrine muttered. He looked right and slightly down at Clostermann, who had her gloved hands tucked into her armpits, teeth chattering louder than a typewriter about five feet away, the binoculars she was using just a few seconds ago getting hastily buried by the snow being deposited here and everywhere by the winds.

“Get closer to me.” Aaron offered, gesturing to his right side. “And don’t open your mouth so much, you’ll lose body heat.” Nodding, Perrine took his advice, grabbed the binoculars, and crawled up to him, laying down less than half a foot away from him. She nearly gasped at the temperature difference. *It’s almost like being near a roaring fire.* “Better?” he asked, looking through his scope once again.

“Yes, thank you.” Clostermann gratefully replied. “Aren’t you cold?”

“A little.” Aaron admitted, his eyes looking over the mountainside of Titran, a white washed side that was eight miles away that sloped down at a thirty degree angle, “but I’ve weathered worse. See what you can make out.” Perrine then took up her binoculars and peered through the lenses, adjusting the magnification dial with the tip of her right index finger. Panning left and right, gazing intently at the mountainside, nothing looked out of the ordinary.

“Still noth-” she started to say as a sudden howling gale tore through where she was looking at, exposing for a fleeting moment a shade of black buried under the snow and ice. “There!” she exclaimed, giving Aaron a tap on his shoulder with her left hand and directing him with her right. “Right there, twenty degrees low.”
Quick as a flash, Divale maneuvered his rifle and sight to where Perrine indicated and smiled as he too saw that hint of contrast. “We have the target location Sanya.” he stated into his communicator. “Roughly three hundred feet up the side and dead center.”

“Good job you two. Get down here and get ready to launch at a moments notice.” Sanya relayed, joy evident in her voice. As soon as she cut the link, she looked up at Eila and marveled. “They actually worked.”

“Of course they worked.” Eila replied with smirk. “They always do.” Feet going through several inches of snow reached her ears and she turned just in time to see Aaron and Perrine come down towards them in a flurry of churning legs. “You two look like you wanted off that acme.” she quipped.

“She did, but I was fine. I thoroughly enjoyed freezing my bare ass off.” Divale deadpanned. “What’s the next move Sanya? We send in the Ramses?”

Litvyak nodded and thumbed her communicator to the frequency used by the destroyer. “We have visual confirmation on the target captain. Proceed with plan.”

“Wilco lieutenant. Moving along now.” Edmund stated. “Get in there and give them what for, but be a dear and save some action for us. The boys want a piece of these bastards.”

“Understood. Out.” Sanya answered before cutting the link. Regarding the rest of her company, she ordered, “Let’s move. On the double to the left side.” She got curt nods in reply and the quartet, bounded as fast as they could go along the side, navigating the slopes with the expertise of mountain goats. Progress was swift and they got there with more than a minute to spare before the Ramses would make its appearance on the other side. Craning around the promontory, Litvyak could see nor detect any changes. “Your binoculars.” she commanded, turning to Perrine. Clostermann handed them over and Sanya took them with her right hand. Doing the calculations in her head, the Russian placed them in front of her eyes and adjusted the magnification at the precise spot that was marked. It didn’t take her long to hone in on the location, but the patch of black had been buried again by the snow. Damn. We’re blind again. Will just have to go on my hunch that it’s right there. “What’s the Ramses’ ETA?” she asked Eila.

“Around thirty seconds Sanya, not much more.” Eila returned, looking behind them. The fake shell of the destroyer could be clearly seen, the front leveling as the crew began to make the dangerous trek to get the target to expose itself. There’s no way in hell we’d put them right in the thick of this. Sanya was right in suggesting that instead of going in through the narrow passage, the Ramses would just sail past, jinking right to make it look like they’re about to make the turn. Suddenly, as the very tip of the bow passed the firing line, Sanya picked up all sorts of chatter from Titran. There you are you bastards.

“You were right Aaron.” she intoned, nodding and keeping her eyes trained on the mountainside. “There are quite a few bogeys protecting that thing and not all of them are air units.”

“Any idea where and how many?” Divale anxiously asked, taking his machine gun off his back and holding it in his left hand as his right was holding his antitank rifle.

“Around thirty independent signatures.” Sanya illuminated, risking a quick glance at him. “We have eight air units, twenty one ground units, and the big guy.”

“Look!” Perrine pointed out. Sanya whipped her head around and didn’t need her binoculars to see that there was a glowing red mark on the mountainside, a crimson blob that was expanding further up and down with every passing second. Snow began to melt rapidly, turning into fast flowing
streams only to be frozen again like wax cascading down a lit candle as the Neuroi underneath began to power up the main gun. Patches of the beast could be seen and she gasped. It was a Strategos of immense proportions, easily four to five times bigger than normal. Gone were the side cannons, the sides and front steeply angled. The top was relatively flat and upon that surface was a long gun that looked like it could be the main armament of a battleship, steam rising from the heat coming off the tip. This is it! It’s going to fire soon!

“Captain Peterborough!” Litvyak screamed into her communicator. “Prepare to ditch the disguise on my mark!” She hastily turned to her friends and yelled out, “Heat them up!” As one, the three witches activated their Strikers, the rotors sending clouds of loose snow into the air. Aaron squinted his eyes as the debris buffeted him and unfurled his wings without a sound, like an assassin pulling out his knife before going in for the kill. Sanya then did a mental countdown as she eyed the Neuroi. Five, four, three, two, one. “Execute captain! Now!”

“Aye! Activating explosive bolts!” Edmund answered loudly over the comms. A rippling series of detonations ran along the length of the Kaspar Hauser, fire and shards of steel rising into the cold near Arctic air. Slowly, the two halves started to come apart, like a hand separating the shell of an egg. Another sound was heard too, that of an angry wail coming from Titran. The Neuroi’s weapon power had hit critical mass and discharged. The force of the shot caused the surrounding area to shake violently and triggered a minor avalanche along the mountainside, showering its frame with more snow. A red beam tore through the air and collided with the façade dead center. The effect was a near instantaneous heat bloom as the metal began to melt under such high temperature before it went up in a ball of flame. The concussive effects sent both pieces into each other with a mighty crash of steel on steel, like a cathedral bell being struck by a sledgehammer. Despite the ferocity of the attack, the Ramses was now that much faster without it’s disguise and it used it’s new found speed to great advantage, narrowly getting out of the veritable Venus flytrap by the skin of its teeth, the prow scarred from burrowing through the metal. “We made it through lieutenant! Great job! We’ll round the island and come about to lend aid! ETA seven minutes!” Edmund reported.

“Rodger that!” Sanya spoke back. She killed the link and put it on a unit channel that she had created just for this occasion. “Let’s kill this thing!” One that signal, all four went up into the air and executed a high g turn around the island, going fast and low near the water line, zigzagging as they went to throw off any aimed return fire. It didn’t take long for the Neuroi to realize that it had been duped and roared again, the sound terrible to the ears. It’s protective host rose up from the layers of snow, popping out of the ground like ebony daises. Even from a distance of a few miles, Litvyak could make out the tell tale shapes of five Strategos, ten Legionary, and six Cataphract, their beamers turning towards them. “Make your passes quick! We might be able to get two cracks at this thing before the air units get here! Split off and draw their fire!” Sanya ordered. Eila and her veered left while Perrine and Aaron went off to the right. The two teams had barely begun to pull up when they came under heavy weapons fire from the mountainside, crimson lines crisscrossing in a standard shield formation, designed to create an umbrella of coverage to prevent infiltration. Sanya flicked off the safety to her rocket launcher and aimed, Eila doing the same with her MG42, beams passing harmlessly by the pair as they got closer. Climbing into the sky, they flipped over and dove down like dive bombers, using gravity to increase the speed of their descent. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Clostermann and Divale doing the same thing. Strikers screamed as they got within engagement range and the two teams fired. Sanya fired two rockets, the first slamming into the roof of a Strategos and destroying it. The second missile streaked at the Neuroi weapon itself and struck the angled side. However, instead of exploding on impact, it bounced off and buried itself into the snowy ground. An explosion erupted from under the enemy and caused it to jar to the right hard as the tremors pushed it into two Legionary who were crushed beneath it’s massive bulk. Eila sprayed with her machine gun in a line, wiping out three more Legionary and knocking out two legs of a Cataphract, the limbs spinning away into the snow like frisbees. Perrine let loose with her Bren,
finishing off the Cataphract that Eila had immobilized and killing another with well placed shots. Aaron, with his PTRS-41 and machine gun, carved a swath of destruction through the enemy ranks, taking down two Strategos, a Cataphract, and managed to get three shots from his antitank rifle to hit the main target. Like Sanya’s rockets however, the high powered shells either bounced down into the earth or flew off elsewhere to zip into the rocks.

As they flew past to make another round at them Sanya assessed the situation. That armor is very well angled and too strong for conventional weaponry. We need the Ramses to get here. Then her magical aura picked up several signals coming in from the north. Those will be the air units. We need to make this quick. The turn made her teeth rattle in her jaw and g forces tried to level out her maneuver, but Sanya stayed the course. Remembering her position, she could see the point where incoming fire would be likely and did a barrel roll, making her flight path go into a spiral, like forming a lowercase E. Coming around the mountainside, the tactic paid off as the simplest of dogfighting tricks got her out of danger, the keening freems of Neuroi ground fire doing no harm as they whizzed by. Again the four pilots grazed the enemy, taking out more of the hated foe. By the time they were done, the Strategos and Legionary were wiped out completely, leaving just three Cataphracts up and running. “Good job folks but we’ve got company. Eight air unit coming in hot from the north. Bearing twelve o’clock high, fifty degrees.” Sanya radioed to her friends. She cursed to herself. God damn it! We took too long to get around the mountain and now the enemy has the drop on us now.

She went back to the Ramses’ main channel and inquired while going around the mountain again and scanning the skies for the enemy interceptors, “Ramses! We need you to go faster!”

“We’ve giving her all she’s got to give Lieutenant Litvyak.” Peterborough retorted calmly. “The island is ringed with off shore rocks. They’re preventing us from making the turn sharp. ETA is now four minutes.”

“Rodger. Litvyak out.” Sanya replied, killing the link. “Sukin syn (Son of a bitch)!” she exclaimed to herself. Shapes began to appear and her gut tightened. Now we’re in for it. No time to get out of the way with such odds. We need to go head on. She leveled out her turn and barked, “Enemy sighted as predicted! Form up on me and execute helix formation!” Eila broke off and sped towards the front, yawing right. Perrine and Aaron were just a split second behind them, managing to get behind and to the left just as the Neuroi interceptors began their run, moving in a tight V formation as they did so. Given the positions of the two forces, the height advantage was clearly with the Neuroi, but the formation edge was with the 501st, for they were constantly moving in a spiral, much like a barrel roll, granting them better freedom of movement and increased evasion. And we’re going to put it to good use. Time seemed to slow as the two masses crept closer and closer to maximum engagement range until the Neuroi started firing. Beams lashed out, the interceptors trying to coordinate attacks in order to force their prey to break off so they could get behind them. A random few did hit Sanya and Perrine, but their shields absorbed the blows. Aaron had his wings out at an angle to best catch the beams and deflect them back at the Neuroi, apparently not caring if he got pegged or not. Eila for her part evaded everything, regardless if there were two, three, or more sets of red beams coming at her. It didn’t take long for the four brave 501st members to get into range. Sanya fired off a three missile salvo in a torpedo like spread, in the hopes that it would cause the enemy formation to break. Unfortunately, the Neuroi group spun in place and jinked right, but fortunately made them easy targets. Eila fired her MG42 and clipped the wing of one of the fighters, causing it to lose all momentum and balance, tumbling out of the sky like a gambler’s dice. Perrine managed to bag one of her own as well, her shots hitting her target dead on and turning the foe into a white death cloud. As for Aaron, he let loose with his PTRS-41, pulling the trigger rapidly and expelling all five bullets in the clip within three seconds. The antitank rounds wiped one out completely and blew out the propulsion system of another, making it drop like a meteor down to the earth.
The remaining Neuroi broke off in separate directions, two by two pairs as they blew past them all, the turbulence bone jarring. “Break off and engage!” Sanya ordered. Eila moved in alongside her while Perrine and Aaron veered away. Relocating her prey, she saw them diving low near the water line, trying to use the islands and some sort of cover. The two friends dove right after them and their Strikers whined loudly as the downward thrust co-mingled with the sounds of the still whipping winds. Just as they got to their level, the Neuroi split up and weaved in and around the rocks in a seemingly random pattern.

“The one on the right is going to rise up over that crag and the other will swoop in low.” Eila predicted. “I’ll take low.”

“Right. I got high.” Sanya replied. She then turned into where the enemy hoped to catch her by surprise and readied her Fliegerhammer. Checking the loadout she frowned. One rocket left. Will have to make this count. Deciding to increase her chances of success, Litvyak projected her aura outwards. The signals being sent by the Neuroi became visible and telegraphed it’s intention with a slew of violet and blue circles. Jokes on you in a few seconds. She silently counted down, keeping a close eye on the swirling colors. Suddenly, her enemy appeared, rising like a phoenix over the formation and Sanya bellowed a warcry as she pulled the trigger, the last munition sailing out of the lower right tube with a furious roar that matched her own. Flying through the air, it caught the Neuroi in the underbelly and detonated, taking it out. The tell tale buzzing sound of an MG42 made Sanya turn her head just in time to see Eila scored multiple hits on her chosen target, the impacts causing the enemy interceptor to hit the water hard, flip up and over like an gymnastic during a floor exercise, and careen into the side of small outcropping, blowing it and the rocks up almost instantly upon impact. Seeing a job well done, Eila smiled, but something caught her eye. Regarding the strange sight, Juutilainen could see that a hole had materialized within the mountain island where the massive Neuroi weapon was stationed and was actively moving up the side, attempting to escape.

“It’s trying to get away!” Eila pointed out with her weapon. Sanya acknowledged the call out with curt nod and started to form a plan. No missiles left so caving in the entrance is out of the question. Could Aaron do anything?

“Aaron come in!” Litvyak called into her communicator.

“Read you loud and clear lieutenant.” Divale’s voice answered, the loud crack of his machine gun ripping through the airwaves.

“Aaron, the enemy is trying to escape into the mountain and we can’t do anything here about it. What can you do?” Sanya asked.

“I’ll hold it up until the Ramses gets into range. Leading the remaining two- strike that, one enemy fighter back to you now. Divale out.” Aaron replied.

“Rodger that. Linking up with you now.” Sanya responded. With haste, the pair rose up into the air and quickly spied their friends making a beeline for them. Aaron could see them too and regarded Perrine who was the closest to the last remaining fighter.

“I need to break off and deal with the big guy. You got this?” he asked.

“In the bag.” Perrine answered, reloading her Bren. “You can go.”

Assured by her words, Aaron arched his back and used his double jointed body to execute a tight Immelmann and flew off to Titran. It didn’t take him long to gauge how much time he had left. This is going to be tight. Can’t go in from the rear for that will take too much time. Has to be the front. Getting in low along the water line, he focused on the Neuroi, who was still trying to get away back
into its nest. When he was close enough, Aaron stowed his machine gun and pointed at it with his arms, palms pointed in opposite directions. “Vincula fati.” he intoned. With the sound of tearing flesh, two long burning chains emerged from the base of his wrists, his blood steaming off the red hot metal and filling the air with heavy iron based scent. They moved with the speed of bullets and with a mind of their own, looping around the large gun several times. Aaron landed fifty feet away from it and pulled hard towards him. The Neuroi’s progress was halted and it bellowed in rage as it tried to fight back. Divale gritted his teeth as the binds pulled taut, pain registering in the back of his mind. “How long?!” Aaron called out through his pearly whites.

“How long?!” Sanya relayed after a moment, the hard boom of a dead Neuroi fighter rippling through the airwaves. “Keep holding it!”

Recognizing that it could do nothing to break the bonds, the enemy then moved forwards in an attempt to bullrush him or force him to let go. “Oh no you don’t.” Aaron scolded. He planted his feet and drove his left wing deep into the snowy earth beneath him, using his other wing as a shield. Both man and Neuroi collided hard, and Aaron was driven backwards a few feet, the height advantage giving his enemy more of a punch than he could handle, yet he maintained his posture, his wing tip and feet carving furrows into the ground. Steeling his resolve, Divale pushed back with his right wing, adding his right arm to the fight. It arrested the progress of the Neuroi, but barely. “Status!” he roared, his muscles starting to burn from exertion. “I can’t hold it for much longer!”

“Thirty seconds!” Sanya retorted. She thumbed the dial to her communicator and radioed the Ramses. “Captain, the enemy is in grid F3, coordinates of .46 long and .58 lat right over.”

“Understood lieutenant.” Edmund replied calmly. “Getting the batteries preaimed now.”

Directing her attention back to the titanic clash occurring below, Litvyak saw the gun start to descend and glow. It’s preparing another shot and aiming it right for Aaron! She quickly glanced at her watch and knew what she had to do. “Aaron! Let go off it and get clear. ETA five seconds!” Not needing to be told twice, Divale canceled the magic and the chains retracted into his wrists with a metallic rattling. He pushed off his left foot and forward rolled up and over at an angle, narrowly being scalded by the heat buildup of the massive gun. Chancing a look back as he was about to land over the side, Aaron could see the Ramses finally circle the island and his heart leapt for joy for the briefest of moments before it sank back down again as he saw all eight of the 120mm cannons pointed right at him. Better shot straight you navy pukes. Wasting no time, he jumped up and flew away down the mountainsides. The Ramses unleashed hell with its batteries, the roar and recoil of large caliber gunfire rocking the vessel. Not looking behind him, Aaron could hear the rounds bracket the area behind him and go off. The concussive waves of the detonations, altered his flight pattern and he skidded on the ground. It wasn’t much of a graze, but it was enough for him to lose control and roll down the remaining one hundred feet until he landed face first into the ice cold waters with a splash.

Far above, the three witches oversaw the destruction of the foe in a cloud of twinkling shards, snow, vitrified earth, and shattered stone. The miasma was so thick that it obscured the entire area. “You see him?” Perrine asked with concern. “Did he make it?”

Eila peered through the death fog and squinted her eyes. Judging by where he fled and adding in a bit of randomness, he should be right about- “There he is!” Eila called out, pointing with her right hand. Sanya flew down towards where her wingman indicated, Eila and Perrine following close behind. The group ventured cautiously, combing the skies lest they get struck by an errant piece of debris. The wind again picked up and revealed the prostrate form of Aaron Divale. Oh no! He isn’t- As soon as she though that, Litvyak saw him stir, pushing himself up with both arms out of the water and standing up gingerly. They all landed several feet away from him soon after, directly behind him.
“You alright master sergeant?” Sanya anxiously inquired. “Are you injured?”

With water dripping from his frame, uniform, and hair, Aaron turned and smiled, his face bruised and red in spots from his rough journey. His lower abdomen was quivering violently, like a fly caught in a spider’s web. He unbuttoned one button and reached in with his right hand. After a quick second, he pulled out a decent sized fish and held it by the gills. “I’m fine folks,” he remarked, looking over his catch, “and it appears that I’ve found dinner into the bargain.”


“Target is down Captain Peterborough. Good shooting.” Sanya informed.

Cheering could be heard on the other end as Edmund asked, “How’s Aaron? Did he make it out in time?”

“He looks fine, but he’s waterlogged like a drowned rat.” Sanya relayed.

“Very well then. My orders state that I must continue up north until we get a hail from the 507th. Since you helped us out, I’ll take you four as far up as Tromso where we must anchor up and wait, my treat.” Peterborough offered.

Tromso. That’s awfully close to Alta. Sanya took the communicator out of her ear and asked Eila, “Do you remember where the old hideaway in Alta is?”

Eila smiled and winked. “Like it was yesterday.”

“I’m not going to set foot on that rickety sloop until that ginger cunt apologizes for being a filthy rotter and a bloody wanker.” Aaron stated plainly into his communicator, his words causing Perrine to blanch.

“Oh,” Edmund mocked, “I’m sorry that this ginger cunt who doubles as a filthy rotter and a bloody wanker saved your pale white ass from being strawberry jam.”

“I don’t think your wife would appreciate you staring at another man’s ass there Edmund.” Aaron wittily countered with a chuckle as he swung his fish down on a rock, stunning it with a loud smack. The rest of the witches laughed at the joke as well, their breathes fogging the air.

Alright people.” Sanya said after she got a hold over her giggles. “Let’s get back on board and get warm. Maybe Aaron will share his catch of the day.”

“As long as that cook there doesn’t muck it up.” Perrine quipped, remembering the atrocious dinner last night and the equally bad breakfast that morning.

“Fair enough.” Sanya offered as she activated her Strikers. After everyone got ready for launch, they rose into the air as one and made their way to the Ramses, her gun barrels smoking as they cooled down from firing. Well there Litvyak, we got the job down, but we still have a long way to go before the end.

Night was falling as they bid goodbye to the Ramses, waving from the furthest edge of Tromso, roughly fifteen miles from the town proper. The wind had died down considerably, making the weather tolerable, but still chilly. Though it broke the veil of stealth that protected them, Captain Peterborough flashed the port side lights at the quartet, sending his regards and farewell, as they steamed back towards home. The sun was setting, turning the sky a deep orange that rapidly went to
a royal purple. Aaron smiled, contenting himself that the 507th would protect them on their journey. Still wish you could come with us a bit further old friend. Russia will help, in its own special ways.

He turned to Eila and asked, “So where is this little hole in the wall?”

“It’s a small ways up north and around the way, skirting the Arctic Circle.” Eila replied. “With your help, we should be there very soon.” Aaron nodded, understanding what she meant and bid everyone to take him by his hand. Sanya held Eila’s hand as she grabbed Aaron by his left while Perrine made do with his right. “Be sure to stay low to avoid detection.” Juutilainen advised as all three witches activated their Strikers.

“Thanks for the tip,” Aaron mockingly retorted with a grin, “for I clearly don’t know what I’m doing.” He unfurled his wings and flew into the air carefully, not wanting the jarring takeoff to cause any of his friends to lose their grip. Gently, Divale leveled out and ordered, “Hold on to your butts folks. I’m going max speed. Strenuitas.” With a jolt, his magic propelled him forward, his wings curving them around the coast at the tiniest fraction of an angle.

Perrine saw the world go by in a blur and marveled at the acceleration that Aaron was generating. She looked at him and saw on his face that there was some tightening around the jaw, like he was feeling some sort of pain. “You alright?” she asked.

“Fine actually.” Aaron answered confidently. “Just recovering from that tug of war match earlier and the tumble I took down the mountain. I’ll be okay.”

“Fine bit of strength you showed back there.” Sanya remarked. “Not many can say they went toe to toe with a Neuroi that size on the ground and live to tell the tale.”

“Would never have happened had I not seen it and pointed it out.” Eila quipped. As Aaron nodded in approval, keeping his eyes forward, a question started to form in the lieutenant’s head. “Speaking of, you said that your men had a system of communication in place that superseded the need for actual radios. How did that work?”

“There were some that had the ability to capture naturally occurring radio waves, rearrange them, and then project them to their intended targets through the power of their minds alone.” Aaron responded.

All three witches looked at him in wonder and disbelief. “How is that possible?” Perrine pondered out loud.

“In roughly the same way that Sanya uses her magic.” Aaron illuminated. “Yet there are some key differences. Hers is natural and only detects. When it came to my boys, their gift came about due to a random mutation during growth. Something to do with an enlarged tectum if I remember right.”

“What is a tectum?” Sanya inquired.

“It’s part of the midbrain.” Aaron answered, regurgitating the information like a renowned physician to a patient awaiting surgery. “That structure is responsible for aiding visual and auditory processing. Since it grew abnormally, it provided a vast improvement in both as well as the capacity of the rest of the brain to gather, process, understand, and respond to stimuli.”

“So you heard these messages through thought?” Eila queried. “How did that feel?”

“Unnerving at first.” Divale admitted. “The sensation is similar to having ice water running down the back of your neck and their voice rings like an echo, except it sounds as crisp and clear as if they were standing right next to you. Sometimes, it caused nose bleeds to develop to those that received
information that way due to a slight increase in blood pressure in that vicinity.”

“How many of those men did you have?” Perrine wondered, captivated by the story.

“One hundred.” Aaron stated. “The Eighth Coterie, the Psychos, headed by Elijah Wintergreen. Good lot, hard working, and always dependable in a pinch. While skilled in the arts of communication, they were very capable fighters when called. In the beginning, we had near instantaneous information being sent to us, saving a lot of lives in the process. As time went on however, the effects of having less of them began to take their toll.”

“What kind of a toll?” Sanya asked.

“Sending messages through that particular channel was taxing mentally and required a great deal of blood in order to pay for it. The more they used it, the greater the pain became until they would go into a catatonic state, not being able to move and repeating the same selection of words over and over again for hours until they recovered.” Aaron replied sadly. “Many suffered and later died due to it which wouldn’t have happened had Elijah told me earlier. Would’ve done something better than what I ended up doing.”

“What did you do?” Eila inquired.

“When he told me about what was going on behind the scenes, I grew very angry at Elijah for having covered this up for so long. He said he was sorry and was determined to make amends by taking a great responsibility in terms of being the primary communicator, lessening the burden on the rest of his coterie. I tried to dissuade him from doing that for it would put his life in great danger, but he insisted and wouldn’t budge on the matter. Gradually, I relented and let him have his way, even going as far as to give him the ability to go into our medical supplies to get pain medication if it got too much to handle. Looking back on it now, I should never have done it. While Elijah did need it from time to time to deal with the pain in order to get through the day or to sleep at night, he kept on using the stuff long after the pain stopped.” Aaron lamented. No one spoke as they saw that Divale’s face slackened from remembering those tragic times, memories of the destruction of his friend coming back.

“I found out about it during a small break in the action in mid late ’43, just before Abbeville. Since I was quartermaster general, I had to make sure that everything was in order before we went into action. During my search, I found that quite a substantial portion of our morphine shots had mysteriously gone missing. I immediately got that feeling in my gut, the kind you don’t want to acknowledge and do something about, but you have to. Made a beeline for his tent and went right in, didn’t even give him a courtesy knock or hail. The moment he saw me, he sat right down in the middle of his sleeping bag, looking all shocked and shaken to the core. Not wanting to spring the trap too early, I put on a relieved face, saying that someone said that he wasn’t looking too well and I was concerned for his welfare. The fib worked and Elijah grew relaxed, but didn’t so much as budge from his spot. We shot the shit for a bit and while I was preoccupying him with small talk, I took note of his body language, his eye movements. His peepers kept on darting this way and that, not focusing on me at all, but on what was behind him and he fidgeted his fingers and feet, crossing his legs then extending them, like he couldn’t get comfortable. That was when I knew that he was hiding something and it pained me to know that a thief was in our midst. For going on almost four years, I had trusted every man in my unit with my life and to finally come face to face with one that not only was trying to deceive me but also steal from me and his fellows was heartbreaking.

I dropped the act and told him why I was in his tent, confronting him with my findings. Lo and behold, Elijah actually had the audacity to lie right to my face saying that he didn’t take them or even knew where they were. My rage built up with every excuse that poured out of his mouth and I
leaned in and growled, ‘You have lied to me once Elijah. There will not be a second.’ Now, noticing that he was caught and that there was nothing he could do, Wintergreen admitted that he took the morphine, even so far as getting up from his bed and lifting the cover. Under the sheet were the missing supplies, quite a few of the syringes empty. I then asked him to roll up his sleeves, both of them. All along his arms were track marks, the injection sites infected and the tell tale black of collapsed veins. Ordinarily speaking, his magic would heal such injuries, but he was so far gone in addiction that it simply refused to take. I gathered up the morphine, looked him in the eyes, and told him that I was going to be his shadow until he was clean. I didn’t care how long it took, I wasn’t going to let my friend be consumed by drugs, medically cleared or not. This went on for about eight hours, me following him around like a lost puppy, even to the shitter. Then, when I was preparing some dinner for him, Elijah suddenly goes into massive seizure, tremors overtaking his body within seconds and getting worse. I grab him and shove a thick stick into his mouth to prevent him from biting his tongue off and assessed the situation. His blood pressure was through the roof and his heart was pumping like a jackrabbit’s after having evaded being run over by a car. White froth was coming out of his mouth and he was sweating profusely. Then when his arms came up to his chest, clutching the center, I knew that he was having a heart attack due to the withdrawal symptoms.

At that juncture, I knew that instead of helping him, I inadvertently harmed him severely. With tears in my eyes, I took a syringe, held him down, and injected him with a does of morphine. Almost immediately, his blood pressure and heart rate plummet down to normal levels and his spasms cease after a few minutes. By the time he was back to his normal self, I was bawling for I knew that I could do nothing to save him and he started crying too out of shame for having his body be too weak to fight back. When the time came for us to go into Abbeville, I called for volunteers to be in the rear guard. Elijah steps up to the plate and offers his services in addition to four others. A second goes by as we look at each other and I knew that he was going off to die in order to erase the shame, the stain on his honor. As I let him fly off, I honestly didn’t hold out much hope for his survival. I gave him five minutes at most. Tough bastard ended up lasting over an hour before he went down according to those that survived. But the worst part about his death was that the Neuroi didn’t kill him. All eight chambers of his heart ruptured when the withdrawals kicked in again. Died instantly. Out of all the people that I’ve seen get killed over the years, Elijah’s death, more so than Jonathan’s or even Larissa’s, hurt the most.” Aaron closed his eyes and pushed back the tears, feeling a squeeze in both hands from Sanya and Perrine in support, letting him know they were there for him.

Eila looked over the terrain and her face brightened in recognition. Through the darkness that enveloped everything, she could see a large cave entrance with a three foot high stone barrier. Looks like the walrus wall held up. Pointing down, she ordered, “Take us right in Aaron.” With a nod, Divale slowed up and began his approach. His wings flapped silently and Aaron calculated his descent. Okay, just a routine breaking and entering with a lot less breaking. Keep low and don’t muck it up or someone’s going to get a nasty headache. Reliving all the landings he had executed in his time under a multitude of circumstances, Divale went lower and lower until he was almost grazing the gently lapping waves of the water below before pulling up and over the barricade. Within a second he arrested his forward progress, keeping a firm grip on his charges and landed perfectly on his feet. Letting go, he then turned around in place to get a better look at his surroundings. The cave was very deep and had a high ceiling, reminding him of the one on Malta where he had met the Sentinel many years ago. As he took it all in, he couldn’t help but feel that this wasn’t your ordinary cave. The walls are smooth as is the floor. Wind and cold didn’t plane these surfaces. “This used to be an old Viking hideout where raiders would waylay unsuspecting ships or towns nearby, coming back to count prisoners and precious cargo.” Eila explained, as if knowing what he was thinking. “Come on. There’s better lodging further in.”

As one, the group followed the Finn who walked with a confident stride, a gait that made one think that she was going through the hallways of her own home. “How long did it take to enlarge the
existing architecture?” Divale asked, noting the walls with a gesture of his head.

“According to the workers that did it before the war,” Sanya answered, furrowing her brow in thought, “it took the better part of ten months to do it, five of which was spent on taking careful surveys of the site, assuring local authorities that they wouldn’t harm the historical nature of it, and making sure that the walrus colony further west of here wouldn’t come in and wreck the place.”

“Are walruses that destructive?” Perrine inquired. “I always thought that they were peaceful creatures.”

“Oh they are.” Eila remarked. “It’s just that they aren’t when provoked and the surest way to do that is to venture into one of their colonies when there are pregnant females. People have gotten killed due to making that mistake. The wall in front of the entrance prevented them from coming in and claiming it as their own.”

“I hear they also make fine eating.” Aaron quipped, placing a hand on his stomach.

Perrine turned her head and looked up at Aaron in shock. “You just ate. How can you still be hungry?” she queried.

“Besides that fish I caught, there was painfully little else that could be considered palatable.” Divale civilly retorted, letting the statement speak for itself.

Clostermann looked away and shook her head. It’s going to catch up with you one day Aaron and you’ll balloon so much that you’ll be lucky to use a ladder to get off the ground. Still, I can’t really disagree with him. Dinner was pretty lackluster, yet again. When the cook served us that watery chowder, I thought Aaron was going to march back into the kitchen and boil the cooks head. Soon, they all came a small rectangular complex made of corrugated steel, completely free of rust, shut tight with a waterproofed wooden door with a long metal bar across the middle. A smokestack looking protrusion towards the back was lined with soot from fires that had been lit within ages ago.

Juutilainen took the bar with both hands towards the bottom, but instead of pushing or pulling it, she lifted it. The door went up like a window shade and Eila pushed it further along until it came to a stop, the hard clap of a catch signaling that it was secure and wouldn’t slam back down. “Welcome to Alta.” she announced, stepping aside and gesturing with her right hand.

Like excited children, they funneled into the hideout and took a look around.

It wasn’t much to look at, it really wasn’t. The floors had been planed smooth at one point, yet were marked up by long marks within the stone, evidence of Striker dragging by tired feet or arms. Splotches of some long dried up liquid stained the ground in seemingly random spots in drip trails, the kind you see when one gets out of the shower. Old metal ammunition boxes lined the walls, some shot up by Neuroi beamer fire and others just abused to the point of barely being held together by the hinges. Around the center of the place, right up against the right hand wall was a quintet of Striker holders, just like the ones back at Dover Castle, but crude and hastily built with bent iron bars and solder. At the far end, was a huge fireplace, with a half face cord of wood and kindling stacked neatly nearby. The interior of the fireplace was black with soot and even from the front door, Aaron could pick up the familiar smell of burnt wood. In front of it were a few chairs and tiny metal structures in front of them made of wire thin material, looking like plant risers in a garden, but which any soldier would call burner holders. There was no decoration, no curtains, no color whatsoever except for the drab gray of metal and rock. It was built to house warriors whose primary concern was engaging the enemy, not sprucing up the joint. Sanya, being the last one to enter, reached up and found the release catch. With a tug, the door came right back down, hitting the stone with a clunk.

“Allright folks.” she announced turning around and looking to and fro, her mind hard at work. “Let’s start settling in. Perrine, see if there are any blankets to be had to sleep on. Eila, get searching for any
spare ammunition that’s compatible or fuel cells if possible. We need all we can get. Aaron and I will
get that fire going. If anyone wants to take off their Strikers, feel free to do so. Hop to it.”

Eila and Perrine walked over to the Striker rack and started to remove them while Sanya and Aaron
made a beeline towards the fireplace. “Not too bad for a hole in a wall.” Divale admitted, going to
the side of the fireplace and lifting up an armful of logs. “Considering how hodgepodge it is.”

“We made due with what we had back then.” Sanya replied, gathering up a good chunk of kindling
that looked dry enough to be used and spreading a small layer inside the fireplace.

Aaron’s brow furrowed as her statement circulated around in his head. “You mean to say that you
were here? Eila too?” he asked, placing the logs down in a cross hatch pattern.

Litvyak nodded. “When the enemy pushed us out of Finland, they managed to separate our forces.
Most got out of the way and went along the Swedish coast. Some weren’t so lucky and Eila and I
were two of them, forced up north. It was bitter cold then, average temperatures with the wind easily
forty below. Luckily we found this place and when the winds died down enough, we went into Alta
which was already abandoned at the time and scavenged what we could to built a shelter. Stayed
here for two whole months with a few other Finnish and Swedish pilots, getting resupplied by
airdrops one in a while and eventually getting ferried out further west. We launched hit and run
attacks over the mountains, trying to stall or draw attention. Didn’t really work out considering how
few of us there were.”

Aaron reached into his backpack with his right arm and pulled out a can of liquid heat. Eschewing a
knife to open it, he stuck his thumb nail underneath the lid and turned it like a door knob. With a pop,
the top came off and clatttered to the stone like a coin falling on a wood floor. Then Divale reached
into his front right parka pocket and searched for his lighter. “Did any of them make it out along with
you?” he inquired.

Sanya looked mournfully behind her, her eyes lingering on the stains in the rock. “Not very many.”
she murmured as Aaron flicked the lighter to life. The orange flame was applied to the top of the
liquid heat and the substance ignited with the phoof sound of rushing flame. Gingerly, he took the
can in his right hand and positioned it so that the flames would get the kindling going first. Minding
the fact that too much heat would cause the vessel to explode, he moved it around constantly, never
letting it stay in one spot for too long. It wasn’t long before the dried twigs and bark caught on and
burned, spreading the fire to the bone dry logs.

Aaron nodded in understanding, not needing to press anymore for a more concrete answer as he
withdrew the can and tucked it under one of the burner holders.

As the general says: Nothing is
harder than a fighting retreat.

He went to one of the chairs and sat down, feeling the sturdy wood
creak as it held his bulk up. Divale then began to remove his backpack, but winced as he did so, a
facial expression that Sanya saw immediately and correctly deduced. With concern, she strolled over
and asked, “Are you injured master sergeant?”

Knowing that he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Aaron sighed. “The roll down the
mountain I’ve fully recovered from, but the hyper-extended muscles in my back have yet to heal, but
I’ll be fine by morning. Nothing to worry about.”

“Withholding injuries is dangerous Aaron.” Sanya pointed out. “It could jeopardize the mission.”

“I’m okay. Trust me.” Aaron countered while still trying to get the pack off his back.

Litvyak placed her hands on his broad shoulders and implored, “Stop. You’re just hurting yourself
more. Let me do it.” She went around the chair and took hold of the straps. Aaron let his arms go
limp as she pulled it off and set it on the ground. “Jesus.” she muttered as she let go. “What do you have in there, rocks?”

“Only for fiber.” Aaron quipped with a grin.

Sanya wasn’t in the mood for levity and her face showed it. “Take off your parka, uniform top, and undershirt. I’ll help you if need be.”

“Why?” Aaron asked, a bit confused.

“In my country, injuries to muscles are common due to the cold. It causes them to seize up or even snap. We were trained to spot such things and deal with them accordingly. The best way to get rid of a hyper-extension is to massage the muscles near a heat source. Now take them off Aaron.” Sanya explained. She leaned in and asked with her hands on her hips, “Or do I have to pull rank?”

“To be respectfully honest,” Aaron answered sincerely with a straight face, “I don’t give a damn if you do, but since you’re my friend and I trust you, I’ll do as you say.” He then unzipped his parka and carefully maneuvered out of it, letting the heavy coat fall to the wayside. Next came his uniform top, the collar now displaying the chevrons and rockers of a master sergeant, glowing the color of his eyes from the firelight. His white undershirt was the hardest for him to remove and he had to have Sanya do the honors. “Not to be touch crass here lieutenant,” he remarked as she folded it neatly and placed it with the rest of his clothes, “I believe you’re the first woman who told me to take off my clothes and have it be out of concern rather than the carnal. It’s quite refreshing to hear.”

“Oh thank God. Not near the spot.”

Positioning her hands on his right latissimus dorsi, she instructed, “Breathe in slowly, grit your teeth, and close your eyes. This will hurt a bit.”

“I’m used to being in pain Sanya.” Aaron replied, doing as she asked. “Short of killing me, there’s nothing you can do to-” The last part of his sentence died as Sanya began to massage the muscle. It felt like getting shot, except this bullet fragmented from within and was working itself all over the area like a worm burrowing into the soil. The sensation made his right eye twitch and his respiration quicken for a split second. “Change my mind.” he finished through gritted teeth.

“This shouldn’t last long with the fire going like it is.” Sanya assured, feeling her way around the affected area. “Should only take a few minutes or so.” Aaron contented himself with crossing his arms and concentrating on willing the pain away. *Might as well. It’s what I’m good at.* Sanya dealt with her first target quickly then moved on to the left trapezius and the moment her hands ground into his flesh, Divale almost shuddered in torment. For a brief moment, his thoughts started to drift back to the battle with the gargoyles at Notre Dame, when his back was nearly ripped to shreds by their talons, but the agony kept him in the here and now. Litvyak then turned her attention to the right teres major and was about to dig into it, when she heard a clunking, sounding like bats being dropped by a clumsy bat boy at a baseball field. She looked in the direction of the sound and saw Eila standing there, mouth open, arms limply at her side, and standing before a wooden box written in Swedish. She didn’t know much of the language, but she knew that it contained some spare fuel cells. Perrine was right next to her, carrying a good amount of thick wool blankets and likewise perturbed by the scene of Aaron sitting in a chair half naked with her hands all over his back.

“What are you two doing!?” Eila exclaimed, gathering her wits and the box that lay at her feet. Aaron made ready to say something witty and maybe a bit crass, but just as he was about to speak,
Sanya gave the affected muscle a series of knuckle grinds that silenced him. “I’m just reminding the
master sergeant here about the need for being more forthright in providing injury information.” She
regarded Divale who sat before her, gave him another good twist, and inquired, “Am I right?”

“Perfectly so lieutenant.” Aaron grunted out, wishing that the procedure would end faster then it was.
Some revolutions of the wrist later, Sanya stepped back, reviewing her work, and nodded
approvingly.

“Stand up and stretch a bit.” she advised. “See how they work.” Aaron got out of the chair and
gently swung his arms to and fro, contorting his spine to see if the treatment helped. *Mother of God it
worked. Can’t feel a damn bit of pain.

“Like the day I was born.” Aaron proclaimed. He gazed down at Sanya and gave her a thumbs up.
“Great job and next time I promise I will say when I’m not one hundred percent.”

Sanya reciprocated the gesture and waked over to Perrine and Eila who were both busying along the
far wall nearest the fire, with the former making the beds as best she could while the latter tested the
charge of the acquired fuel cells. “Any luck with ammunition?” she asked her friend.

“No at all,” Eila replied sadly, “and these fuel cells have less charge then a dog tired brigade.”

“Least we have warmth and a dry place to sleep in.” Perrine pointed out as she finished with the last
bed, a simple under over double sheet. At the mention of the word sleep, Jutilainen gazed at
Litvyak and saw the weary face, the dark circles further defined and visible in the firelight. *She
should sleep. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow.* Taking her comrade of many years by the arm,
she started to lead the worn out Russian to a bed. “You should get some sleep Sanya.” Eila
remarked. “You haven’t done so in a while.”

“I can’t sleep.” Sanya weakly protested. “There’s still so much to do and plan for.”

Eila paid the objections no mind, taking the first sheet off, setting Sanya down, and sitting right next
to her. “Try.” she offered. She then tapped the meat of her upper right right arm and added, “It may
not look it, but this shoulder is very comfortable.”

Sanya peered into the blue eyes of Eila and smiled meekly, letting her head rest where it will on the
muscles in her right shoulder. Jutilainen then pulled the cover sheet over both of them and closed
er eyes. Perrine looked on as Aaron came up next to her, his shirt and uniform top back on. “Wish I
had a camera for this moment. It’s too precious. They’re like a married couple right now.”
Clostermann stated softly, not wishing to disturb their slumber. Aaron couldn’t help but agree, yet no
affirmation escaped his lips. His mind turned back the clock to the night that him, Erica, and
Gertrude dined with Lucretia at her flat. *Married couple. Makes me wish that I know what that is.
Maybe I can- “What’s wrong Aaron?” Perrine asked, breaking his concentration.

Whipping his head around to face her he fumbled for an explanation. “Just- a lot on my mind.” he
said. “If there’s a back way out of here, I’ll be out for a while keeping watch.”

Perrine shook her head. “While there is one further along in, you don’t need to do that. Eila and I
managed to get the old alarm system running. Anything happens we’ll know.” she replied in a low
voice

“Unless I made them, I have no faith in them at all.” Aaron countered with a whisper. “I’d rather be
safe then sorry.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll take the watch.” Perrine offered. “You’ve done enough today.”
Aaron stood next to his wingman and thought about it, his hands in his front pants pockets. “Only if you’re sure.” he said. Clostermann nodded and started to walk away towards the back of the compound. Remembering something, he called out to her. “And Perrine?” When she turned around to regard him, he added, “If you need me, wake me.” Without a word, the French witch turned and continued on her journey. Aaron, for his part, strolled over to the rightmost bed, keeping his footsteps muffled so as not to disturb the sleeping beauties further to his left. He lied down and maneuvered his parka under his head, using it as a makeshift pillow. The thick coat felt cool and perfect and Aaron stared at the metal ceiling, his mind slowly winding down, getting prepared for sleep.

We made it on dry land, but there is still a long way to go. Got real lucky today with the battle, but now comes the hard part: getting from point A to point B with a limited supply and no hope of aid deep behind enemy lines. I have a bad feeling that our luck is going to run out within the next two days max. I can guarantee it. You’re not going to let anything bad happen to them Aaron. You can’t hold back anything, even her, if it means that you all get out of this frozen hellhole. Its going to hurt very much, but you have to do it. Wouldn’t be able to live with yourself if one of them got hurt or worse. Don’t think on that Aaron, it only gives you nightmares. Then again, my nightmares frequently become reality.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The group reaches the Karelian Isthmus, right where Aaron's foray into the war began. Clues are found in the form of two sets of footprints, one friendly and the other considerably less so. Seeking shelter from the coming night, the warlock leads them to an old house that played host to an unmerry Christmas. A dreaded enemy of legend attacks and is defeated not by the force of arms or magic, but a well aimed shot from a rock from Kollaa. Later on, Aaron finds himself in hot water, but manages to get out of it the only way he knows how.

Chapter XXXV: Lady Of Winter

Though it didn’t start off on the right foot, Minnie Bishop and I really hit it off from the get go. She more than lived up to her legend and I’m still tickled pink that I actually met her. The fact that we played in that charity game, got drunk, swapped stories about the past, and danced together was icing on a cake that I thought I’d never have the opportunity to taste. Up until that point, I thought that there was nothing and no one that could possible trump my idol. Boy was I wrong.

Diary Entry March 29th 1944

Everyone dove into the snow, a never ending white mass close to a foot deep as Sanya spotted another Neuroi patrol fighter in the skies overhead. She carefully maneuvered herself so that she could pull out her Fliegerhammer at a moments notice or dive away from return fire. Better to be safe than sorry. The craft, a simple arrowhead shaped thing with a single beamer blister for weaponry, cruised low and slow through the slight overcast, taking its time, the keening whine of its propulsion system grating to the ears. This has been the sixth one we’ve encountered in four hours. Do they know we’re here? Chancing a look behind her, Litvyak moved with the alacrity of a sloth and saw much to her relief that her friends had adopted her winter camouflage tips, with their heads down, weapons out yet buried an inch into the snow, controlling their breathing, and one arm in front of the face, minimizing the amount of contrast. The enemy continued to mosey right along, weaving to and fro, searching the snow capped wastes of the Karelian Isthmus, the site of where Aaron staged his first ambush in his first ever battle as a soldier. Sanya never took her eyes off he fighter, her right hand clasped firm around the trigger of her weapon. After what seemed like an eternity, the Neuroi sped away northwest, climbing into the cold late afternoon air. Once it got far away enough so that it wouldn’t be able to see them too well, the Russian got up, hardpacked snow and ice falling off in clods. “That’s number six.” Perrine observed, stating the obvious to everyone. Turning to Eila she asked, “Did the 507th say that patrols were like that when you talked to them this morning?”

“They can be at times.” Eila explained shouldering her MG42. “However, that only happens when they’ve identified a clear threat and know where it is. Kind of makes me wonder if they know we’re
“If they thought for a second that we were,” Aaron countered, wiping the snow off his parka front, “they wouldn’t send just one fighter. It would be too easy to counter. Knowing them, they’d send a full wing and blow everything they saw into oblivion just to spook us into making a mistake. They did it all the time in the past.”

“Regardless, night is falling fast and we don’t want to be caught out on the steppes in the dark.” Sanya remarked, focusing on the practical rather than the theoretical. “We should be coming up on your old ambush site Aaron. Maybe we can find some clues as to who nabbed that radio and where they took it.”

*I figured that you’d go to the source. Good idea.* “Then let’s get moving. A night in Russia can be pretty dangerous.” Aaron agreed. As one, the troupe advanced, their snowshoes making it so that the weight of their Strikers wouldn’t make them sink into the snow. Divale made do without them and sloughed his way through the powder with a stoical determination, saying that they weren’t built to hold his weight and thus were useless. After debating it with Sanya, she reluctantly agreed to let him leave them behind. Regardless of the lack of improved speed, Aaron kept the pace, standing off to the rear on the right side, Perrine off on his left. Eila and Sanya both had the front secured. They came up to a small rise on the outermost fringes of the battlefield and hunkered down. Sanya reached out with her magic, seeing if anything was on the other side of the hill. Content that nothing was waiting for them, she gave a thumbs up, the sign for an all clear, and they all crested the rise together. Once they could see over the top, the scene took their breath away and even made Aaron gasp in shock. It was sheer devastation, the thick forests of pine were disheveled, entire patches tossed about as if some giant had uprooted them all one by one, cast them up into the air, and let them fall where they may. Some looked like they were ripped down, their bases baring fully exposed roots thicker than a ship’s anchor’s chains, the dirt underneath bulbous and deep brown in color. Pine needles and broken branches littered the ground, a carpet of debris that made it so that one would be hard pressed to see a glimmer of snow. Yet all this was nothing compared to the raised earth caused by the earthquake, forever altering the landscape for all time. Large protrusions, natural menhirs, rose up towards the skyline, easily ten to fifteen feet high. Looking over it all, the quartet felt that they were not in a forest at all, but in some twisted Gulliver’s Travels tale, descending upon a ruined cityscape once inhabited by the Lilliputian.

One of these large upheavals caught Aaron’s eye and he gestured to it with his right hand. “That was were we buried it.” Sanya looked at the particular structure and could plainly see a long shaft carved into the side as if an earth mover had sunk its greedy iron jaws into it. She then regarded the warlock and could see that his mind was elsewhere, lost in his memories.

“You with me master sergeant?” Sanya inquired with a hint of concern.

“Just reliving past events.” Aaron answered simply. “Nothing more.” Taking his explanation with a grain of salt, Litvyak silently commanded the group to advance with a gesture of the head. They trudged through the forest, crunching pine needles and twigs into the earth, sounding like crackers being crushed by a hand before being deposited into a bowl of steaming soup. As they meandered through, Eila spotted several trunks baring Neuroi beamer burns and bullet holes, many of them large caliber.

“Must have been a hectic fight when they realized that they’d been had huh?” she quipped to Aaron who was stooping over, looking intently at the ground.

“You have no idea.” Divale murmured as he scanned the soil. He brushed away some of the cover and found what he’d been searching for, a small slightly rusted brass casing. Perrine saw him pick it out here.”
up and moved in closer to him as he turned it over in his mammoth hands, gazing at it with the air of a master appraiser being given a gem of some worth. “I laid right here Perrine. Right here as I gave the command to fire. Scariest moment of my life.” he continued, the cracking of rifles and the freems of Neuroi return fire still echoing somewhere deep in his mind. A flash of light and day turns to night, the forest back to what it once was for a few seconds before all hell breaks loose. The enemy, near invisible in the gloom save for their red chevrons and their heavy footfalls, were advancing ever deeper into the woods, into the carefully laid trap. A pair of eyes looks upon them in fearful expectation, the sight of this alien foe beyond comprehension from over a small barricade made from an old radio, the front and sides covered in snow to hide it. Cold fingers grip a machine gun, a Russian M27, the circular clip flat as a frying pan bottom and covered by a massive hand lest the moonlight that seeped through the tree branches all around would reflect off the metal and give away the position. Breathing slows, the exhalation of carbon dioxide coming through the nostrils that were being plugged up with mucus, the body’s tried and true defense against further damage and heat loss. Vision pans left and right, picking out the hidden figures nearby. Some behind trunks, others higher up in the trees themselves, quite a few lay stretched out in small divots or hastily dug ditches. Cover was had by all and a smile comes over the face, an expression that causes pain as chapped lips crack and bleed. A tongue, warm and wet, licked around the superficial wound, the vitae tasting like a raw steak that’s too salty. Closer and closer the Neuroi as they were called come, beamers searching for targets and a path through the thick vegetation. Realization kicks in, the moment had come. Lungs fill with air and a fire lights deep from within. A voice pierces the night with one word-

“For a grave site, this was very well dug.” Sanya observed, bringing the present back to where it belonged. She gazed intently at the shaft and pointed at the edges near the bottom where if one looked carefully, the faintest outlines of a box like shape could be discerned. “These markings are from a spade.”

“Which means it didn’t fall out on its own after the quake, but was dug out.” Eila deduced.

“So our finder was human after all.” Aaron pondered out loud. With a thought, he looked at the ground nearest the raised earth. At first glance, the soil looked undisturbed, but years of covering his tracks in order to survive and avoid being detected told him otherwise. With his right hand, he brushed away some branches and a fistful of pine needles to uncover a large footprint that was anything but the shape of something resembling a human. It was boxy, went a good three inches into the ground, and was the size of his outstretched hand. The print had grooves like that of the sole of a shoe, deep and uniform. He leaned in and took a whiff, applying his keen senses. Though probably many days old, Aaron could still detect the faintest chemical reek of diesel fuel that lay within the snow. “And was a witch. These tracks are from a land Striker using Russian diesel fuel.”

“Russians are out here? This far from the Urals?” Perrine asked with a high degree of skepticism. “You have to be wrong there Aaron.”

“That or he’s being misled in his judgments.” Sanya countered. “I know Russian land Strikers and this print is far too boxy for a Russian model. We made ours smaller and more slanted in order to deflect rather than absorb shots. Which means that the only real explanation would be German.”

“But who would have a German made land Striker this deep behind enemy lines?” Aaron inquired.

“Someone who was running away from something.” Eila called out, a good twenty feet in front of them. “Aaron? Did you or any of your men encounter anything strange while in this wood?”

“Not at all.” Divale recollected. “The place was completely deserted save for us and the Neuroi.” Juutilainen waved with her right hand, beckoning everyone to come over to see what she found. When they all got to her, they looked down at what Eila uncovered and their collective eyes
widened. In the earth was a bevy or massive footprints, much larger than the ones they had found earlier by a good two and a half times. Some were in the shape of a hoof, much like a goats, circular with a point at the very front and flatter toward the end. Others had the look of human hands after being dipped in ink and applied to paper, except those appendages didn’t have the tell tale dips of claws at the top of each of the four digits, talons that ran a good six inches long and a third of that wide.

Sanya took her sight away from the tracks and looked over at Aaron, who was rigid with recognition. “You know what manner of beast makes these marks?” she queried.

Aaron’s glowing yellow eyes met hers and she could see the fear within them. “Yes I do,” he answered as calmly as he could, trying to hide his fright. “and I wish I didn’t. These are from a chort. By the looks of things, at least five of them.”

Eila and Sanya looked at each other and Perrine could see the silent unease that passed between them. “What is a chort?” she asked.

“A foul beast of legend.” Litvyak illuminated. “They are demonic fiends that have three eyes and the head and back limbs of a goat. Within the long forgotten mountain peaks and valleys of Russia, they breed like rabbits. Sometimes they walk as a man does, stalking the countrysides looking for prey. They hunt in packs like wolves and when they find something, they charge in, using their speed to run you down and their brute strength in their claws to rip you to shreds. My mother always had me inside when night fell and told me all the stories about what her ancestors encountered many centuries ago. Out of all the tales she weaved, none scared me more than that of the chorts.”

“Can they be killed?” Clostermann anxiously inquired, placing her right hand around her cross.

“Not very well.” Eila commented grimly. “Even a full platoon of heavily armed men would have trouble bringing it down. Their hides are thick and they can shrug off any wound as if it was nothing. Thankfully, despite what Sanya said, they are a rare sight. The last time a chort was sighted was around 1908 when that explosion happened in Tanguska.”

“What about the last time that one was killed?” Perrine wondered out loud.

“Not since the days of the great khans who tore through these parts in the late 13th century. According to the account, Kublai Khan himself dueled it to the death, but also succumbed to his wounds. To be honest, I find that highly doubtful as he was almost eighty at the time.” Aaron replied. He looked back down at the footprints and added, “Regardless, what isn’t doubtful is that there are at least five of these things out and about and night’s coming on in a few hours. We need to find some sort of shelter.”

“The person who found the radio must’ve had the same idea.” Sanya remarked. Looking in the direction of her gaze, her friends saw more of the Striker marks moving away from the site towards the east.

“That has a greater chance of leading us to a corpse than a cottage.” Eila warned.

“Still, we have to try and we won’t have this good of a lead ever again.” Sanya retorted. “Let’s move out.”

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The sound of snowshoe shod feet crunched through the snow, a brilliant white made even more so by the shining sun, a golden orb that soon would be disappearing behind the horizon line. There
wasn’t a cloud in the azure sky and it beat down on the powder, casting a near blinding reflection. Thankfully, the four companions had their glare goggles on, protecting them from the worst effects. They had been walking for a good two hours and nothing was seen, no shelter, no life, not even a Neuroi flyer, a fact that dwelt heavily on Aaron’s mind as he trudged alongside his friends through the Russian steppes. They were thick as fleas on a dog not too long ago, but as soon as we left those woods, it’s like they were never there. Not good. A small clump of tiny pine trees came into view as they started to go up a small rise. However, one didn’t need to have much of an imagination to realize that the puny vegetation was the tips of taller variants, the majority of their size buried by the snow. Something twinkled on one of them and Aaron looked upon the strange sight. Nestled within the branches was a small star made of bronze. At first, he felt nothing, but then a torrent of emotions and memories flooded into him mind unbidden, causing him to stop dead in his tracks. Perrine noticed this and asked, “What’s wrong?” Her question drew the attention of Sanya and Eila who turned around and regarded the situation.

“I-I know this place.” Aaron stammered out softly, moving his head from side to side, gauging his surroundings and comparing them to the memories of long ago. “T-this can’t be the house c-could it?” With a start, advanced again at a brisk run, kicking up the snow like water, his blistering pace leaving his friends behind in a flurry of swirling white mists.

“Aaron!” Sanya called out to him. “Hold up!” However, the warlock was deaf and blind, charging forward with the frantic movements of a zealot that wishes to be the first to a holy man so as to receive a blessing from some divine source. He stumbled on the rise for a brief moment, yet righted himself as he then drove onwards, cresting the rise within a few seconds. Standing on the top, he looked out and saw to his great surprise a small cottage made of rough hewn logs with several windows along the sides and a chimney rising up from a roof covered in so much snow that it looked like a box on top of the shingles.

By the time the three witches reached him, they could hear him mumbling to himself, “I can’t fucking believe it. After all these years, it still stands.”

“What do you mean Aaron?” Sanya inquired when she was close enough and reasonably sure that he wouldn’t run off again. “Have you been here before?”

“Been here?” Aaron said, looking down at her and then back at Eila and Perrine. “I’ve been in that house.”

“If you have then you would’ve known where it was and saved us a whole lot of trouble.” Eila grumbled.

“I said I had a near photographic memory, not a perfect one.” Aaron countered, looking back at the house and marveling at it.

“Was it after the ambush?” Perrine queried, trying to deduce how Divale had come to be there.

Aaron nodded and began to explain. “When we put down the last Neuroi and buried the radio, we decided to split up in order to not attract attention to ourselves. Drew lots to pair us up and me and David got to be bunk mates so to speak. We both made sure to disguise ourselves as Russian soldiers, using uniforms that we found here and there. As we went up, he told me that there was a house not too far away that looked to be deserted from what he saw. So we went there and found out much to our surprise that this place was the furthest from being abandoned. All out in front of the house were several sleighs, the horses huddled near a fire that burned outside under a small wooden canopy, thick blankets over their massive backs and strangely, had these woolen hats on their heads that came up and around their ears. Weirdest thing I ever saw. Bright yellow light was pouring out of every window and smoke was rising from the chimney. David and I look at each other and we both
had the same thought: It’s probably better to leave this place be, but if we can somehow gain their hospitality, we’d be made in the shade. Summoning up our courage, we stroll up to the door, hearing music and the sounds of laughter coming through the wood, and me being me, I knocked on the door. The voices stop and for a long moment I feel horrible about ruining the party. A few seconds later, the door opens and we’re damn near blinded by the intensity of the light coming through. I hear a man ask who we were, and I reply that we were soldiers assigned to such and such a unit that had been sent out to tell people to evacuate as best as they could for the enemy was nearby. David also added that during our travels, our radio broke and inquired if they had one they could use to contact HQ.

The gentleman at the door sadly explains that he didn’t have a radio in the house, but graciously offered us a seat at the table near the fire as we both cold and hunger. Thanking him for his kindness, we go in and as our eyes adjusted to light, we could see that this house was packed with people, young and old sitting around a table that was practically breaking under the weight of platters upon platters of food and pitchers of drink. Wreathes and red ribbons hung from the low ceiling and along the stair banister that went up to the second floor. A decorated tree was in the corner with a golden star on the top and was encircled by garland and multicolored baubles. Oil lamps were burning alongside an army of candles and the air smelled sweet with the aroma of lamp oil, pine, meat, and perfume.

“January 1st is at the tail end of Orthodox Christmas.” Sanya illuminated, politely interrupting for a brief moment. “You were very lucky to be invited inside. Most Russians are fearful of the government and never accept guests to their house much less be let in unless forced to.”

“I gathered that when I saw the faces of the people at the table.” Aaron agreed. “As soon as they saw us enter, they looked at us like prisoners about to be sent to the gallows to dance the hempen jig. The man who let us in, apparently the patrician of the family, told everyone that these men were out serving their country, sending out Stalins’s orders that would help protect the people. That made everyone relax and we even got some applause from the older folks around the table, those that probably lived during the times of the czars themselves before the Revolution. We thank them all for their generosity and stated that they did us a great honor by allowing us in. Smiles soon formed and that was when I knew that we were in. We, took off our uniforms, hanging them on a coat rack, sat down, and dined with this massive extended family, engaging in small talk about life, love, the war, and when we would throw those black and red bastards out of Moscow. Cigars somehow materialized out of nowhere and that was my first foray into smoking at the tender age of fourteen. Took to it pretty well, but David coughed up a storm which caused everyone, including me, to laugh. Didn’t partake much if I recall correctly. If we did, we’d probably would’ve eaten those folks out of house and home. Must’ve been there for a good few hours and throughout that time frame, we saw people leave, getting hugs and kisses from all present before vanishing into the night past the threshold. Soon, me David, the gentleman and his wife were the only ones remaining. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, David and I helped clear the table and wash the dishes. By the time we got the last plate put away, we all hear a knock at the door. The man goes over to the door and opens it and there is another Russian soldier there holding this huge burlap sack. He and the home owner say a few words and the soldier hands the fellow a letter. I saw this exchange and I give a silent signal to David that it was time to go. I knew what that letter was, a death notice. After the messenger of death left, we both tell the husband and wife thank you and that we’d always remember them. We put our uniforms back on and waved goodbye. No sooner did we get ten steps away from the threshold than we heard a pair of loud gunshots. Though it would’ve saved us being out in the cold for an hour until we found an abandoned bear cave some five miles north, neither of us had the stones to go back to that house.” Aaron looked over at the cottage and added in a low voice, “Until now.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Eila said sympathetically. “Hopefully this won’t affect you too much.”
“I’m over it.” Divale answered.

“And soon we’ll be over and into it.” Sanya quipped. As one, the group ventured towards the house, the Russian looking over the scene and noticing a few details as they got closer and closer to their destination. Eila noticed her friend contemplating these things and moved up next to her. “You thinking what I’m thinking Eila?”

“Seems like our erstwhile radio snatcher might still be alive.” Eila thought out loud, examining the house. “The windows aren’t drawn and there looks to be some patches of snow on the roof that are lower than the rest of it, a clear sign of melting from heat coming through cracks. The only question is, is this going to be a friendly exchange?”

“If it isn’t, we have the right man for the job.” Sanya grimly replied. She looked over her shoulder at Aaron as she kept on walking and asked, “If I told you to kill a person master sergeant, would you do it without question?” Aaron looked at her and answered only with the sounds of unstrapping his shotgun from his leg holster and pumping a round into the chamber. Assured that he would do whatever was asked of him, Litvyak bade the group to advance cautiously towards the house with a flurry of hand signals. Everyone got their weapon of choice out and moved up, moods dark and tense, none more so than Perrine’s who listened to the fellow lieutenant’s words with shock and fear. 

“We wouldn’t honestly kill a witch would we?”

She moved up at the double next to Aaron who didn’t even pay her a glance as he trudged through the snow. Leaning in, Clostermann whispered, “You really wouldn’t do it, would you?”

“She’s the CO Perrine.” Divale answered grimly. “If Sanya gives the order to fire, I have no choice in the matter. Would I prefer if it didn’t happen, yes, but if it does, I’ll manage to reason it away.”

“So you’d feel nothing?” Perrine inquired, clearly uncomfortable with the subject.

“I wish.” Aaron replied sadly. Within a few heartbeats, they reached the door to the house. Sanya paused at the threshold and stepped to the right side, back to the wall, Eila copying the tactic on the right side. She gazed at Aaron and gestured with her head towards the knob. Divale drew his shotgun up to his shoulder and hissed, “Get behind me lieutenant.” Perrine immediately went into a low crouch, her Bren cocked and loaded. Knowing that she was ready, Aaron moved in closer, his breathing slow and shallow. He transferred his shotgun to his left hand and tested the knob gently, seeing if it was either locked or booby trapped. There was no resistance at all and the iron was stone cold. “So it isn’t locked. That’s very strange. If I had a chort after me, I’d barricade the fucker to the gills. Has to be booby trapped.” Aaron whispered to the group.

“It might not be an explosive, but keep your shields up just in case.” Everyone nodded and Divale placed his right hand on the knob once more, the feeling of ice all over his palm. A silent countdown went down in his head. Three, two, one. With a flash, he twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

Nothing happened for a split second until a large brown shape came down from the top of the door frame, a mere foot within the house proper, looping towards Aaron’s chest. Thankfully, Divale was ready for it and batted the object away with a harsh smack of his right hand, sending it into the left hand wall by the door with the sound of cracking wood. It all occurred within such a short time that no one had a clue what happened until Aaron slowly moved inside the house and Sanya followed him in, Eila and Perrine taking up the rearguard. Craning her neck and turning left, Litvyak could see the trap, a large fireplace log with the end sharpened to a fine point and suspended by a crude release catch, now ruined, broken into pieces by Aaron’s vicious back hand, the parts scattered all over the dusty floor.

Eyeing the hardwood planks, Sanya could see quite a few footprints. Some were the land Strikers while others were booted. As she looked closer at them however, Litvyak began to notice that some
were different sizes. *There was more than one? Or maybe our thief had visitors?* Letting her thoughts on the matter go, she took a look at her surroundings. The main interior looked the same as Aaron had left it over four years ago. A decorated tree, a large table with seats all around it, the banister and ceiling still having wreathes and red ribbons hanging from them, candles in their holders in various states of being, nothing had changed except for the amount of dust that made everything look faded and dull, some motes gently moving through the silent space. No warmth was to be felt, yet the fireplace, a massive stone construct, looked to have been used recently, judging from the placement of the poker and billows and the amount of ash. Two curtained doorways lead into other parts of the downstairs. “All clear on the main room.” Eila reported. “What’s the next plan?”

“You and I will make sure the downstairs is secured. Aaron and Perrine will take a look above. Morse only.” Sanya ordered. The quartet separated into pairs and Divale moved around the way and started to go up the stairs, Clostermann right behind him. The steps creaked a tad as they bore his weight. *Guess whoever is here will know we’re coming then.* Then it hit him, a foul smell that made him wince in disgust. He thumbed the dial on his communicator and morsed, *(I smell something really bad up here, like something died bad. Taking a look now.)*

(Rodger that. Be careful you two.) Sanya replied.

They continued to go up, the odor getting worse and worse with every step. Clostermann didn’t catch a whiff until that had almost reached the last two steps for she didn’t possess the preternatural sense of smell that Aaron did, but when she caught it, the aroma made her gag and almost vomit uncontrollably. “Putain, quelle est cette odeur?! (Fuck me, what is that smell?!?) she managed to croak out, putting her left hand over her nose.

“Respire par la bouche (Breathe through your mouth).” Divale advised, his tone nasal. As they came up to the top, the only way to go was left where they saw only one door, the frame buttressed in a way by a bevy of towels that were shoved underneath like a doorknob, trying to keep whatever foul smelling entity beyond it somewhat tolerable. *So much for that. This reek is so bad, I’m practically crying. Thank god you don’t have my sense of smell Perrine or else you wouldn’t have made it this far.* “I’ll go in first.” he whispered over his shoulder, his delivery making it clear to his wingman that he didn’t want to at all. Taking in a deep breath, he grabbed the knob and pushed it in. Like the front door, it wasn’t locked, but unlike the front, this wasn’t boob trapped. Inside, was a small bedroom, a large double bed near the curtained window, the white sheets and woolen blankets tossed about. A dresser lay near the far wall, undisturbed while a night stand was on the right side with a three pronged candelabra, a beat up butane lighter next to it. This was hard for Aaron to see as the smell was overpowering, making his eyes water. Even Perrine couldn’t deal with the odor and simply refused to enter the room. After he wiped the tears away with his right arm, his blurred vision caught the sight of a small blue and yellow painted can with red lettering on the side, fully open. Inside of it looked to be some sort of fish in a brackish fluid. *(Found out the source of the smell. It’s an open can of some sort of fish or another. Reeks like the dickens. You might be smelling it now.)* Aaron morsed to Sanya

(We are, thank you very much.) the lieutenant replied. *(According to Eila, it’s surstromming, herring that were killed during spawning season and allowed to ferment for months before being canned in a mixture of its own juices and brine.)*

(You telling me people eat that shit?) Aaron morsed in awe.

(Eila says it’s not very common and is an acquired taste.) Sanya answered. Aaron was about to say something else when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw Perrine point at the curtain. Following her outstretched left hand, Divale saw the thick woolen curtain flutter gently. Concern overtook him and he bounded up to it and pulled it away. The window was cracked open, a space
that one could barely fit a sheet of paper through. But more than enough for the smell to get out into
the open. This was set up deliberately to lure them! Oh fuck us!

Breaking radio silence, Aaron pressed the stud on his communicator and whispered, “Sanya, the
window was cracked open up here. Whoever did this wanted to bring them here. We need to~” His
transmission was interrupted by a slew of roars far off in the distance, beyond his present location.
That came from the other side of the house. In a flash, he raced out of the room was almost halfway
down the stairs before Perrine managed to even move a muscle. His eyes darted around the
downstairs, searching for his friends, but not finding them anywhere. “Where are you?” he called
out.

“In here.” Eila answered, her voice coming from behind one of the curtained passageways. Aaron
rushed through it, brushing the thick sheet away from him. He found himself a few steps away from
another pair of doors, these presumably leading outside towards a cellar of some sort. Sanya and Eila
were a few feet past the threshold, huddled near a window, Litvyak peering out the glass with her
binoculars, face grim and taut. Divale heard the sound of approaching footsteps coming from behind
him and didn’t need to turn around to know that it was his wingman. I know those steps anywhere.

Panting from trying to catch up with Aaron, Clostermann put her hands on her knees and hunched
over, gulping in breaths. “What do you see?” she managed to ask as she righted herself and moved
up alongside the rest of the group. Sanya, though she heard the question, was too absorbed in
looking through the binos. At maximum magnification, she could make out five dark shapes moving
in towards the house, tiny specks of pepper on a mound of salt. Behind them, the sun was beginning
to set, casting the world into a light show of bright orange and red before shrouding it in darkness.

“You were right Aaron.” she admitted while nodding and putting the binoculars down. “There are
five of them.”

“And they’re all coming here.” Eila stated, flicking the safety on her MG42 to the off position.
“Thankfully, we have the upper hand.”

“No,” Aaron replied gloomily, craning his neck and taking a gander out the window himself, “we
don’t.”

“What do you mean by that?” Sanya inquired, opening the window, the rush of cold evening air
chilling them slightly and rustling loose hair.

“They are pacing their advance with the sunset, judging by the way the sky is looking now. Chorts
love attacking at night because they blend in well. Plus, remember what I said about their hides being
thick? Unless you have heavy caliber weaponry on hand, you’re just going to piss them off.” Divale
explained.

“So you’re saying that we have no chance against those things?” Perrine queried, again touching her
cross around her neck.

“Not at all.” Aaron clarified, clicking his boot heels, activating the spring mechanism that made his
knife pop out. “If you focus fire and aim for the soft spots, the eyes, sides of the head near the ears,
and just underneath the chin, you can bring it down, but it’s going to take a lot of ammo to do that.
Your Tonnere and Sanya’s Fliegerhammer could easily take out one with a well placed shot, but
these are slippery bastards, very agile and very tough. Knocking them down may be easy, but
keeping them down is another story.”

“What about you?” Eila asked, taking another look outside.
Aaron looked at them all after pulling the knife out of his boot and holding it in front of him. “I can do this alongside you ladies, but I’m going to need more help.”

“Don’t do it Aaron.” Perrine warned, shaking her head violently from side to side. “She’s nothing but trouble.”

“Speak for yourself.” another woman’s voice rumbled in reply. All the witches looked on as the blade of Aaron’s knife clouded over and Ismenoth’s face appeared, regarding Clostermann with a cold stare from her beady black eyes. “Unlike someone here, I never tried to kill him out of some emotional duress.” Then, the demoness furrowed her brow a tad, pondering some sort of question. “Technically at least.” she added with a sly grin.

“We got a few problems out here Ismenoth.” Aaron reported, shifting the knife in his right hand and placing it facing out the window.

“Oh those are just chorts.” the fiend scoffed. “You can easily handle them Aaron. Grow a pair.”

“I’m serious.” Divale reiterated strongly, turning the blade around and peering both the metal and face within. “Ever since France, I’ve started to really think about being more careful. While it is true that I took one of these things down during training, that was against one. We have five bearing down on us right now and we have little means to counter them. Now are you going to help me or do I have to be reckless again?”

“My my.” Ismenoth marveled with a beaming smile. “How have we smarted up.”

“They’re closing in fast.” Eila hissed from the other side of the window, her grip on her machine gun tightening. “About a thousand meters now.”

“Yes or no bitch.” Aaron stated, his irritation with the indecision evident.

“Oh a resounding yes.” Ismenoth answered. “However, I would like something fresh in exchange.”

“I think that would be difficult to accomplish given the current circumstances.” Aaron retorted, assuming that it was a sexual encounter that she wanted.

“I didn’t mean flesh.” Ismenoth explained, her face leaning in and making her head look that much bigger. “I meant fresh air.”

Divale blinked. She can’t mean- “You are not coming out of there woman, and that’s final.” he shot back emphatically.

Sighing sadly, the demoness pouted. “Suit yourself. You don’t help me, I don’t help you.”

“Six hundred meters.” Eila called out. “Now five hundred.”

“Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.” mused Ismenoth, warping her right hand back and forth across her body.

“Whatever you’re trying to do Aaron, get it done faster.” Sanya ordered, checking to make sure her rockets were properly loaded and primed.

Fuck it. “You got a deal, but you don’t leave my side. Get more than two feet away from me at any point and back you go, even if I have to toss you there on your ass.”

“Yes!” Ismenoth cackled, clapping her hands together. “This is going to be so much fun for the both
“Go fuck yourself.” Perrine quipped, disgusted with such a shameful display of triumph.

“Already did twice now Frenchie.” the fiend countered. “But if you insist, I have more than enough time for the trifecta.” The image then started to focus on her right hand as it moved down her ample chest, past her belly button, and sink inside her pants in the front. Aaron quickly placed the knife back into the sole of his right boot and clicked it home, sparing everyone the sight, but not the sounds of the demoness moaning in pleasure. Then, he took off all his weapons and parka furiously. “I’ll keep them distracted enough for you all to line up your shots.” he informed. After he placed the last of his Torkerev’s on the white cloth of his folded parka, he gave everyone a wink of reassurance and closed his eyes. His body started to become wreathed in smoke and soon became such a thing, a wispy mass that snaked out the window and into the darkness that finally fell across the Russian steppes.

The three witches looked out, relying more on their ears than eyes, seeing if they could pick out their targets and get a decent volley in. The crunching of snow beneath huge hooves registered, but never in one particular spot. It seemed as though that there were more of them out there. Then, Sanya could make out a twinkling in the gloom, a glistening ruby red triangle that panned to and fro. It didn’t take her long to figure out that she was staring at one of the chort’s eyes, their luminosity dulling for a split second as it’s bestial breath coiled around it’s head like gun smoke from the end of a barrel. She could hear it inhale and exhale, a phlegmy rasp resembling that of an overworked plow horse. The wind shifted, blowing through the window once more. Litvyak winced as the foul reek of their hides reached her nostrils, the odor a cloying combination of wet dog hair and vomit. One of the creatures gave out a roar that was answered by the rest of it’s packmates, a blood curdling symphony could make the stoutest of hearts freeze solid. All the while, nothing could be seen of the warlock who had just went out into them a few moments before. *Come on now Aaron, where are you damn it?*

“Deitatem.” Aaron intoned, and from out of nowhere the warlock’s gaseous form materialized once more into the plane of reality, but instead of being in the guise of a man, Divale appeared as he did when he and Perrine did the exercise, in a flurry of green sparks that pierced through the veil of night, the aetheric energy popping and bouncing off his armor. “Circumdate.” he added a split second later. With a whooshing sound similar to that caused by a flamethrower, two long red lines moved out from behind him and flew forward along the ground in a wide arc with the speed of MG 42 bullets. It happened so fast that no one, not even the chorts couldn’t react fast enough before the two streams met further along the way, their collision silent yet binding all within that space. The magic glowed like a wildfire, illuminating both Aaron and his enemies. Sanya, Eila, and Perrine gasped as their eyes fell upon the chorts for the first time. They were massive beasts, taller than a tank is long by a factor of two, maybe three, with bulging musculature that looked stretched to the point where it could rip at any second. The hooves were thick, the legs reverse jointed and shaggy furred like that of a goat, a thick hide that ran up and around the groin and up along the sides, yet totally absent on the chest and arms. Long black talons jutted out from the ends of their fingers, shining bright like Damascan steel in a forge. Tree trunk thick arms, heavily veined and primed for attack lead up to a bearded goat’s head with a trio of red eyes arranged in a triangle with a pinprick sized pupil within them. The rest of the skull featured a long snout with two flaring nostrils pouring hot breath into the air, the maw filled with sharp yellowed teeth. Two coiling horns corkscrewed around the cranium outwards, protecting the horse like ears from harm, bulbous growths all along their lengths like the ones found on a shillelagh cane.

Arrayed against such a fearsome quintet of foes was the warlock, terrifyingly resplendent in his armor, the bat like wings unfurled. In his hands was a long halberd. The tip of the weapon had an ax like head with a long spike at the top that curved out then back in, terminating in wrap of red dyed horse hair that prevented blood from running down the shaft that was decorated like the skin of an
alligator with multiple rings of silver that featured runic symbols. At the butt end was a mean looking double headed billhook, granting him the ability to use the halberd like a bo staff if he chose to. Suddenly, Aaron twirled the massive pole arm with his right hand, the long taloned fingers articulating with the ease as he moved off to the right side, watching his prey slink backwards for a moment, unsure with how to proceed against this newcomer. He could hear something coming from the house behind him, a voice that stated something of great import, but all his senses were glued to the chorts, taking note of their positions. The two in front will advance slow while the other three will circle around like wolves, trying to push me against them. Standard distract and bait tactic. Now which one is the alpha? As he looked, his assumption started to come true as two of the beasts got on all fours and strolled forwards. Behind them, the other three moved out and around, and it was then that Aaron caught a glimpse of what he presumed was the alpha. Though he was now easily twice his normal size, he was a dwarf compared to the creature in front of him that even on all fours bested him in height by a good three feet. If it stood on its hind legs we’re looking at twenty maybe twenty five feet. That’s one big mother. Now, what to do to even the odds? Plans were quickly formed, dismissed, brought back to the fro, revised, played out, and decided with moments as the chorts began to play their deadly game of ring around the rosie with him.

“You ready to rock their worlds ladies?” he called out into the night behind them, his booming voice carrying far and wide like a bullhorn. The sound of racking bolts were the only replies he got and Aaron could help but smile. Four against five is more than winnable if I can keep them occupied with me. First target should be one of the three circling behind me, preferably one that’s alone for just a split second. Then relocate and reengage. “Watch my back Ismenoth.” he hissed softly.

“I’d rather watch your front, but suit yourself. I’m easy.” the fiend replied for a moment, bringing her visage out at the billhook end. “Make me proud.” Divale took a quick glance all around, searching for the right time to strike. He passed over the exposed chort, a young juvenile, doing his best to not draw attention to the weak bar in the cage. Muscles tensed up in his legs and adrenaline started pumping into his bloodstream. Bring it on. Pushing up with his legs, Aaron flew back and to the right, swinging his halberd from the left side. As he turned, he could see that he caught the chort in midstep, its left hind leg forward. The creature realized what was happening and tried to bring up its right hind leg up to try to flee, but it was far too late and Divale’s halberd came down and across its back, carving a deep bloody chuck from the middle, severing the spine. The chort howled in agony as it collapsed, the signals from the brain no longer reaching the rest of the body, vitae streaming from the wound. Despite that, it could still swing out with its front limbs and swing it did, clawing at him. Aaron sideflipped over the attempt, high into the air. One of the other chorts seized the opportunity and leapt up to meet him, letting out a bestial cry. The warlock positioned his weapon to make it look like he was going to stab the head through the chest of the creature. It took the bait and paid for it dearly as he then swung the billhook up from underneath, the flat of the blade finding purchase against the snout, crushing bone and ripping flesh. The blow took it away and out of the fight for a moment, giving Aaron a place to land. No sooner did his feet hit the ground than darkness came over his head. Reacting to the threat, he shoulder rolled backwards, through the legs of a chort as its mighty claws dug into the snow, white powder flying everywhere. He lashed out with his weapon at the left leg, the steel cutting through the tendons. The chort howled and started to fall forwards on top of him, but Sanya fired a rocket right at the head, the munition striking the target dead center. The thick skull spared Divale from the most of the force, but the gigantic beast lost both its horns, the appendages shattering like glass as it was rocked backwards, the hind legs unable to adequately right itself from the hit. Taking advantage, Aaron swung again, this time at the stomach with the billhook end. The belly ripped open and blood spewed out like a geyser along with the pinkish entrails, falling out of the intestinal cavity like sausages from a butchers smock.

Then the sounds of pounding hooves through snow from either side of him, drew his attention. Seeing that he was now exposed, the alpha and one of the others charged in, bellowing like rabid
dogs, horns out in front. The ignition of another rocket from the house came soon after Ismenoth shouted from the billhook, “Take right and slide under!” Taking her advice, Aaron turned and ran towards the chort to the right, just as the missile struck the upper part of its left flank, forcing its left legs to come off the ground. Knowing that it was now or never, Divale slid underneath the vacant space and used his wings to propel him forward that much faster. He managed to clear the danger and twirl slightly so as to get on his feet. Looking back as he did so, the other chorts, the alpha no less, struck his off balanced packmate in the throat, the impact crushing the windpipe and audibly breaking the neck with the sound of a gunshot. It was going so fast that the now dead end of the pair was sent end over end and landed a small ways away, rolling in the snow once before it came to a stop. Aaron pushed off the ground with his wings and got upright, but it didn’t last long before Ismenoth warned, “Behind you!” He placed the halberd shaft out, like he was pushing a massive grinding wheel. One of the other chorts, an adult and much more cunning than the juveniles, rushed forwards and extended its neck, teeth bared in an attempt to chew his face off. The steel bar saved his life as it wedged roughly in the chort’s mouth, dislodging incisors and bicuspids, the charges momentum pushing him back. Divale’s feet could find no purchase as he slid backwards. He tried to turned the halberd out and cut the beast’s throat, but it was locked tight in it’s jaws. Having enough of these games, the chort reached out with it’s hands, grabbed just underneath the bladed ends and started to bend the halberd back onto itself, trying to turn it into an improvised guillotine. Knowing that it was a risk, Aaron ducked under the executioners steel, the billhook and halberd head grinding against each other mere inches above his head. He kicked out at the only targets he could reach, the ankles right above the hooves, with all his might. Cracking bone was the result and the chort toppled forwards on top of him with a resounding thud.

Sanya saw this scene unfold as she aimed another rocket at the alpha, it’s form inching closer to the dog pile. “Distract it after I fire!” she yelled to her friends as she pulled the trigger. For the third time, a missile streaked from the window and snaked through the air. It would’ve connected had it not been for the fact that the chort wasn’t really that interested in the scrum and was looking for easier prey. It turned its head just at the moment Sanya fired and dodged out of the way with a crude side roll. As the projectile disappeared into the night, leaving but a trail of propellant to mark its passing, Perrine and Eila opened up with their machine guns. Bullets ripped through the air and struck the creature all over. Despite the fusillade and the amount of blood that misted into the air following the impacts, the chort merely roared in anger and charged at the house. Litvyak hefted her fliegerhammer and slowed her breathing as the enemy churned its massive legs into the snow, kicking up powder with every bounding step. You’re only going to get one shot. Make it count. She waited and waited until the horned head got to be the size of the wall behind her and fired. Given the distance between them and it, the witches immediately ducked down to avoid any explosive feedback as the rocket sped forth. At that point, the chort was less than fifty feet away from the window and had no chance of getting out of the way. The missile impact was heard and the munition exploded, the edges of the fireball coming through the opening, licking the walls and window frame black, the smell of burning wood filling their nostrils. The concussive force of the blast shattered the pane, glass showering down like crystal rain. Though not knowing if the chort was knocked down or killed, Eila sensed something was amiss. “Move away now!” she screamed, grabbed the hands of Sanya and Perrine and wrenching them towards the interior of the house. A split second later, a gargantuan claw crashed through the wall, swiping the inside madly for anything living within. The taloned ends missed gouging a nasty furrow in the back of Perrine’s head, a few locks of her straw blond hair cut away. Eila lost her footing and fell forwards, sending the trio hard into the floor. She turned over and saw that the chort continued ripping out vast sections of the house and quickly withdrew its arm before sticking its head in, looking dead at them with its red eyes.

The smell of the creature’s breath and hide was gag inducing. For a moment, time seemed to freeze, yet it was broken by a tinny click. It took time for the mind to register the sounds import. That’s the sound of a grenade pin being pulled. A globular mass was seen tumbling through the air, courtesy of
Clostermann and it detonated soon afterwards, sending shrapnel, splinters, and smoke everywhere. Shields chimed as debris bounced harmlessly off, the magic barriers holding firm. A bestial cry was heard as the alpha took the brunt of the blast, sheets of flesh hanging off the skull and bulging neck muscles, blood dripping down like a leaky faucets. Perrine smiled, expecting the creature to go down, but it soon turned into an expression of terror as it glared at the trio with violent intent. How is it still upright? “Vincula fati!” a voice bellowed. Within moments, a pair of chains looped around the chort’s neck, causing it to grunt in protest. It tried to resist, but was pulled roughly out of the hole it made. Curious, Perrine moved up with her Bren out and peered out the side. In the still glowing red dark, she could see the beast being wrestled back, and further behind it was Aaron, his face rigid with strain and standing above the ruined corpse of the adult that fell on top of him, his clothing slick with blood and gore from using his spell and the chort’s strength to free himself out the back of the adult.

Having enough, the alpha turned around and charged as Eila and Sanya joined the peanut gallery. Aaron was ready for it and retracted the chains a bit as he leapt up, narrowly avoiding being gored, front flipping over the length of the chort’s body. Using his momentum, he tugged hard and managed to catch the creature in mid-stride, lifting it up and over his own head. Arcing like a basketball shot from the baseline, it flew over and slammed into the ground, the shower of uplifted snow near blinding. Aaron killed the spell and hastily moved to where his halberd was, but the chort was back on its feet and stood up on its hind legs, rising to its full height. The two combatants were an equal distance away from the weapon. It roared a challenged and beat the ground with its massive hands repeatedly, blood still streaming from the grenade wound. Divale complied by cracking his knuckles and getting into a proper sprinting stance. The alpha lowered its massive skull, accepting the offer and the two, as if by urged to action by a starter’s gun, ran towards each other. “Freya!” a woman’s voice shouted. It nearly made Aaron stop in his tracks, yet thankfully he didn’t as a wide beam of blue energy rushed past him, colder than any cold he had ever felt in his life, frost forming along his back and right shoulder. The magic missile collided with the chort’s left leg, instantly turning it into a block of ice with the sound of tinkling chandelier crystal. Though beautiful, it made the limb structurally weak and the mass of the beast crushed it into shards, sending it toppling forwards.

Aaron managed to get to his halberd and picked it up at the run. Screaming like a madman, he threw his arm back and jammed it into the skull of the creature repeatedly, like a mother using a cookie cutter to make individual baked goods out of a sheet of dough. The chort felt the blows rain down for a few seconds, but refused to budge as death started to set in slowly, robbing it of movement.

After a few more good punches, Aaron let the weapon be, his front wet with crimson vitae, breathing hard as he turned around, trying to pinpoint where the shot came from. “Imago calor.” he intoned. In a flash, the world became a mixture of various bright colors. He could pinpoint where the dead chorts were, including the rapidly fading one that he downed first. Nestled with the mess was a curious red blob in the upper fringes of the circle. “You can come on out now. I won’t harm you.” Divale ended the spell and watched as a mass of snow heaved up and ran down the sides of a woman’s winter gear. The parka hood was brought back by a left hand as the other held a large cannon, easily a 75 mm by the looks of it. When Aaron could see her face his breath was taken away. Her hair was the color of Sanya’s, the eyes steel gray with a hint of amethyst throughout. She wore a uniform in the colors of the Finnish military, near blue gray with a slightly darker side belt with the mark of a captain on her collar, black stockings, and white boots that came up to the mid calf. The flesh was pale like Eila’s, yet she stood considerably taller, standing 5’7” if she wished to step outside of a pair of light green land Strikers that were blocky and heavily pitted with damage. The likeness to Eila is incredible. Wait a minute, this can’t possibly be-

“Aurora!” Eila shouted, bounding out of the house and running toward them. The woman, Aurora turned and her face matched that of Aaron’s as she began to murmur something, but the words were cut off as Eila embraced her in a bear hug. “I’ve been worried sick about you! Why are you here?!!
Are you okay?" she asked, each question coming out faster than the last.

“Christ Eila, give your sister some time to speak.” Sanya quipped as she and Perrine came out of the gaping hole.

“Okay, okay.” Aaron stated, putting his hands in a T. “Let me get this straight: This is your sister, Aurora “The Rock of Kollaa” Juutilainen?”

“That it is.” Aurora said, getting out of her sister’s clutches. “And you must be Aaron Divale.”

“How do you know my name?” Aaron asked, infinitely curious.

“We should discuss these things inside over some food and a warm fire. Perrine suggested, shivering in the cold. “It’s freezing out here.”

“Agreed.” Aurora replied. She looked at Aaron who was walking towards the alpha that she helped him kill and asked, “What are you doing?”

Aaron took his halberd and wrenched off the billhook end with a snap. He then proceeded to skin the hide off the shoulder, exposing the flesh before digging in deeper, severing the tough muscle fibers. Within moments, the sharp blade did its job and Aaron pulled off a blanket sized piece of meat from the dead creature. “Working on dinner.” he answered, holding the bloody meat in his hands like a matador does his cape. “And believe me, it’s going to be good.”

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Four mouths watered as the smell of cooking meat filled the house. The fire was going and Aaron was hard at work, in a kneeling position and tending to the meal with a pair of meat forks like a mother does a fussy child, always moving the immense chort steak so it wouldn’t burn and cook evenly. The hole that the enemy made had been patched up via floorboards in one of the corner sections of the dining room, affixed in place by the nails, extra bits and pieces of moth eaten clothes shoved into whatever crevices remained to stop the wind from blowing in. Both Juutilainen sisters were sitting side by side at the table, Sanya was to Eila’s left, and as for Perrine, she was next to Aaron, waiting with a large platter which looked more like the door to a jeep rather than a dish. The dinner table was replete with plates, forks, knives, cups, a carving knife, and whatever cloth napkins that managed to escape the voracious appetites of the moths. A samovar full of hot tea was nearby and a bowl full of boiled potatoes sat next to it. “And I thought they would smell bad on the inside.” Aurora quipped, taking a deep whiff of the air.

“Just goes to show,” Aaron answered, getting up from the fireplace and looking back at her, “never judge based on looks.” He then went back to his duties and she saw him nod his head in approval. “It’s done. Get the platter as close as you can Perrine.” Clostermann did as she was told and Aaron stabbed the meat with the forks and gently lifted it up and onto the platter. He positioned his right knee under the metal, using it as a resting point as he did so. Once it he was sure that it wouldn’t fall off, he gestured to the table and Perrine walked away, taking her seat. Divale got up from the floor and strolled over, the steam from the main course billowing everywhere. “Alright ladies,” he announced as he placed the platter on the table with a slight thump, eh cooked flesh the two and three quarter inches thick. “I present tonight’s special: Chort Steak.” He then moved his right index finger from the edges to the center and added, “Well, medium well, medium, medium rare, and mooing. To each their own.” He gathered up the carving knife and was about to make the first cut when Aurora tutted loudly, drawing his attention away.

“Grace.” she emphasized looking right at him. Humbled, Aaron gave it a split second thought and sat down next to Perrine, keeping the knife and one of the meat forks in his hands. Everyone clasped
their hands and Aurora began, “Bless us Oh Lord, protector of wayward souls in these times, to you, we give our thanks for providing the bounty we see before us this night and the friends and family to properly enjoy it with. In your name, amen.” Aurora prayed softly. All at the table joined the refrain and Aaron stood back up, brandishing his tools of the trade.

“So who wishes to have what?” he asked, looking about the table. A chorus of orders came out, fast and furious, yet Divale heard them all and began to cut into the steak, portioning generously and passing them onto the plates. He served himself last, taking the well done edges and sitting down. The bowl of potatoes was passed and all partook of its contents, supplementing it with mugs full of black tea from the samovar. He waited until everyone was a fair ways into their meal before asking Aurora, “Parochial taught?”

The elder sister shoved a piece of potato in her mouth and nodded, chewing and swallowing soon after. “Yes. We both were. How did you know?” she answered.

Aaron shrugged his shoulders. “I’m good at figuring people out.” he sheepishly replied. “However,” he added, furrowing his brow and bringing up his cup of tea, “what I can’t seem to wrap my mind around is how in the hell you wound up in these parts and managed to find a radio that me and my boys buried four years ago.”

Aurora finished up devouring her steak and pushed her plate aside. “I was sent out to investigate the damage the quake did to the surrounding area and to gauge whether we could use it as a location for another hidden base or emergency supply depot.” she explained.

“Do you normally go out alone?” Eila asked with concern.

“I originally set out with elements from the base garrison around two weeks ago. Had seven men with me. Things were great up until we crossed the border. Bastards were waiting in ambush. Fought them off, but everyone else got killed. The radio took a hit and was rendered inoperable. Using my communicator, I jury rigged it to sense any transmissions that were active at the time. I knew it was a long shot, but survivors still eke out a living in these lands believe it or not. For a good minute there was nothing, but then I heard this pinging and some otherworldly language coming from the quake site.” Aurora answered.

“You continued with the mission without any support or effective communications with HQ?” Sanya inquired. “Very dangerous.”

“When Commander Rall gives an order, you follow it.” Aurora retorted. “But anyways, as I was saying, I went over to the site. Place was in rough shape, but I easily triangulated where the signal was coming from and found this beat to shit radio that had clearly seen better days, nestled in a chuck of upraised earth. Weird as all hell, but I’m not one to question providence. Hacked it out with my spade and checked it out. It was just as damaged the one I had with me, but it still had life. I grabbed it and made my way to this house, for I had it marked on my charts for some time as a possible hideout. Got there and went about repairing it. It took some time to get things figured out and tested, but I managed to get it working better than it was. I turned the dial and started to hail HQ, but I kept getting nothing but static. Fought with it for a good few hours before those things started to show up.”

“Must have been attracted by the radio.” Perrine deduced. She looked over at Aaron and asked, “Can chorts pick up radio waves?”

“Not to my knowledge, but they do have keen hearing.” Aaron pondered out loud, crossing his arms over his chest. “What happened next captain?”
“I killed the radio and hid as they approached, growling and snarling up a storm. They lingered for a time and moved out. Tried it again the next day and the same thing happened. Decided that the radio was attracting them and left it outside. Saw their tracks in the snow and followed them.” Aurora answered.

“You followed a pack of chorts to their lair and didn’t get killed?” Aaron queried with a cocked eyebrow.

“As a young girl, I hunted wolves with our father while Eila and mother stayed home. I knew how to sneak up on them and read the winds. The lair was downwind and so was I. Ended up being a bear cave some ways past here,” Aurora illuminated. “I knew that it was suicide to go in there, so I primed whatever satchel charges I had left, threw them inside, ran off as fast as I could, and blew the cave up. Got back to the house and found that the radio was gone.”

“Gone?” Eila and Sanya asked simultaneously. “How?”

“There were another set tracks in the snow, that of a T-34 tank.” Aurora stated sincerely. Everyone in the room looked at each other in disbelief.

“You certain?” Sanya inquired, not sure she had heard correctly. “My people haven’t been past the Urals for years and they only come out when they have identified a threat that needs dealing with. I’ve never heard of them dispatching scout teams this deep in enemy territory.”

“Those were T-34 tracks lieutenant.” Aurora repeated. “Of that I’m sure.”

Aaron leaned forward and added, “This is where I’m a little bit skeptical. So, at that point, the radio was taken from you which means that the Russians somehow heard the transmission. Given the odd nature of it, I can understand why they went searching for it, yet if that was the case, why didn’t you try to follow those tracks and catch up with them? You had the chorts trapped in the cave momentarily so you had the opportunity.”

The captain looked down and put on a face that made it clear that she didn’t want to explain further. Eila sensed it and placed a hand on her sister’s shoulder. “We’re all friends here.” she simply said.

It made Aurora nod and she breathed in deep. “Russia is different now. They might have been our friends at one point, but the invasion of their homeland hit them hard. The entire population has become almost xenophobic, distrustful of outsiders, even if they’re on the same side. If I made my presence known, there was a good chance that they would’ve opened fire.”

Sanya shook her head violently from side to side. “I don’t believe that for a second. My people—”

“She’s telling the truth Sanya.” Eila interjected forcefully. “I’ve seen it happen up around Helsinki. The Russian’s that managed to get up north with the delegation bivouacked on the outskirts. The mayor thought it would be a good idea to send them aid. When they saw what was coming their way, they immediately went inside their tanks, moved out and threatened to shoot them, shoot civilians trying to help them, if they didn’t turn around.”

Sanya looked at her wingman and friend and saw no deceit present. Knowing that argument was futile, she adjusted her position in her chair and sighed. “Continue.” she murmured.

“I also didn’t try to get rescued because I thought that the radio would distract the chorts from me long enough to make a break for it.” Aurora went on.

“And I take it they didn’t leave.” Perrine said.
“No, they didn’t, and it boggled my mind as to why.” Aurora replied.

It was then that Aaron leaned back in his seat and looked at the ceiling deep in thought. For a few seconds, he searched for a plausible explanation and then his eyes flashed, the eureka moment had come. “Chorts have a well developed sense of smell. They can pinpoint the exact location of a dollop of limburger cheese twenty five miles away. One of the scents they absolutely go crazy for is blood. Puts them in a frenzy like sharks.” Aaron pointed out looking at Aurora.

“I’m not injured.” Aurora countered. “So how did they-” Her words died in her throat as another reason breezed through her head, the very one that Aaron had subtly implied. Juutilainen’s face grew beat red and she snapped, “What the hell does that have to do with it?!?”

Immediately, Aaron put up both hands, palms facing out in front of him in an attempt to restore calm. “I’m the expert on these things. Given the order of events, it’s the only logical reason why they stayed for as long as they did.” he slowly elaborated.

Eila, oblivious as to why they two were having an argument, spoke up. “There’s no need to get angry you two. All Aaron said was-” Then it hit her too and everyone else around came to the conclusion at the same time. “Oh.” she muttered, cursing herself for not recognizing it sooner. “Sorry.”

“Regardless,” Aaron remarked, cutting another piece of steak from the mass still remaining on the platter, “we’re standing and they’re not and that’s all that matters.” He lifted the meat onto his plate and asked Aurora, “So how did you know who I was?”

“My unit, the 502nd, has close ties to the 507th.” the captain answered curtly, still smarting from the inside comment.

“Ah, Beurling.” Aaron figured, remembering the conversation he had with Wilma’s friends in the car.

“You are correct and she had plenty to say about you.” Aurora acknowledged.

“Any true to life?” Aaron queried, munching away at the outer edges of his second helping.

Aurora then bent off to the side and gazed under the table. “Seems to be.” she commented. Aaron crossed his legs reflexively and rolled his eyes. “Not well enough to cover the stench of chort blood.” Aurora pointed out.

“Then I’ll rectify that.” Aaron stated, pushing his chair out and getting up. He looked around and then regarded Sanya. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Of course she had to talk about that.” Divale’s mouth dropped open in indignation. “I washed.” he protested.

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“Aaron simply stared at her. You’re fucking kidding me right? Don’t tell me I have to go hunting for the buried outhouse or set up shop with my spade. “Of course you didn’t.” Aurora said, getting up from her chair as well. She walked over to the right side of the fireplace and ran her left hand along the mortared cobblestone. Divale heard a click as something was triggered from some unknown location and soon, a section of the wall in front of the captain rose up, revealing a dark passage way, a spiraling gently sloping path made of polished rock. “The owners had it hidden the whole time.”
Aurora then picked up a log from the wood pile and shoved one end of it into the fire. After twisting the wood for a few seconds, she pulled it back out and held it in front of her, the tip burning like a torch. “Come on and I’ll show you.” Curiosity overtook the group and they followed Eila’s sister down into the depths of this secret commode. They made turn after turn as they traveled, the flames of the torch flickering wildly, casting contorting shapes and shadows along the walls and floor. As they walked on the stone, their footfalls echoing throughout the space, Aaron began to notice that the area was getting warmer and more humid the more they went in. Very strange. Like being in an bathroom after someone had just taken a shower. What is this place? His thoughts continued to wander until they all came to a wide chamber, hot and wet with moisture that could be seen cascading down the natural rock walls. Bubbling liquid and the hissing of steam could be heard. Aurora then placed the torch down in a section of the wall that looked to have been hollowed out and suddenly, the entire area was alight with witchfire blazing away in other niches just like that one. The magical illumination revealed a massive cave with a low ceiling. All was in a haze from the steam rising from a large pool of water, clear to the point where one could see the bottom. A small pathway continued on towards another section with three separate entrances.

“A hot springs under the house?” Sanya asked in wonder.

“That it is.” Aurora stated, turning around and regarding the entire group in triumph. “The first night I was here, I slept near the fireplace. Woke up during the evening and found that I was still warm. The fire I had made was dying, yet I was fine. I put two and two together and began to try to see what was causing this. I’ll admit that my hand grazed the hidden button as I got up and here we are, the best bathroom anyone can get in Russia. So who has to go?” Aaron raised his hand as did Perrine and Sanya. Aurora then pointed to the left and rightmost entrances on the far side and explained, “Girls. Boys.” Nodding in thanks, the soon to be relieved individuals began to stroll on over. Clostermann and Litvyak all went into their entrance, but Aaron went in the middle, causing Aurora to call out, “Where do you think you’re going.”

Aaron turned around and proclaimed, “This is the mens room.” With that, he disappeared inside. Aurora chuckled and looked over at her sister. “He’s a piece of work isn’t he?” she asked.

“Oh you have no idea.” Eila replied. “Out of all the people I’ve met, Aaron Divale is perhaps the most unique and possibly the most eccentric.”

“Pretty handsome too after a fashion.” Aurora quipped, prompting Eila to whip her head around. “Aurora!” she exclaimed. “Really?!”

“Well, I can tell you think the same about him.” Aurora pointed out with a smile.

Eila looked down at the ground and blushed a tad. “True, but-”

Aurora leaned in and asked, “But what? Not your type?” Eila tried to explain to her elder sister that Aaron had a lover and it wouldn’t be appropriate to make a move, but nothing came out as the figures of Perrine and Sanya popped out of the entrance way, content and happy. “If anyone wants a bath, hop right in. The water’s fine.” She began to remove her clothes piece by piece, not caring a wit if anyone saw her naked. When she took off the last of her clothing, she gently placed her left foot into the pool and sank into the water, sighing in pleasure as the warmth took her into its embrace.

“I could use a bath considering how long its been.” Clostermann acknowledged as she took off her uniform top. Sanya looked over at Eila and gestured to the hot spring. Her wingman nodded and the witches soon had their clothes off and were in the water within a minute.
“This is paradise.” Sanya murmured, eyes closed and smiling.

“No kidding.” Perrine answered, leaning back and letting the water go up her neck. “Thanks for showing us this place Aurora.”

“You’re very welcome.” Aurora replied. She then looked around and furrowed her brow. “He’s been in there a long time.”

“Maybe he needed to go as well?” Eila offered meekly.

“He’s probably staying inside, giving us our privacy.” Perrine countered.

“Why?” Aurora inquired. “Is he some sort of a prude?”

Before Closternmann could explain, Aaron’s voice came ringing loud and clear from his respective entrance way. “He just likes to be respectful and mind his own business.”

“Sounds like a piss poor excuse to get out of being embarrassed.” Aurora remarked. “Why don’t you come out and join us? You are a part of the group after all. Or do I have to pull rank?”

“Good luck using your rank to pull me in there captain.” Aaron stated. “You’re not the first to try and you won’t be the last to fail.”

Aurora then hatched a scheme and mocked, “Are we a little chicken there master sergeant?”

A second went by and she smiled. That struck a nerve I’m sure.

“What did you say?” Divale queried with more than a hint of foreboding in his voice.

“You heard me.” the elder Juutilainen shot back. “Furthermore, I’ll go and say that the man who went out and killed four chorts topside has less brass than me.”

“Then let’s compare.” Aaron proclaimed and within a split second, smoke billowed from the entrance way, curling with haste towards the hot springs. Aurora’s feeling of success in having goaded the man to action soon dissipated like the rising steam from the water as the mist came roaring in like a tsunami. Unease overtook her and she pressed herself against the rock as the fog rested above the water at the furthest side away from the witches. It seemed to mesh with the steam and vanished into thin air. More bubbles started to come up through the spring, appearing on the surface in droves before exploding with a dull blub. However, each time that happened, mist began to swirl around and around, coalescing into a semi solid mass resembling a human torso. Moments went by, and the color of flesh appeared along with the scars, eyes, muscles, and hair of Aaron Divale, his molten bronze colored orbs staring right at Aurora. “You look a little pale there captain.” he uttered with a smile. “Did your time take that much out of you?”

Eila sucked in her breath as her sister overcame her initial shock and put on a stern face. Aurora leaned forwards and declared, “Big words from a big man oh so far away from danger.” she goaded. “Come on over and say that to my face.” Aaron cocked his head to the side like a dog, trying to figure out what his master is saying and sank beneath the water like a crocodile only to come back up a moment later, standing at full height. Water, clear as crystal, ran down his frame as he wiped the moisture from his face and slicked his short hair back. Slowly he walked forwards, keeping his eyes fixed on a point far behind the witches who watched him advance. Aurora marveled at the sight, the sheer physicality of the man, and scooted over a tad to give him a seat next to her, causing a chain reaction in Perrine who moved further away. In time, Aaron set himself down between the captain and lieutenant, his unnaturally high body heat adding to the steam clouds coming off the water.

“As I was saying,” Divale began again, looking right into Aurora’s eyes, “you look tired. How has it
“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” Aurora answered, her eyes looking over him, his muscles and his scars. She then regarded his eyes and cocked her head to the side. *He doesn’t wander with them. Very strange for a man in these circumstances.* “You sure you’re not a prude?” she asked again.

“Just respectful of my friends and my friend’s friends.” Aaron replied, facing forward and looking up at the low gray stone ceiling.

“An officer and a gentleman.” Sanya stated.

“Let me ask you something,” Aurora said, moving closer to Aaron and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Do you normally accept dares? You didn’t have to come over here.”

“I know,” Aaron admitted, “but I don’t like being seen as afraid and weak so I went and did it.”

“Gets you in trouble constantly.” Perrine pointed out. “You shouldn’t have to feel obligated to do something you don’t want to do just to save face.”

“Speaking of face,” Aurora quipped as she moved in front of Aaron, keeping her body under the water so as to not expose herself. He kept his eyes riveted to her own as she watched her, maneuvering his legs to shield himself. “You have a pretty nice one yourself.”

“Aurora.” Eila groaned. “Come off it, he’s-”

“Just talking with me about sweet nothings, now hush you.” her sister retorted with a pointed right index finger.

“If you think my face is good looking now, you should’ve seen me when I was younger. According to some, I was an absolute darling.” Aaron illuminated.

“I disagree.” Aurora opined. “You’ve seemed to have aged well, despite the occasional gray hair I see up there.”

“Don’t think this as a come on,” Aaron brought up, “but how old are you?”

“Just turned twenty late last year. And you?” Aurora riposted.

“Old enough to know that I would be making a mistake.” Aaron flatly replied.

At first Aurora was taken aback by such a bold declaration and her temper flared for a quick moment until she then realized why he said it. *So that’s what Eila tried to tell me. Oh Aurora you’ve fucked up.* She put on a shamed face and back away, head downcast and to the side. “I’m sorry.” she said sincerely. “I didn’t know you had a lover.”

Aaron brought up his right hand and shook it side to side, letting her know that she did no harm and that it was water under the bridge. “It’s alright Aurora.” he assured. “Most don’t know about it anyway.”

“Yet you keep it a secret.” Aurora countered, regarding him again. “If you love her in return, why hide it?”

“I do, but many wouldn’t understand the nature of our relationship given the circumstances. That is why I protect that nugget of information. It’s not to deceive, but to protect.” Aaron explained.

“Please keep it a secret.” Eila pleaded. “He’s deserving of this woman and would be devastated if he
lost her.”

Aurora nodded. “I will and I’ll say no more about it.” She looked down at her hands and frowned. “Bah, I’m starting to prune up. I’m heading on up and getting some shut eye.” With that, she moved to the edge and hiked herself up onto the stone, Sanya, Eila, and Perrine following her. Clostermann was the last to get out of the water and as she moved away, she noticed that she didn’t hear any footsteps behind her. Curious, she turned around and saw that Aaron was still in the hot springs, looking down at the water as if deep in thought.

“You coming?” she asked him, getting him to suddenly jar back into reality with a twitch of the neck.

Divale kept looking away as he replied, “I’m going to sit here for a while and relax. Need to soak longer to get this chort blood off me.” Perrine feigned contentment and continued on her way until she got past the curve in the passage leading back up to the house. She doubled back and slowly positioned herself in the shadows.

I hate doing this to you Aaron, but I feel that something isn’t right with you.

Carefully, Clostermann peered back into the chamber just in time to see her wingman shake his head sadly from side to side. Despite the mists of vapor around him, she could barely make out a single tear fall from his cheek, but instead of it being the color of the water, it was a xanthous hue. She stifled a gasp as she then realized why Aaron had stayed behind, the reason why he wanted to be alone. She’s coming out, collecting on that deal. The yellow drop fell from the edges of Divale’s face and ploked into the pool without a sound. The moment it struck the surface, it began changing the color of the liquid around it, like a vial of iodine being poured into a water tank to purify the contents. It spread out and out, encompassing a small area three feet away from him before suddenly shrinking into a human sized parcel. Bubbled started to come up, a roiling torrent of them, heralding the arrival of the demonness. A wet clump of venom green hair came up followed by the sallow face and onyx black eyes of Ismenoth, who stood up from the pool, revealing herself to the world, stretching her arms and legs out in front of Aaron, like some sort of striptease performer.

“Ahhh.” she cooed, flexing her arms and rubbing the joints in her knees and hands. “It feels so good to be free of that confining space within you.”

“What can I say,” Aaron meekly reasoned with a sly smile, “I had to let the luggage out sometime.”

Ismenoth glared at him and walked right up to where he sat. She leaned over and gently slapped the right side of his face with her left hand. “Don’t be mean now,” she scolded, the fleshy impacts echoing throughout the empty space, “I helped you out after all.”

“In hindsight, I probably could’ve taken them on with just my friends backing me up.” Aaron admitted.

The fiend sat down in front of him now, the aroma of her skin mingling with that of the heated water. “Yeah right, and Notre Dame was a fluke.” she mocked, bringing up that sore spot in her mind again. Then she turned around in the water and positioned herself right against him, nesting in his lap like a cat does its favorite spot on the crown of a sofa. Her eyes closed as she let his warmth heat the icy cold core of her heart and smiled. “Best seat in the joint.” she murmured. Ismenoth’s eyes then opened again and looked around, gazing at the ceiling, the misty steam, the bubbles, everything. “I’ve missed being out and about. Less crowded, more diversity in the color palette, more to experience and enjoy.” she absentmindedly stated. Aaron felt her body twirl in place and saw his inner demonness face him, wrapping her legs around his midsection. He could feel her lower body rub against him and it made him shudder. “What I didn’t enjoy was that Juutilainen slut pushing herself onto you like she owned you.” Ismenoth fumed, her face angry and eyes flashing. “You belong to me and no one will come between you and I.” She paused and put her right index finger to
her lips, thinking about something before grinning mischievously from ear to ear. “Come to think of it, that’s a nice little mental image. Maybe we can try her on for size later? She’ll call you master and me mistress.”

“In your dreams.” Aaron deadpanned.

“Demons don’t dream.” Ismenoth retorted. “We achieve.”

Aaron whiffed the air and commented, “Too bad you can’t achieve bathing once in a while.”

The demonness then wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and pulled him closer to her. “You’re right.” she said lustily. “I’ve been a dirty girl. Maybe you could help me with a good deep cleaning?”

“And risk becoming as wizened as a walnut? No thank you.” Aaron denied, placing emphasis at the end.

Defeated, Ismenoth then asked, “Then a hug then? For old times sake?” she pleaded, batting her eyes. Inwardly groaning, Divale held her, his revulsion evident to Perrine who still watched silently from her spot near the passageway. She saw the foul entity that plagued him placed her head in the crook of his left shoulder and nuzzle his neck. Suddenly, her eyes opened and stared right at her. Closterrmann didn’t move, didn’t breathe, and kept her heart as calm as possible. However, her attempts failed as Ismenoth mouthed the words, “I see you.” It was too much to bear, and the lieutenant high tailed it out of there. Seeking to prevent Aaron from discovering that he was being spied upon, Ismenoth dumbed down his magic a tad to take away some of his preternatural hearing, muffling Perrine’s frantic footfalls. After a few seconds, she went back to closing her eyes and getting lost in her dark thoughts. Wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise later on. Luck was on your side again Frenchie, but make no mistake you meddlesome bitch: It will run out much sooner than you think. He may have forgiven you for what you tried to do to him, but I haven’t, and you will know my displeasure through him.
The journey takes the quintet to Vorkuta, so tantalizingly close yet so far. Sanya picks up a substantial Neuroi presence within the town, a nest, and resolves to destroy it. During the infiltration, they find unexpected survivors who tell them that help is on the way. A frantic running battle ensues and the enemy is defeated, but not without dealing a near fatal blow. Russian reinforcements arrive and take them into custody. At Salekhard, a reunion takes place, but as one relationship comes together again, another threatens to break.

Chapter XXXVI: Pravda

It may not have been the first country I’ve been to, but Russia is probably the most beautiful land I’ve ever seen, truly worthy of the epithet ‘Motherland’. She nurtures, she feeds, she protects, just like a kind parent should. However, like all guardians, there is a side of her that comes out if you cross her, one that punishes the unwary and foolish mercilessly and harshly. Beautiful and deadly, looks that kill, maybe that’s all this world is deep down. Thankfully, as the saying goes, what doesn’t kill you makes you that much stronger.

Diary Entry July 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1940

Hacking one final time did the trick as Aaron managed to gather enough force within to expel the last of the blood from his stomach, a long off color red stream that splashed into the white snow, the heat burrowing into the powder and staining it with crimson. Tear welled up out of the sheer pressure of the heave and they started to sting as the cold acted quickly to freeze them making his situation that much more painful. He spat the last flecks of blood from his mouth, his palette moistened with his own vitae and tasting of raw salty steak, and wiped his eyes and mouth with a rag that he took from the house, now many miles away. A crunching sound made him turn around and he saw Perrine there, standing watch. He threw the rag to the ground, it’s purpose fulfilled and asked, “Does she want me to continue at the pace I’m going?”

Clostermann shrugged and answered, “Wish I knew Aaron. She’s been pushing really hard to get over the Urals by nightfall so I wouldn’t hold out that much hope for relief.”

“Well let’s talk to her and see.” Aaron decided, kicking up some snow in an attempt to cover up his mess. It took a few swift boots to manage it as the wind picked up and blew most of the fruits of his hard work away. However, it didn’t last long and Divale buried his vomit quickly and walked right up to and past Perrine, his wingman following him as he sought out Sanya. They went over a small hill and looked at their surrounding area yet again. The Urals, the mountains that separated West from East, stood tall and majestic in the distance, roughly thirty five miles away, making them look so small in comparison. Much closer than the range in the back drop was what looked to be a large town within a triangle of lakes, it’s surfaces frozen and covered in snow. A river ran through it, though much of it couldn’t been seen due to the number of buildings that populated the town. It bore the scars of war everywhere, the cored husks of highrises and the dips of craters hidden under the
thick layer of white.

“Strange that a place like this would get hit by the Neuroi this close to the Arctic Circle.” Perrine stated.

“From a logistics perspective yes.” Aaron agreed, trudging along. “There are practically no people up here worth fighting through, no important targets that need to be dealt with. However, the lack of personnel and military presence was probably what made them strike this place to begin with. Easy pickings and nothing to impede the advance elements so they could skirt around the northern reaches of the Urals, swoop right in, and crush the Russians from behind. That’s what I would do.”

“Thank God you’re not on the opposite side then.” Clostermann replied.

Aaron regarded her and he saw Perrine look away quickly, as if she couldn’t bear looking at him. 
Now that’s strange. “You alright?” he inquired.

Clostermann was about to open her mouth to say something before the voice of Eila called out over his communicator, “Come here quick! Sanya’s picking up chatter!”

Aaron whipped around and high tailed it as fast as he could back to the main gathering point where he had to excuse himself after the last expenditure of magic, Perrine moving quickly behind him. His legs propelled him forward taking him down the small hill and made a right around a clump of pine trees that resembled stunted bushes rather than the tall conifers they were. There, Sanya, Eila, and Aurora all huddled, looking up at the pair as they approached, their weapons all resting in the snow alongside them. “Any idea if it’s friendly?” Perrine asked, huffing a tad as they squatted down next to her friends.

Sanya concentrated and furrowed her brow, using her magic to listen in on the communications. “It’s a cluster fuck of signals coming in every which way.” she reported, singling out certain channels and enhancing them within her aura. “There is a channel from Russian military units somewhere over the Urals. Can’t exactly pinpoint it.”

“Probably using a jammer.” Eila suggested.

“It’s causing all sorts of hell for me, bouncing signals every which way. Can’t really tell them apart.” Sanya went on. She sighed, ending the magic and looked over at the rest of the group before added grimly, “To make matters worse, Eila and Aurora say they’ve found a massive Neuroi presence within the town.” Litvyak gestured to Aurora and the captain nodded.

“From what we’ve gathered, this place is called Vorkuta and served as the forward most Arctic airfield for Russian witch squadrons before it fell. We have small patrols of Legionary doing circuitous routes, occasionally stopping within alleyways to change up the pace. Haven’t seen any of the heavy hitters, but I’m sure they’re lying somewhere within.” Aurora stated.

“We also believe that these random stops are anything but.” Eila illuminated further. “It almost looks like they’re actively searching for something or someone.”

“Survivors?” Aaron inquired with a cocked eyebrow. “In this environment?”

“It’s not that unheard of.” Sanya explained. “During the retreat from Moscow, I kept on getting morse codes from underground hideaways all over the place. While yes it’s hard for me too to imagine people surviving this long in such a hostile environment, the possibility is still there.”

“How many did you see?” Perrine asked Eila.
“We saw around twenty of them.” Eila replied. “Too small to be a scout force.”

Clostermann put two and two together and came to the same realization that everyone else did earlier. “So we’re dealing with nest then.” she murmured, fear in her voice.

“We have the option of skirting further south.” Aaron suggested, waving his right hand at that cardinal direction, clearly not wanting to engage.

“I’ve thought about that.” Sanya admitted, crossing her arms over her chest. “However, this is the shortest and most dependable route through the Urals for over a hundred miles. Plus, I’m not going to allow this nest to produce units that raid and slaughter my people.” She reached down and picked up her Fliegerhammer, wiping off the loose snow from the barrel. “We’re going in, slow and low, and we’re going to destroy this nest.”

“But Sanya, we don’t have the support or firepower for that!” Perrine protested as Sanya started to turn away.

The lieutenant turned around for a brief second and flatly countered, “What do you think he is?”

Aaron visibly grimaced and shook his head. And this is how shit gets complicated. Standing up, he took up his machine gun and blew through the trigger guard, snowflakes flying out or melting upon contact with his hot puke reeking breath. He placed on hand on Perrine’s right shoulder and assured, “We’ll be alright. I’m sure they have assessed the risks and have a plan to get into the town without being seen.”

“We do.” Eila confirmed, hefting her MG42. “Can you get us in with your magic?”

“I’d rather not given how much I’ve used earlier but I’ll do it if ordered.” Divale said, swallowing the sour taste of stomach acid and bile that still coated his teeth and putting on his spectacles.

“You might not have to.” Aurora pointed out. “A mile northeast of here is a railway hub that lead south into the town. During the time me and Eila spent in Vorkuta, the enemy didn’t once venture beyond the inner streets of the town square. We can use the low set tracks and the rail cars to screen our movements.”

“Good idea captain.” Sanya congratulated. “Let’s move out and get this job done.” With that, the quintet all fell in and made a beeline for the spot that Aurora talked about. The barely before noon sun was shining overhead, time to time shrouded by the partial cloud cover, casting the white world in a shade of gray. Wind was practically nonexistent, making everyone thankful that they didn’t have to suffer again what they experienced at Titran. It took barely forty minutes to navigate through the frozen world to a small rail station on the outskirts of Vorkuta, a structure that was remarkably intact and well preserved despite the conditions. The rail lines were covered in several inches of snow, but the lay of the land formed a natural depression of roughly four feet. It was the perfect cover, allowing just their heads to be seen, or in the case of Aaron his head, shoulders, and a small portion of his upper chest. Long red painted wooden rail cars either rested upon the rails or were on their sides, toppled by forces unknown. Many were cracked open like eggs, the effects of the cold doing its work on the unprotected rail cars with their contents, if they could be seen with any degree of accuracy through the snow, strewn about. “Watch where you step people.” Sanya warned, pointing out the areas nearest the ruined transports. “There’s no telling what they carried. Mind your surroundings and point out anything suspicious.”

“Copy.” Perrine sounded off, not wishing to suffer a repeat of what happened to her almost a month ago. Go slow Clostermann and everything will be okay. She held out her Bren and gingerly stepped along the rail line, going toe first like a prospective swimmer checking to see if the water was fine.
Aaron, knowing why she was doing things that way, graciously went ahead of her in a few long strides, grinding his feet into the snow and twisting, allowing her a safe frame of reference. She thanked him with a curt nod and he returned it. A slight breeze picked up and Aaron turned into the wind, squinting his eyes as he scanned the ground. Memories of years gone by wafted through his head. Here, searching for landmines so he and his men could recover enough explosives to make grenades of their own, and there, throwing them like frisbees at ground targets from high above as Berlin burned to the ground block by block. Christ almighty, just thinking about that firestorm makes me warm. I'll never forget those fires for as long as I live, not to mention those that were left behind.

“Hey you.” a voice called out to him, breaking him out of the shadows of the past. Aaron whipped his head to the right and saw Aurora right next to him, somehow keeping pace stride by stride despite the height difference and the 75mm cannon she carried.

“What’s on your mind captain?” Divale asked, still moving forward and sidestepping a clump of snow capped mounds.

“I want to apologize for what I did yesterday.” Aurora answered. “It was inappropriate and I should’ve known better. I’m sorry if I made you-”

Aaron put up his right hand, palm raised up and waved it as if saying hello. “Don’t worry about it.” he said. “I’m somewhat of a curiosity, a fact that I’ve come to accept.”

“Still, doesn’t make it right though.” Aurora pointed out.

“Water under the bridge.” Aaron countered. “There’s no time in a lifetime to feel sorry for oneself. I get it all the time.”

“Do you?” Aurora asked.

Aaron thought about it and, deciding to inject some levity into the conversation, inquired, “This a trick question?”

At first Aurora was confused, but the double entendre soon became apparent and she chuckled. “You want it to be?”

“That is the question.” Aaron stated, sounding more like a Shakespearean actor quoting Hamlet.

“You like jokes huh?” the captain queried in almost a mocking voice. “Try these on for size.”

Eila’s voice came over the comms, groaning like a rusty door hinge. “Oh no, not the bad jokes again.”

“Can it Illu.” Aurora politely snapped. “We’re going to engage in a battle of wits.”

“Just keep it down and civil.” Sanya ordered.

“Alrighty then.” Aurora relayed. She regarded Aaron, who was eagerly anticipating the clash and began, “A bold robber stole a toilet from the local police station. When asked by the press if they had any leads, the police chief responded, ‘We have nothing to go on’.”

Nodding in approval, Aaron retorted, “Accountants vary their normally speedy service in relation to the clients size. The smaller the size, the harder it is get a hold of one.”

“Scientists are looking for a larger test group to better study the effects of obesity.” Aurora recited.
A roguish character goes into a bar and asks the bartender on duty where the bathroom is. The bartender points down the hall and says to him, ‘It’s the one with the sign Gentleman on it, but don’t let that deter you.’” Aaron offered.

“Nice one. You’re mother is so stupid that she returned a puzzle to the store from which she bought it because it was in pieces.” Aurora jabbed.

“You’re going there now eh? Now that’s precious, but this one will take the cake here. You’re mother is so fat that when after God said ‘Let there be light’, he added solemnly, ‘Please move out of the way ma’am’.” Aaron fired home with a smile. The joke made Aurora laugh hard, erupting like Mount Etna on a really bad day. Even Perrine, who normally found such things tasteless, hooted a tad.

“Aaron?” Sanya asked over the comms, killing the laughter in an instant. “I need you to come here and take a look at this.”

“Where are you?” Divale radioed back, cursing himself at getting so carried away with the conversation that he’d lost track of her and Eila.

“About fifteen feet up and inside an overturned rail car with the number 626 on the side. Can’t miss it.” Eila reported. Aaron quickly looked up and around the snowscaped railway and eyed the 626 rail car, the numerals burned into the wood by a large branding iron. He moved up with haste, Perrine and Aurora bringing up the rear. The car was shorter than the rest, but in probably the worst condition out of the ones they passed for the wood was heavily cracked and shattered in spots. However, as Aaron got closer, he noticed that the normally straight lines of clean breaks were jagged and uneven in parts. *Mother nature doesn’t do that, a hatchet does.* He found an opening and maneuvered around, making sure that if there was any foul play on the other side that he was ready with his machine gun. Thankfully, the only ones on the other side of the entrance were Sanya and Eila, standing near a pallet of packing crates that had landed upside down. Across from them, another hole was found in the rail car, featuring the same oddly roughed up angles. Most of the interior was bare save for the overturned pallet and a few random crates here and there, the planks broken or ripped up with force judging from the bent nails jutting out. Snow drifted in with the most subtle of wind gusts through every opening, rimming the sites with powder. Sanya looked at him and gestured to a crate she was standing near. Divale looked at the container and understood in a heartbeat why he was summoned. One of the nails glistened a color that wasn’t steel silver, but crimson red. He reached out and ran his left index finger over it. The cold had made it stick like glue, but his high body heat melted some of the coating off and Aaron brought his hand back up to his face and sniffed while rubbing it between his index and thumb. *Hot sand. That’s blood for sure.*

“Thinking what I’m thinking?” Sanya inquired.

Aaron nodded. “We aren’t alone out here and this someone had a real nasty accident. Going by the footprints, we’re dealing with a young child or a midget. Either way, their blood trail will lead us to their hideout.” he stated almost matter of factly.

“Then lead on.” Sanya ordered, hefting her rocket launcher. “We’ll back you up.” Aaron moved through the railcar and out the other side, keeping his head at a small angle as to give him the best view possible in picking up the tracks and watching his twelve o clock. He moved within the small
prints as best as he could to muffle the crunch of powder that sounded like cracking knuckles. Everyone else did the same, though Aurora and Eila moved out along the wings, looking out for debris. Divale’s breathing slowed and he concentrated, listening for the slightest unnatural sound as he eyed the bread crumb like blood trail. *Getting the bad end of a hammer would be enough to make anyone cry or hasten their breathing.* They only needed to walk for around three minutes before the tracks lead the group to a fallen water tower, the metal dome crashed open like the Liberty Bell. The fissure was wide enough to let someone small through. *Jackpot.* He turned around and used his right hand to point at his chest with his thumb, his eyes with his index and middle, and then over at the water tower with his index. All nodded silently, understanding that Aaron was telling them that he was going to scout the location alone. The witches spaced themselves out by twos, Aurora with Perrine on the right flank while Sanya and Eila covered the left. As he ventured towards the makeshift shelter, Aaron’s ears could pick up a small grunt of pain from within. *That’s a kid for sure.* He quickly fished around in his right front parka pocket and pulled out his spectacles. *Don’t want to go scaring people to death.* Placing them on his face, paying the cold metal frames that seared like a hot knife across his temples and around his ears no mind, he came within a few feet from the entrance. Hunkering down, Aaron placed his back to the metal and breathed in deep, looking over at his friends, who gave him the okay to proceed with curt nods. *Please God don’t let me fuck this up.* With a quick twist, he moved in on the entrance, turning his body to face it.

His eyes adjusted quickly to light and within the dimly lit gloom was the form of a small child, a boy, probably no more than ten years old, dressed in thick patchwork clothes, boots, and cradling his right hand. Despite the pressure the lad was applying to the wound, vitae still seeped through his fingers and tears of pain rimmed the tired eyes of a face so pale and gaunt that it looked malnourished as his life force pooled in a frozen can bottom sized puddle. The darkening of the hideout made the child look up with a gasp of surprise. He immediately scooted to the far right and pulled out a small knife with his left hand, tucking the injured on under his left armpit, sending snow in all directions. Aaron sensed the moment and placed his weapon on the frozen ground, barrel pointed away from both of them. He put out both his hands, palms up, in front himself, trying to show the boy that he wasn’t a threat. “*Eto khorosho, syn. YA zdes’ ne dlya togo, chtoby prichinyat’ tebe vred, no chtoby pomoch’ tebe* (It’s alright son. I’m not here to harm you, but help you).” he said calmly.

“*Derzhis’ ot menya podal’she* (Stay away from me)!” the lad hissed, not believing the warlock for a second.

“*Oshtrafovat* (Very well).” Aaron acquiesced. “*YA ostanus’ zdes' togda* (I’ll stay here then).” He noticed the young boy wince as the rough cloth of his coat dug uncomfortably into his wound and added with concern, “*Eto vyglyadit plokho. Vam nuzhno lecheniye* (That looks bad. You need treatment).”

“*YA v poryadke (I’m fine).*” the frightened child shot back, lying through his teeth.

“*Khorosho, yesli ty kogda-nibud' peredumayesh* (Well, if you ever change your mind,)” Aaron began as he rummaged through his backpack. The boy eyed him warily as he pulled put a medical kit. “*YA pryamo zdes (I’m right here).”*

“*Kto ty? YA ne uznayu vas iz nashey gruppy. Vy s yuga? Chum? Mozhet Severnyy* (Who are you? I don’t recognize you from our group. You from the south? Chum? Maybe Severnyy)?” the child asked, each question coming out faster than the previous.

“*Menya zovut Aaron Diveyl i ya iz 501-go JFW v Duvre (My name is Aaron Divale and I’m with the 501st JFW over in Dover).”* Aaron answered.

“*Angliya (England)?*” the boy wondered, his left arm going lower as he contemplated the answer.
“Pochemu ty zdes (Why are you here)?”

“Moi druz'ya-ved'my i ya na missii ochen' vazhnogo (My witch friends and I are on a mission of great importance).” Aaron explained. “My mnogo puteshestvovali, i nam nuzhno preodolet' Ural. Odnako moy nachal'nik leytenant Sanya Litvyak khochet osvobodit' etot gorod ot Neyroyev, prezhdze chem sdelat' eto (We've traveled many days and need to get over the Urals. However, my superior, Lieutenant Sanya Litvyak wants to liberate this town from the Neuroi before doing so).”

“Belaya liliya (The White Lilly)?” he boy reverently breathed, scarcely believing what his ears just heard. “Ona zdes (She’s here)?” Aaron nodded and motioned to Sanya with his right hand to come over. Several seconds went by and eventually Russian met Russian when Sanya poked her head inside the crack. The boy dropped his knife and started to cry, not out of pain but happiness. “Bozhe moy, my vyzhivem. My sobirayemsya sdelat' eto (My God we’re going to survive. We’re going to make it),” he muttered. He then looked at them both and implored, “Zaydi vnutr' i perevyazi moyu ruku (Come inside and bandage my hand).” Both Divale and Litvyak hunkered down and squeezed inside. Sanya had the easiest time with it, but Aaron’s bulk made it well nigh impossible. In frustration, he grabbed the edges of the metal and bent them away like the key opener to a sardine can.

“Kak vas zovut (What’s your name)?” Sanya asked as Aaron got the opening wide enough for him to get inside.

“Pytor.” the lad replied. “YA iskala priapos dlya svoey gruppy, kogda popala v avariyu. Eto ya byl vinovat. YA otvel glaza ot raboty, potomu chto uslyshal shagi. Molchali i vyshli na druguyu storonu (I was foraging for supplies for my group when I had my accident. It was my fault. Took my eyes away from my work because I heard footsteps. Kept quiet and got out the other side).”

Which explains why we didn’t see or hear him. Smart.

“Pozvol' mne uvidet' tvoyu ruku (Let me see your hand).” Aaron asked. Pytor did so and Divale took a look at it. As he had assumed earlier, the wound was from the pry bar end, two marks right in the meat between the thumb and forefinger on the right hand, just underneath the webbing. They were fairly deep and would require some stitch work. “Tebe ponadobyatsya shvy, molodoy chelovek (You’re going to need stitches young man),” he explained, opening the medical kit. He pulled out a vial of antiseptic, a needle and spool of thread, gauze, and a clean bandage roll. Divale opened up the antiseptic and poured a bit onto the wound, causing Pytor to wince as the liquid did its work. After dabbing the moisture away with a piece of gauze, Aaron threaded his needle and ordered, “Ostavaysya na meste i bud' khrabrym dlya men (Stay still and be brave for me).” The young boy swallowed deep and placed the hilt of his knife into his mouth, ready to bite down if the pain got too much to bear. He nodded for Aaron to continue and the warlock began to sew the opening shut, moving fast like he was sewing up a tear in a pair of pants. Sanya watched him work and held Pytor tight as he bellowed like a steer during mating season, hearing the wooden hilt of the blade crack as he bit down hard and feeling the boy struggle to move his limbs in an attempt to make him stop. Blood welled up from the punctures, obscuring what was going on, but Aaron made do. “I've done enough of these to know what I'm doing and where I'm going. The first gap was closed and tied off within ten seconds and the second got patched up in fifteen. He then quickly placed gauze over the suture and bandaged the site up. “I s etim my zakonchili (And with that, we are done).” Aaron announced, clapping a hand on Pytor’s shoulder and smiling approvingly.

The Russian looked at his hand and smiled back in gratitude. “Vy skazali, chto byli chast'yu gruppy (You said you were part of a group).” Sanya recollected, letting him go. “Skol'ko yeshche tam (How many others are there)?”

“V nachale ikh bylo okolo trekhsot (There were around three hundred in the beginning).” Pytor
explained, his tone sad as he remembered those that weren’t around anymore. “Meneye sotni ostalos’ seychas. Bol'shinstvo pogiblo ot kholoda i nedostatka yedy (Less than one hundred remain now. Most got killed by the cold and lack of food).”

“Gde oni seychas? Ty mozhesh' otevtzi nas tuda (Where are they now? Can you take us there)?” Sanya inquired.

Pytor thought about it and stated, “YA mogu, no vy dolzhny soglasit'sya na dve veshchi. Vopervykh, mne nuzhno snachala pogovorit', prezhdye chem vstretit' kogo-to yeshche. Zatem vy dolzhny sdat' svoye oruzhiye Zakonodatelyu. Za predelami glavnogo vkhoda zapreshchayetsya strelkovoye oruzhiye, yesli u vas net razresheniya. Eto traditsiya (I can, but you have to agree on two things. The first is that I need to do the talking first before you meet anyone else. Then, you have to surrender your weapons to the Lawgiver. No firearms are permitted beyond the main entrance unless you have permission. It’s tradition).” He got up from the cold earth and started to make his way to the exit. “Eto nemnogo dal'she vozle zapravochnoy stantsii. Podpisyvaytes' na menya (It’s a bit further up near a refueling station. Follow me).”

The way to the hideout ended up being on the outside of the complex that Pytor described, the entrance cleverly disguised as a ruined T-34 tank turret. Upon opening the hatch, a long iron ladder lead down into a large tunnel that ran underneath the tracks. According to to him, the underground network was used to transport materials and supplies if the weather got unbearable. Judging from where we are, that would be nearly all the time. That was a good twenty five minutes ago and the five 501st members and their newly acquired guide were still traversing the tunnels. It was completely dark, the sole source of illumination being a flashlight that Pytor had took with him. Aaron’s eyes adjusted like a cat’s, the pupils widening to encompass and enhance the lit area. Knowing this, Sanya let him take point behind Pytor, who deftly navigated the pipe like it was his backyard. Divale took a look around and saw that the metal flooring was well worn by many a booted foot, bits of rust rimming the furthest edges. The air smelled like old cutlery being taken out of storage, that metallic tinge that one never forgets, yet it was clean and crisp. Now why is that I wonder? He tuned out the sounds of footsteps behind him and regarded Pytor, “The smell down hear is strangely pleasant for the most part.” he commented.

“These tunnels have little to no doors sealing them and run throughout the entire city.” Pytor answered, his English heavily accented. “That’s why it tolerable down here.”

“If that’s the case, how did you all remain hidden for so long from the Neuroi?” Aaron asked.

“They send patrols down here from time to time, but they’re not to bright in making themselves invisible down here. Moreover, their patrols go along select routes. Dodging them becomes child’s play, though the Lawgiver makes sure that we’re all ready to relocate in case something goes awry.” Pytor replied. He then made a quick right down a slightly thinner passage and immediately held out his hand behind him to the group, the signal for them to hold up. Turning around he said, “I’m going up and letting them know about you. Give me a few minutes.” Without waiting for a word, the lad then ventured deeper and disappeared into the gloom as if the darkness reached out and embraced him. Aaron looked back over his shoulder and saw the rest of his friends stand down.

“I don’t like the idea of giving up our weapons.” Aurora griped, patting her 75mm cannon.

“We don’t have much of a choice if we want to get in good with them.” Eila countered.

“You’d think that saving one of their own would be enough to convince them of our good intentions?” Aaron conjectured, also not too keen on surrendering his guns.
“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t.” Perrine stated plainly. “We can only hope that Pytor is better at talking than he is at prying open pallets.”

“And he did say that these tunnels lead to places far beyond this.” Sanya replied. “We can use these to avoid the topside patrols and infiltrate the nest from below.” She then saw the flickering of a flashlight from where Pytor vanished and stood at attention, her change in posture causing everyone else to do the same. In time, the boy appeared gesturing with his hand for them to follow him once more.

“Everything has been arranged.” Pytor declared proudly. “Remember what I said and all will be well.” Sanya looked at everyone and saw that they were all waiting for her to make the first move. Here goes nothing. She adjusted the grip on her Fliegerhammer, making sure that it was as far off to the side as possible, and proceeded to walk into the deeper into the tunnel. Eila fell in behind her, with Perrine, Aurora, and lastly Aaron taking up the rear. When the group was close enough, Pytor moved on, using his flashlight to guide them. After the quick right, there was a left followed by another right, a pattern that Litvyak knew from experience was meant to mask the appearance of light. The hard angles would capture any stray rays of illumination and prevent them from being seen from the major tunnel network. Smart hideout placement. Soon, a dull orange glow began to light up the area, making Pytor’s flashlight more of a nuisance than a perk. The boy realized this and shut it off with a click. Her nose picked up the smell of burning wood and if she concentrated hard enough, she could even hear the crackling of sparks as they leapt off the pyre.

Closer and closer they came until the dull glow became a shining beacon before a large expansive opening, like the one you’d find at the entrance of a theater with the wide room and the slight depression as you walked further on. It was made with brick, old manmade stone that had cracked in numerous places so bad that one would be amazed that it didn’t collapse. Side tunnels lead away from the main room, shrouded by thick dark cloth, presumably areas that served as makeshift sick rooms, bedrooms, restrooms, or some other accommodation. Inside was a large gathering of people, roughly fifty or so, huddled around old fuel barrels for warmth, the flames casting shadows up to the high ceiling. They looked ragged, worn, and emaciated, clear indications of the hardships they had suffered for many years. There were men and women, mostly older, no one looked younger than twenty, Pytor the sole exception to that rule. All were dirty, the faces streaked with dirt and grime from the lack of running water and everyone was dressed in thick wraps of tan fabric sewn haphazardly together along with caps, mittens, and holey boots that had bits of cloth shoved into the gaps. The inhabitants looked at the new arrivals with hope and fear when they saw that they were armed. Not a soul spoke, yet one of them gathered enough courage to separate themselves from the rest and strolled towards them. It was a man in his early thirties, dressed in a faded blue one piece work uniform, the front breast pocket hanging off and flapping like a dog ear every time he took a step. His back was straight, height a good 5’ 10”, and his gait measured, signs that he was once in a profession that prized such attributes. His fair blond hair was cropped short and the blue eyes were sunken in from lack of nourishing meals and rimmed with dark circles from lack of adequate sleep. The boots he wore were in great condition despite the environment and they barely made a sound as he came up to them, eyeing each one of them in turn.

“Are you the Lawgiver?” Sanya asked looking to set a good first impression.

“That I am.” the man answered. “My name is Maxim Andropov. I was once a postman for the mail service in town before the end came, a job that came with knowledge of the tunnel network that ran under the town. Came in handy when I helped get survivors down here. My son tells me that you are from England, is that correct?”

“Yes.” Sanya replied. “I’m Lieutenant Sanya Litvyak of the 501st JFW.” She turned and pointed at each of her companions and in turn gave their ranks and names. “These are Lieutenants Eila
Juutilainen and Perrine Clostermann. The ones bringing up the rear are Captain Aurora Juutilainen and Master Sergeant Aaron Divale. We mean no harm and will gladly honor the tradition.”

Andropov nodded and gestured to the nearest corner, the left, and Sanya placed her Fliegerhammer and her ammunition up against the wall. Eila placed her MG42 next to it and Perrine followed up with her Bren. Aurora begrudgingly surrendered her 75mm cannon, giving the former postman a dirty wary look as she did so. Aaron merely placed his guns in a neat stack and placed them a bit further away from the rest of the pile, leaving a gap between the two arsenals. Then, he strangely sat down in the vacant space, stretched out his long legs, and leaned back against the bricks.

Sanya turned red with embarrassment and tried to form an explanation that would make some sort of sense to Andropov, yet before she could do so, he started laughing softly. “Well, we did so no weapons beyond this point.” he chuckled. He regarded Litvyak and added, “It’s alright. You may all come inside and get warm.” He stepped aside and the quartet moved right along, eager to feel the warmth of a decent fire. Despite being complete strangers, the survivors graciously moved aside, giving them room to get closer to the fires. Maxim then turned his attention to Aaron who still was sitting outside the threshold like a dog waiting for its master to open the door for him. Divale watched him out of the corner of his eye as he walked up and stood in front of him on the opposite side of the tunnel.

“Neplokhaya ustanovka u vas zdes', moy drug (Not a bad set up you have down here my friend).” Aaron commented, looking up at him.

“My russkiye (We’re Russians).” Maxim simply said. “My obkhodimsya prakticheski chem ugodno (We make do with just about anything).” He cocked his head to the side and looked into his spectacled eyes, narrowing his own. After a few seconds, Andropov nodded. “YA slyshal o tebe, Aaron Diveyl (I’ve heard about you Aaron Divale).”

“Na dannyy moment mnogiye imeyut (At this point many have).” Aaron remarked with wry grin. “Po pravil'nym i nepravil'nym prichinam (For the right and wrong reasons).”

“Vstan', molodoy chelovek, i day mne posmotret', pravda li to, chto oni govoryat (Stand up young man and let me see if what they say is true).” Maxim politely ordered.

Though he didn’t have to, Aaron did as he was told and stood to his full height, looming half a head over his counterpart. In addition, he reached up to his face and lowered the glasses down the bridge of his nose, letting the Lawgiver see his true eyes. To his credit, Maxim stood his ground and gazed at them in wonder. “Kak vy dumayete (What do you think)?” Aaron asked, placing them back.

“YA chestno dumal, chto eti istorii byli propagandoy. Kakaya-to skazka o Baba Yaga (I honestly thought that the stories were propaganda. Some sort of boogeyman tale).” Andropov admitted.

“YA ne Baba Yaga (I’m not the boogeyman),” Aaron explained. “YA tot, kogo vy vyzyvayete, chtoby zashchitit' vas ot Baba Yaga (I’m the one you call to protect you from the boogeyman).”

“Togda, yesli eto tak, zakhodite vnutr' i pust' vse uvidyat (Then if that’s the case, come on inside and let everyone see).” Maxim suggested, gesturing with his head towards his people and Aaron’s friends. Divale looked in the general direction and saw his squadron mates standing by a burning barrel in the far corner of the room, Sanya giving him a look that made him think that she was somehow disappointed in him. He breathed in deep and nodded, letting Andropov lead the way. The pair moved into and through the room, the eyes of all staring at them both. But mostly at me. Aaron could see the look of fear in their eyes, an emotion that never seems to vary when people knew who and what he was. Domino said that in time perceptions will change about me, but I’m not so sure. As far as I’m concerned, fear will be a part of my life, either theirs or my own. Soon, he found himself near the little fire, but the Russians who were there discreetly moved way, leaving the group
by themselves. Maxim stayed with them and rubbed his hands, occasionally cupping them near his mouth and blowing into them as if it was some music instrument as the flames did their work.

“One of the benefits of living in a deserted town is that no one cares if you use your neighbors house for firewood.” he commented. “Still have to chisel the paint off though.”

“So how did you hear about me?” Aaron asked looking down at him.

“A few days ago, some soldiers came through, dropping off some supplies. They gave us an old radio and we turned it on, listening to the state broadcasts. One of them talked about a development far off west, something about a warlock dubbed “The Saint”. They said he could grow angels wings and use magic like a witch, with eyes that burned like molten steel. Two people were discussing about your recently declassified combat records and debating whether they could possibly be true or not.” Andropov answered.

“Oh they’re true Lawgiver.” Aaron declared. “Just ask my friends.”

“You said you had a radio?” Aurora inquired. “Was it old, like Great War old or maybe a bit after with all these dials and antennae?”

“Yes it was, why?” Maxim replied.

“Because that radio is one of the reasons why we came all the way out here in the first place.” Eila pointed out. “When did you turn it on?”

“The twenty seventh.” Andropov answered.

Sanya gave an audible gasp and moved right up to the former postman. “We heard a transmission during that night when I and my wingman here were engaged on the Norwegian coast, a song. Did you listen to it?” she anxiously asked him.

“That radio must’ve been pretty powerful to project a signal all the way out there.” Andropov marveled. “We kept it on low to give us some sort of ambiance down here, only turning it off when we all decided to go to bed. Pytor’s birthday was that day and we all celebrated well into the night and early morning. I was about to turn it off when a man came on, saying that he was about to play a piece with his piano, in memory of his witch daughter who went off to war many years ago. Curious, I stopped trying to turn it off and listened. Once he began playing, I was spellbound. Such beautiful music came through the speakers that I almost wept.” Sanya listened to Andropov’s story and she smiled inwardly. *So this is definitive proof that my father is alive! I knew it!*

“What kind of supplies did they soldiers give you?” Perrine pondered. “Do you get them often?”

“We had never received a drop before so you could only imagine my surprise when they arrived and simply gave us the stuff they were carrying, a feeling that escalated into anxiety when they said that there was a catch.” Maxim recollected.


“They told us that a small detachment from the main HQ over at Salekhard was coming here to liberate this area and that we would be part of the reclamation effort, acting as the vanguard.” Maxim explained. Everyone around him looked at him in disbelief, none more so than Aaron who was in utter shock.

“None of you are soldiers by the looks of it.” Aaron stated scornfully. “Yes, I see the spark of wanting to get even in their eyes, but if you all go out there and try to engage the enemy, it’s only
“This is our home master sergeant. It may not be much, but it’s all we got. In all our minds, it’s worth killing and dying for.” Andropov retorted. Aaron looked away from him, acceding the point.

“What kind of weapons do you have?” Aurora asked.

“We found a small cache of guns and ammunition from the rail cars and the northern airfield across the other side of town.” Maxim illuminated, pointing to a cloth covered entrance on the other side of the room. “Quite a few small arms and rifles. Not much in the way of automatics weapons or grenades, but we do have two machine guns. The soldiers gave us a decent amount of SVT-40s to supplement our firepower.”

“Awfully little to launch an offensive with.” Perrine remarked.

“Agreed.” Eila acknowledged. “When did they say they were going to arrive?”

Andropov pulled back his sleeve, revealing an old watch. “About an hour from now. We’ve been ordered to attack at least twenty minutes before they get here with the objective of distracting the enemy.” He looked at all of them in turn and leaned in. “I know that many will get killed in doing this.” he whispered. “Aaron is right in that it will be rough going for us so I was wondering if you all could help us.”

Without hesitation, Sanya announced in a low voice, “Yes we will. Start breaking up your people into groups and I’ll have mine act as leaders.” Maxim pressed his hands together in a silent gesture of thanks and immediately left the gathering to do as she commanded. She looked around at her friends and they all looked back at her. Deep down, Litvyak knew that she was putting them all at risk by helping them out, but there was no other option in her mind.

They need us. The main force is using them as meat shields to soften and distract the enemy. I just hope we can save as many as possible until reinforcements arrive.

“So where are we going?” Aurora asked, being the first to break the ice.

“We’ll see soon enough.” Eila muttered, gesturing over to the other side of the room. Everyone turned around and saw that Andropov was frantically pulling everyone up and out of the tiniest crevice and shadow and leading them to the small cloth covered hole in the wall where the weapons were stored. Speaking in quick bursts, he implored them to take a gun and handed out ammunition, making sure that there was enough for everyone. Aaron’s eyes happened to fall upon little Pytor waiting his turn in the line and he practically bolted over to him, causing several of those nearby to get out of his way. He seemed to hear someone calling out from behind him, but he paid it no mind, his focus fully on the child solider to be. No! Not him too!

The boy had just barely clasped his small hands around an old bolt action rifle, a weapon that was over half his height if one rested it. Pytor looked up at Divale, the warlock’s shadow completely engulfing him.

“Kak ty dumayesh’, chto ty delayesh’ s etim strelkom (What do you think you’re doing with that rifle boy)?” Aaron asked.

“YA sobirayus’ ispol’zovat’ eto i pomoch’ osvobodit’ nashu stranu (I’m going to use it and help liberate our country).” Pytor answered looking right up into his eyes without fear.

“Vy dazhe znayete, chto proizydet’ (Do you even know what’s going to happen)?” Aaron inquired in an almost disbelieving tone. When the child didn’t answer, he stared down at him and added, “YA skazhu tebe, chto proizydet’ (I’ll tell you what’s going to happen).” Divale stepped away and looked at everyone in the room, panning just his head and pointing at them all with his right hand. “V etot
moment my sobirayemsya i planiruyem shturm. Za nami glavnyy zal, kotoryy privedet nas k vragu. Bol'shaya chast' puti, veroyatno, ne pokryta imi, chto delayet nash progress bystrym. Vskore oni podberut nas, i kogda oni eto sdelayut, my budem atakovany so vsekh frontov. Yesli povezet, my doberemsya do gnezda, ne razdelivshis' ili ne razbivshis' na krovavyye kuski, ikh ne ostanetsya mnogo. Eto stanovitsya matematicheskim uravneniyem posle etogo Pytor (At this moment, we gather and plan for the assault. Behind us is the main concourse which will lead us to the enemy. Most of the way is probably not covered by them, making our progress swift. Before long, they will pick us up, and when they do, we will be attacked from all fronts. With luck we’ll be in a position to counter them, but eventually they will push us out and the body count will tick up. The further away our objective, the higher it gets with every step. If we make it to the nest without separating or shattering into bloody chunks, there won’t be many left. It becomes a mathematical equation after that Pytor).”

he boldly declared, drawing frightened looks from all present. “Kogda-to ya byl takim zhe, kak ty, zhelaya slozhit' zhizn' radi blaga, no ya ponyatiya ne imel, kak eti posledstviya razorvut menya na chasti v dal'neyshey zhizni. Ne delay etogo Pytor. Vy vse yeshche molody, ne zatronuty etim konfliktom. Ne idite po toy doroge, kotoraya u menya yest', inache vy nikogda ne soydetе s neye (I was like you once, willing to lay down my life for the greater good, but I had no idea how those consequences would rip me apart later on in life. Don’t do this Pytor. You’re still young, untainted by this conflict. Don’t go down the road that I have or you’ll never get off it).”

Pytor looked down at the ground and started to cry. “YA znayu, pochemu ty tak govorish (I know why you say that).” He then tilted his head up, the dirt on his face running down in lines from the tears. “Tochno tak zhe, kak vy znayete, chto ya ne mogu ostavat'sya v storone, poka moi druz'ya ukhodyat srazhat'sya. (Just like you know that I can’t stay away while my friends go off to fight).”

Aaron sadly shook his head, fighting back tears of his own. Damn this war for doing this to the young, filling them with delusions of glory! They don’t deserve this fate!

He whipped his head around and looked at Andropov. “V kakuyu gruppu on vkhodit (What group is he a part of)?” he demanded.

“Gruppa S (Group C).” Maxim hastily answered.

With his response, Divale then gazed at Sanya, who stood a small ways away with everyone else. She preempted what he was about to ask with a simple nod. I know you wish that I would let you have the choice, but quite frankly, I don’t give a damn. I’m not going to let him die.

Sanya led the way down the tunnel with her group, designated Group D, holding out the crude map that Maxim had procured for her, looking it over and checking to make sure that the landmarks were right. So far so good. The man really did know the insides of these passages better than the back of his hand. At the same time, she activated her magic, searching for any sign of the Neuroi nest. It was a vain hope for the network of tubular structures bounced the signals every which way, but it was worth a shot. Eila, the leader of Group B, came up next to her and looked down the way, squinting her eyes through the gloom. “Got anything?” she asked, panning to and fro with her MG42.

“Yes, a lot.” Sanya answered, furrowing her brow as her aetheric aura did its work. “I’ve got Neuroi signals all over the place. Few are above and some are way off beyond our position, but I can’t really get a bead on the nest. These tunnels are playing hell with my ability to detect them.” She suddenly had an epiphany and pressed the stud to her communicator. “Aaron? Come in.” she said into the speaker.
“Read you clearly lieutenant.” Aaron voiced back, his Group C on the right flank in a separate tunnel. “What’s up?”

“Have you ever had to destroy a nest during your travels?” Sanya inquired.

“Negative.” Aaron relayed, his response making Sanya shake her head in dismay. “However, considering that they adapt to changing circumstances, just like we do, I would make a bet that the best spot for them to seek refuge from prying eyes would be at a central location, giving them not just easy access to the rest of the tunnel network, but multiple routes for escape if necessary.” Eila thought about his theory and looked at the map in Sanya’s hands, tracing the pathways in her head. Central location would be almost at the hub, roughly two miles away from here. Looking over at her wingman, the two pilots stared at each other and silently came to the same conclusion. Best lead we have so why not use it.

“All groups, this is Litvyak.” Sanya proclaimed on the main channel. “We’re making for the central hub. It’s two miles away deep in enemy controlled territory. Do your best to avoid any conflict with the Neuroi, but if you can’t, try to be silent and quick about it. Group C will continue to anchor the right flank while Perrine and Aurora with Groups A and E respectively will press forward with the left.”

“And if we’re discovered?” Aurora queried.

“Then get ready for a fight.” Sanya simply replied.

“Just like Warsaw all over again.” Aaron grimly stated.

“Cut the chatter and hop to it folks. Good luck.” Litvyak curtly ordered and cut the link. Aaron listened as all the signals went offline and sighed to himself as he continued to lead the way, recollecting where to go from memory alone. Odds are high that we’re going to get discovered down here. If it was maybe a squad we’d have a decent shot, but this many? No way in hell. God this is going to be a repeat of those damned Polish sewers. Least there’s some room to maneuver down her, but not a whole lot of cover. This is going to be a mess. He turned and looked over at Maxim, who decided to join his group for Pytor’s sake as much for his own. As for the boy, he ordered him to stay in the center, surrounded by people. Less chance for you to get hurt when then bodies start falling.

“Privet (Hey).” Divale called over to Andropov, beckoning him to come up. When he did so, he asked in a low voice, “Eto tvoy syn (Is that your son)?”

“Net (No),” Maxim replied without any doubt in his voice, “no ya znayu, chey on syn. Yego roditeli byli Grotskimi, oba rabotali v administratsii. Znal ih dostatochno prilichenno, chto s tusovkami i vecherinkami i vse takoye. Oni umerli rano, kogda voshli «Neyroy». Snachala vragi atakovali voyennyye ob”yekty, v osnovnom aerodrom. Ne potrebovalo s mnogo vremeni, chtoby strest’ eto s litsa zemli, i zatem oni obratili svoye vnimanie na chto-libo pravitel’stvo. Popali v otkrytyuyu, ya vse eto videl. Ne bylo shansov (but I know who’s son he was. His parents were the Grotsky’s, both of them worked in the administration. Knew them decently enough, what with the get togethers and party meetings and all that. They died early on when the Neuroi came in. The enemy targeted military sites first, mostly the airfield. Didn’t take long to wipe it out and they then turned their attention towards anything government. Got caught out in the open, I saw it all. Didn’t stand a chance).” Andropov grimaced and added, “Nikogda ne bylo smelosti skazat’ yemu pravdu posle vsego etogo vremeni. YA prodolzhal govorit’ yemu, chto yego roditeli zhiby i zhdal, poka on prisoyedinit’sya k nim gde-to daleko, daleko ot etoy voyny (Never had the stomach to tell him the truth after all this time. I kept on telling him that his parents were alive and waiting for him to join them somewhere far away, far from this war).”
“Kak govoryat vashi lyudi: nadezhda, osnovannaya na lzhi, luchshe, chem otsutstviye nadezhdy (As your people say: Hope based on lies is better than no hope at all).” Aaron said, accepting why the former postman did what he did. Then he heard a hard step further up the way, around a slanting corner leading towards the left. Immediately, he hunkered down and raised his right hand in a fist, the signal for halt and get down. Everyone, dove down as quickly and quietly as they could, remembering what he said at the hideout. Divale turned to Maxim and silently began making gestures with his hands. He first pointed to himself, then his eyes, and finally toward where he had heard the sound. Andropov understood what was going to happen and nodded, pointing to himself and then the ground. Aaron gave him a thumbs up and reverted his attention back towards the turn. He swallowed deep and moved up at the quick step, keeping his feet low to the ground and his body close to the near wall on the left so as not to alert the enemy with his footfalls. He reached the edge of the turn and placed his back against the concrete, listening. More footsteps could be heard moving away from him. Though it relieved him immensely, Aaron counted hard clanks of Neuroi feet and did the number crunching in his head, the results of which didn’t sit well. At least four for the bastards, maybe five or six at the most. Can’t engage with guns and I won’t be fast enough to take them out with my magic. Need to distract. He frantically started looking for a rock but none could be found. Then, he had an idea and turned his machine gun in his hands, the bolt facing him. He took the apparatus with two fingers from his right hand, using his left to hold the weapon in place and slowly pulled down, trying to open the ejector port just enough to extract a bullet. Bringing it down around halfway, the ejector port opened a tiny crack, the greased mechanisms grindings softly against each other. “Ungueis.” he whispered. The magically incantation caused the fingers on his left hand to grow into claws, but he altered the development, instead using it on his left index finger. It grew and grew until he had enough length to wrap around the entirety of the midsection and over the bolt, securing it in place. With that done, Aaron carefully used his right index finger took fish into the ejector port, sliding the thin metal away and feeling for the tip of the .50 caliber bullet. He got it and pulled it towards his body slowly, making the noise generated minimal. Sweat from his concentration began to bead on his forehead, but he maintained his focus and successfully removed the round. That’s the hard part. Now for the harder part. Still listening in on the patrol, he gestured to Maxim and waved for him to come up. Copying his superior, Andropov did the same for everyone else and moved up to Aaron, backs against the cold concrete wall when they got there. All were afraid and waiting anxiously to see what would happen next. When his group had finished placing themselves, Divale cocked his right arm back and threw the bullet down the corridor, the live round sailing through the air. Seconds went by until sharp ears picked up that tinkling sound of a brass casing hitting the ground. Those not blessed with a high degree of hearing could still listen to the abrupt change in the pace and weight of the enemy’s movements, going towards the ruse with gusto. Taking a chance, Aaron popped his head around the corner and, sure enough, there were five Legionary’s, their glowing red chevrons marking them out clearly in the darkness with their backs turned towards the bullet. Get’s them every time. Without looking behind him, he commanded, “Idti. Pyat’ chelovek komandy. YA pokroyu. Bud’ bystrym i tikhim (Go. Five man teams. I’ll cover. Be quick and quiet).” Maxim stood off to the side and directed traffic, counting off groups of five and sending them on their way. Though they weren’t soldiers by any stretch of the imagination, they were survivors and used their hard earned lessons well, dashing across that small deadly space and reaching the other side. One small group made it, then another, and another. The one containing Pytor moved up and successfully traversed the way. Soon, it was just Maxim, Aaron, and four others, his inclusion throwing off the count a tad. The enemy were still investigating the noise, but Aaron knew that they were running out of time. Have to cross quick, get further on up, and duck into the little niche on the right. “Vyydite i ne ostanavlivaytes’, poka ne doydete do bokovogo tunelya sprava (Move out and don’t stop until you get to the side tunnel on the right).” he hissed. Then they ran, Divale leading the way, followed by Andropov and the three adults. Pytor, being so small, lagged behind, the rifle weighing him down. Noticing this, Aaron snatched him up with his free left arm and carried him like a small rolled up carpet, bounding towards, past and into the tunnel.
beyond. His eyes darted left and right and saw that those who went before recognized that being out in the open was a bad idea and instinctively made for the right hand tunnel. *Good job people.* Maxim was at the entrance waving, encouraging him to move faster. With a lunge, the warlock and the boy breezed past the threshold and Aaron set Pytor down gently, however, Pytor lost his grip on his rifle and the wooden rifle butt slammed on the concrete ground before anybody could react quick enough to arrest its descent.

The sound echoed loudly and the child mouthed a vile curse word as he picked it back up. Aaron whipped his head towards the opening and listened, reaching behind him with his left hand and pinching his thumb and forefinger together, telling everyone to be quiet. *Dear God please don't fuck me over now.* To his chagrin, the Neuroi had turned up nothing and started to resume their initial patrol path. Divale brought the weapon close to him and his jaw clenched with purpose. *Fifty fifty shot which way they go now. The only question now is which way?*

Aurora gingerly moved up to take point, a feat made all the more difficult with her land Strikers going on silent mode. While generally useful during nighttime operations when stealth was key, the automatic treads were made of metal and they clinked whenever a full revolution occurred. *I don’t dare try to go on full range mode. My footsteps will be next to impossible to muffle then.* She had in her hands a SVT-40, eschewing her 75mm for something more tactical. Her cannon was tucked in a special holster behind her right leg, primed and ready to go at a moments notice, sticking up like a signal flag on a tank. Hunkering down, she panned around the right corner, searching for threats. Nothing could be seen down the way and she signaled for her group to come up. Perrine also ventured forward with her unit, her Bren off to her side, not needed given the circumstances. “It should be me doing the leg work out there captain.” Clostermann pointed out. “You’re too important to lose.”

“We’re all too important to lose.” Aurora replied, effectively telling the lieutenant no without bluntly stating it. “Any one of us goes down it’s going to be a hard time for these people.”

Perrine nodded, taking the denial in silence. “It’s strange that we haven’t seen any patrols in a while. You’d figure they’d be all over the place given how many we saw earlier.” she remarked, still looking around.

Aurora gave a small grunt, masking her unease at the fact that there had been a lot less enemy activity. *Doesn’t make any damn sense at all. We practically had to relocate into the central tunnels with Eila and Sanya just to get out of the way just a few minutes ago. Did we get found out? Haven’t heard anything over comms. Very strange indeed lieutenant.* Then her ears picked up the sounds of Neuroi footsteps, loud and clear, coming from a small detour right behind them. Immediately, her hand went up, letting her people and Perrine’s know that danger was incoming and to stand down. They obeyed and Perrine moved up alongside her. “Plan?” she whispered.

“We get up against the wall and surprise them. Only two of them from what I hear.” Aurora muttered back, reaching behind her with her left hand and unhooking a spade from her backpack. “Quick and easy.” She looked over Clostermann and inquired, “You have anything?” Lacking a knife or even a digging tool, Perrine nevertheless nodded and pulled out a spare Bren gun barrel from her backpack. “You’re going to have to get really close you know. Can you do it?”

“No choice. I have to.” Perrine replied, giving her improvised shiv a couple of practice swings. Content that she knew the risks, Aurora gestured to the wall nearest the now threatening corridor and the two quickly hustled into position, backs against the concrete, Clostermann next to her on the left and her nearest the opening. They both slowed their breathing and listened. The footsteps of the
enemy kept getting closer and closer with every second, the time dragging out. Casting a quick look at the forty or so people with them further down from their ambush site, they saw fear in many faces, but a few had their weapons shoulder and at the ready, just in case. Soon, the clanking of Neuroi feet on manmade stone became so loud neither one of the witches could here themselves think. *The time for thought is over, it is now time to act.* Suddenly, a pair of long black and red beamers from the lead Legionary poked out, emitting a small whine as it prepared to charge. Quick as a flash, Aurora reached out with her left hand, grabbed the left beamer, and pulled towards her and down. The sudden jerk caught the Legionary off balance and it tumbled to the ground with a loud crash. Not wasting any time, Juutilainen swung the spade like a mallet with her right arm and drove the weighted blade down into it’s head, cleaving it at an angle that buried well into the armpit. Seeing that it’s friend was in danger and that there was an enemy that needed to be dealt with, the last Legionary ran up and started to draw a bead on the captain just as the now dead Legionary started to disintegrate into shards. However, by focusing on her, it left itself wide open to a counterattack. Perrine leapt up onto Aurora’s right shoulder, her left foot landing square in the muscle, and pushed herself forwards into the Legionary, the spare machine gun barrel held out in front of her like a rapier. Using all her strength, Clostermann drove the part through the Legionaries chest as they collided, the impact driving the Neuroi backwards and into the concrete tunnel wall with a thud. She pulled it out and stabbed again and again, sweeping the legs out from under the enemy and continuing to stab away as it slid down, turning to white and flaking away.

Aurora looked up from her handiwork and regarded Perrine, who was breathing heavily from the exertion. “Nice moves there lieutenant.” she commented, getting up and moving towards her. “Where did you learn that?”

“Training.” Clostermann replied, wiping the sweat off her brow and putting the gun barrel back in her backpack. No sooner did she secure it, than both witches and a vast majority of their support heard a series of loud bangs reverberating from somewhere deep within the tunnel network. *Gunshots.*

“Mayday! Mayday!” Aarons voice rang over the communicator like a clarion call. “Group C has been found out! Making a beeline for the nest to try to distract them. Need support in grid E6 on up. Can you assist?”

“Read you loud and clear master sergeant.” Sanya replied. “All units make way to grid E6. Take out any enemy reinforcements on the way.”

“Wilco Lieutenant Litvyak. Juutilainen out.” Aurora curtly stated before killing the link. She turned around to face the Russians in her group and called out, “Weapons free folks! You know the drill: If it’s red, it’s dead! Move!” The witches started to advance at the run, the survivors of Vorkuta right on their heels. “Don’t go too fast there Perrine.” she cautioned as she noticed that the lieutenant was beginning to pull away. “You’ll wind up having no support if you do.”

“Copy.” Clostermann responded, slowing down just a tad, though deep down she didn’t want to. *He’s all alone out there in thick of it. We need to get him out.* Then she saw it, Legionary’s coming out of several side tunnels up ahead, roughly three hundred feet away. “Get down! Fire at will!” she screamed as she hit the dirt and pulled the trigger to her Bren. Bullets whined through the air and two of the enemy went down. The hostiles responded in kind within a second, letting loose with their beamers at whatever target presented itself. Return fire from friendly rifles and the sole machine gun joined in and soon the entire tunnel was filled with crisscrossing beams and lead. The sound of battle was deafening, a chaotic symphony of cracking weapons, beamer freems, people shouting orders, chiming witch shields, explosions from grenades, and the screams of those unfortunate enough to have gotten hit. In the early stages, the humans had the upper hand, catching the Neuroi off guard and flat footed, however, despite the enemy’s numerical inferiority, they had the advantage of
firepower. No matter how many of them went down, they could still keep up a heavy volume of fire. So as the gunfight dragged on, seconds barely becoming minutes, the Russians suffered greatly. There was no cover save for whatever distance lay between them and the Legionary’s and the enemy took their time focusing down strategic assets. The three man machine gun crew didn’t even have enough time to get through the first two ammo belts before beams cut them down mercilessly. Aurora fired round after round at the hated foe, each bullet finding it’s mark, but it wasn’t nearly enough to stem the tide that was seeking to engulf them.

“We can’t hold here!” she bellowed over the din. “Fall back! Fall back!” Her group looked at her and then back ahead, seeing that the cause was hopeless, and started to run. They managed to cover each other well, some staying put until those that ran stood put themselves covering those left behind. Aurora peered through the fog of war and saw Clostermann preparing to discharge her magic. “What are you doing lieutenant? We have to go now!”

“Give me some time to charge up! Another few seconds!” Perrine explained. “We can still salvage this!”

“We have nothing to follow up with and if we stay here any long we’ll have a lot less now fall the fuck back! That’s an order!” Juutilainen shouted emphatically. Clostermann swore sharply under her breath and started to extract herself, the captain unloading with her rifle. *I could’ve done it. I just needed some more time.* She whizzed past Aurora who after ejecting the spent clip, turned and made a mad dash for the passage they went through some time before, beams coming from behind her, trying to kill her. Some got so close that the heat could be felt from within her Strikers, but nothing hit. Eyeing the opening, she power slid in, rolling on her belly, and pushing herself back up.

“Count?” she asked.

Perrine looked at what remained of their groups and did a silent head count. “We have twenty two. I lost eight and you ten.” she grimly reported.

“From what I recall, there are another few side tunnels that can get us around them, but we have to be-” Aurora began, but a massive shaking of the earth under them followed by a cataclysmic boom rendered the remainder of her plan moot. Everyone started to look and a few panicked, lamenting their lot in frightened voices. “Shut your holes!” the captain barked. “I need to hear damn you!” That killed the caterwauling and she peered out of the entrance. Expecting to see an entire battalion of Legionary’s marching towards them, she was shocked to discover that not a single one ventured beyond the initial point of contact. Furrowing her brow, Aurora thought about why that was, but then she heard a familiar sound, one that brought back memories of the isthmus all over again.

*Oh you’ve got to be kidding me right now.*

Perrine saw her get lost in her thoughts and placed a hand on her shoulder. “What is it?”

The elder Juutilainen merely turned around, looked her dead in the eyes, and replied, “They just dropped in Strategos.”

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Spent casings shot out of the MG42 ejector port as Eila unleashed a stream of shots into the Legionarys that were trying to advance up, spiraling into the air and against the wall that she was hiding near, making tinny chiming sounds as they hit the concrete. As for the bullets, they found their marks and mowed down the enemy in an instant. Her ears picked up a click, letting her know that the clip was empty. She turned away, getting out of the barrage of return fire coming back up from the tunnel as she fished around for another clip. When Aaron’s mayday came over the comms, Sanya had them rush up double time, taking a seemingly erratic path through the underground network. However, what her friend ended up doing was positioning herself in a way that maximized their
defense and prohibited the enemy from making unobstructed and unobserved moves against them. Both groups had just managed to get to where they needed to be before the enemy showed up in three large companies. For the past ten minutes, they had been enduring assault after assault by the Neuroi, and every time they pushed them back with incredible losses. Though each victory emboldened the defenders, casualties were still suffered and the ammunition expenditure was enough to take several people out of the fight, doing little more than acting as spotters and unarmed scouts, retrieving the wounded and any spare rounds and weapons from the dead. Finally finding one, she slammed it home and pulled the bolt back. Don’t have enough rounds to keep this up for much longer, we’re going to have to move out of here soon. She closed her eyes and began to focus, using her magic to determine the best time to poke her head out. Though, nothing could be seen normally, her world became a series of red lines, each one marking danger zones with a number over them, a timer in seconds. Peering at one that read thirty six, Eila nodded to herself and opened her eyes, coming back into the real world. In a flash, her head emerged from around the corner and took in the carnage. The whole corridor for a good few hundred feet was strewn with piles of brass casings, dead bodies, blood, and blackened concrete from stray Neuroi beamer fire. Movement could be seen, the enemy packing up and regrouping yet again. Need to get into somewhere where they least expect us. Panning her vision, she saw an empty side tunnel. That will do nicely. “If anyone has any ammo left, get into that tunnel and hunker down! Remember, don’t shoot until I give the word! Move!” Eila barked.

At her command, the remnants of her group that had any means of defending themselves, got up and moved towards the tunnel, zigzagging to avoid the beams that tried to down them. Eila fired her machine gun down the tunnel with a few quick bursts and saw much to her delight that all of them made it, even the one middle aged man with a badly mangled left arm, restricting him to using pistols and using only one hand to reload. She watched him pop off a trio of round, knocking the Legionary’s out of the fight permanently. “Good shooting!” she called out. The man turned to look at her for a split second to thank her, but in doing so exposed his right arm a bit too much. With such an opportunity, the enemy capitalized, sending some well aimed shots his way. Eila could do nothing as she watched the crimson projectiles freem through the dark and strike the man in the shoulder, causing him to scream in unholy agony, the heat burning through cloth, flesh, and parts of his bone in seconds. Though she was at least twenty feet away, and their was a draft from somewhere that whisked away the worst of it, that sickly sweet odor of cooked flesh could be picked out as clear as day. The man’s legs gave out and he fell forwards into the tunnel, into the fusillade, clutching his right arm with his ruined left. He didn’t last all that long, more beams sailing straight on through and burrowing into his side and back, the force sending him head over heels as each beam hissed with each hit. Eila turned away from the sad sight, knowing that he was most definitely dead, waves of loss cascading over her like water from a shower head.

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her right shoulder and nearly jumped out of her skin. She turned around fast and saw Sanya with an empathetic look to her face. It gave her some solace, but not enough to get the mans last cries out of her mind. Just let the grief turn to something else Eila. It’s better that way. Suddenly, Sanya’s ear communicator started to hiss and pop with static. Words could be heard, but they were faint. She thumbed the selector dial and said into the speaker, “Say again. You’re breaking up.”

“Sanya, this is Perrine.” Closterrmann’s voice rang loudly. “We’ve got trouble. The enemy have deployed Strategos in the tunnels, but they’re of a new type.”

“What are the specs?” Litvyak demanded, shouldering her Fliegerhammer.

“They look exactly like the massive one we took out at Titran.” Perrine explained. “Smaller dimensions but just as well armed and armored. We’re trying to harass them as best as we can to stall them, but there’s no guarantees that we’ll prevent a majority reaching you. Only Aurora has the
weaponry that can effectively counter them.”

“Do what you can with what you can.” Sanya ordered. “How big are they?”

“They take up the entire tunnel. Their turrets grazed and gouge the ceilings. You’ll hear them long before you see them.” Perrine answered.

“Understood. Good luck lieutenant.” Litvyak replied, killing the link and regarding Eila. “Try to raise Aaron and see where he is now.” Eila nodded and went about her task while Sanya got up and twirled around the corner, aiming down the tunnel. Spying a small clump of foes, her finger pulled the trigger and a rocket flew out of the center middle tube, trailing flame and smoke from the missile propellant. It shrieked down the way and slammed into the concrete nearby, exploding on contact, and vanishing into a ball of fire and shrapnel. Nothing could survive an impact like that. “Anything?” Sanya inquired when she moved back out of harms way, looking over at her wingman who was fiddling with her communicator.

Eila grimaced and shook her head no. “Can’t get a signal at all. It’s like it’s not on at all.”

Fuck. Sanya then closed her eyes and concentrated on bringing up her magical aura. The signals from the Neuroi were all around them, bouncing in every direction like the deadly fire from their weapons. She boosted the aura by several times, picking up Aurora and Perrine as they fought against the approaching Strategos on the left flank, some enemy signatures disappearing without a trace as they were destroyed. Good job ladies, but where is Aaron? Soon, her aetheric nimbus encompassed the right side of the network, yet she could still pick up nothing. Dread consumed her soul as the empty space turned up no traces of her friend. Please God don’t tell me we’re too late. Then, something odd appeared, a small pendent shaped blip so small that it could’ve been mistaken for a ghost echo, but in the many years of Sanya’s military career, she knew instinctively what it was. That’s the communicator! Don’t know why he’s not responding to our hails. Maybe it got damaged somehow. Doesn’t matter, I know where he is and more importantly, that he’s alive. “I got him Eila.” Sanya beamed. “He’s all the way up in grid E3 and still pushing hard. We have to move. The Strategos will cross the main artery way in two minutes and we need to intercept them.”

“On it.” Eila replied, signaling to her group and Sanya’s to be ready for a mad dash through the tunnel yet again. “I’ll radio Aurora and Perrine to let them know. Plan?”

“We all bunch up in grid C4 and hammer the lead elements. Perrine said that they’re huge and if we stack them up, they’ll have no way to get around the road block.” Sanya illuminated, gripping her rocket launcher with both hands.

“Until they get the bright idea of blowing holes in the tunnels just to get out of the way.” Eila pointed out. “Then we’ll have no way of containing them.”

“Then let’s make doubly sure that such a situation doesn’t happen.” Sanya stated. “Get me a quick firing line set up and have them start shooting anything that isn’t human. We run up together and wipe out what’s left, then have them advance behind us double time. We’ve got a race to win.” She shouldered her rocket launcher and counted the number of missiles she had left. Seven total. Not as much as I would like but it will have to do.

“Who’s got ammo left?” Eila asked loudly. Several tired hands raised up like pupils seeking to answer a teacher’s questions in a classroom. “Okay. Get ready to run out and make a firing line. Start shooting the moment you get in position.” The lieutenant then regarded her wingman who gave her a small wink and nodded. Sanya then began a silent countdown with her left hand, holding up three fingers and slowly curling them under towards the palm. First the middle, then the index, and finally the thumb all went down and in a flash, both the witches were off, around the corner and running.
Eila could see the enemy in the distance, cautiously poking their heads out to see what was going on. They caught them by surprise for they were expecting them to stay put, not advance and those moments of hesitation were all that the pair needed. Litvyak aimed in the middle of the tunnel, making sure that they kept their heads down until they got there, and fired just as Eila and the rest of the Russians behind them opened up. Several Neuroi took the bait and moved into the empty space, but they vanished into nothing when the missile hit home. The explosion kicked up massively amounts of dust from the destroyed concrete, clouding their vision, but that was their intention all along. They can’t see us, but together we can see them. Sanya and Eila activated their magics and worked in tandem, one picking out targets and the other calling out danger. Combined, the lieutenants made short work of the enemy, compelling the survivors of the assaults behind them to cheer wildly and run after them, feet kicking up battlefield debris, some of them stopping to pick up weapons and ammo from the dead before resuming the sprint.

Eila dealt with the last Neuroi by shooting it at the waist, the high rpm of the MG42 sawing the foe in half, before stomping on the head, effectively killing it with a hard crunch. She didn’t wait to see it die and instead continued to run behind her friend, who despite her size, was outpacing her. “Just like old times.” she called out.

“That it is.” Sanya yelled back over her shoulder, taking a quick right down a side tunnel and left soon afterwards, ears straining to pick up any signs of Strategos. Suddenly, the sound of her footfalls started to become a side instrument to another din that started to make itself known, like the brass section of an orchestra overtaking the string elements during the opening riffs of Modest Mussorgsky’s Night on Bald Mountain. She threw up her hand, making a fist to let Eila know that it was time to stop running and to start fighting when she got near the left corner. Her wingman complied and moved up quickly, coming to a stop at her side. She didn’t need to focus on trying to figure out from which direction they were coming for the ground beneath their feet started to shake. She looked over at Eila and asked with a grin, “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Of course.” Eila replied with a sly smile of her own, the sounds of their groups coming in from behind them. “Time to see if we’re still the masters of the game Whack a Mole.”

Maxim pulled one of his people to safety, just before a hail of beams came in, stitching up the concrete and melting fist sized holes in it. “U tebya yeshche yest' granaty Yuriy (You still have the grenades Yuri)?” he asked his companion anxiously. They were up a fair way away from the rest of the unit, or what remained of it. Many had been killed or left for dead in what had been a mad dash for the main junction that would take them to the central vein that led into the main collection and distribution center of the network. Ammunition had practically run out and all they were left with was their sidearms for the most part and a few grenades, grenades that the pair were about to use to get them out of the jam they were in. Yuri nodded and pulled out two of the explosives, handing one to Maxim. Andropov held it close and listened for the signal from Aaron, a quick three round burst from his machine gun. How in the hell you still have ammo for that thing is beyond me comrade, but I won’t question it. The question that really needs to be answered is whether we’re going to get close enough to use these things. He took a peek around the corner and saw a heated battle in the center of the tunnel between Aaron and a substantial host Neuroi Legionary’s. Beammers flashed and struck his unfurled angelic wings repeatedly, but none could get past his iron defense. Many were deflected into the ground, walls, or ceiling, and some were returned to the senders, their own weapons being their undoing. Divale was a walking tank, lashing out with his wings and claws, decapitating or bifurcating enemies left and right. He hardly used his guns at all in order to conserve the precious few rounds remaining. Suddenly, he saw Aaron draw up his machine gun from the ground. Knowing that the signal was about to be sent, he clapped Yuri on the shoulder and said, “Prigotov'sya (Get ready).” Yuri placed his left hand over the pin and looped his middle finger
through the aluminum ring, Maxim doing the same. Second ticked by and then three loud shots rang out. “Seychas (Now)!“ Andropov yelled, rounding the corner and pulling the grenade pin out. He focused on the group of enemies who were far out beyond the scrum and ran towards them, right arm cocking back. The Neuroi detected their presence, ignored firing on Aaron, and started to turn their beamers on them, their harsh whines beginning again. *This is as close as we’re going to get. Remember what he said: Dive and roll right.* “Bros’ ikh (Throw them)!“ he screamed and lobbed his grenade. Return fire came in and he barely had enough time to hit the dirt and roll, the beams missing him by millimeters. Yuri however wasn’t so lucky. He was too slow in letting go of his grenade and took a trio of shots in the stomach, blowing out his abdomen in a steaming mess of blood and ruptured organ meat. The Russian didn’t have enough time to cry out in pain before death claimed him. His hand went slack and the cooked grenade fell to the concrete and started to roll towards him. Maxim’s eyes went wide and he felt the sensation of ice running down his spine, that cold realization one gets when they know that they were about to die.

“Capio Bob.“ Aaron’s voice rang out about the din and the explosive flew off towards the warlock. Andropov saw the grenade speed towards Divale who then killed his spell and got down, aligning his wings over him. The grenade continued on its path and then detonated a second later, wiping out the Legionary’s still lucky enough to be standing in a flurry of shrapnel, becoming nothing but white shards. Standing back up, Aaron calmly walked over, the danger now passed, and went up to Maxim. “Ty v poryadke (You alright)?“ Andropov nodded and immediately Divale whipped his head around, searching for something. He frowned and regarded the former post man. “Gde Pitor (Where’s Pytor)?“

Maxim opened his mouth to answer but the soft crying of a boy reached his ears. He too got up from the concrete and jogged over to where the sounds were coming from. It was emanating from a side tunnel, the one where Yuri had popped out of before he rendezvoused with him. He got to the front and peered inside. There, on his knees like a churchgoer, the rifle hanging limp in his hands was Pytor, his chest heaving as he sobbed. “YA ne mogu sdelat’ eto Maksim. YA trus. Koldun byl prav (I can’t do it Maxim. I’m a coward. The warlock was right).“ Andropov felt pity for the child and gave him a hug to try to calm him down. Despite his showing of empathy, his sympathy was not as high. You’re right that Aaron told you Pytor. You should’ve listened to him then and spared yourself this. Now you’re paying for it in full and I don’t feel sorry for you one bit. Andropov then got the feeling that he was being watched and turned back to the entrance, just in time to see Aaron duck down and look at them both.

“Khotya eto vazhno, nam nuzhno snova dvigat’sya (While important, we need to get moving again).“ he stated, looking off towards Yuri’s corpse and feeling dejected that there was nothing of use to scavenge off it.

“Have you established communications?“ Maxim asked, letting Pytor go gently.

Aaron shook his head no. During the early stages of the fighting advance, he had a beam brush past his face, the intense heat short circuiting the device, but thankfully not melting in his ear cavity. He didn’t have time to fix it given the circumstances and was basically living on a hope and a prayer. “Leytenant Litvyak znaet nashu situatsiyu, i vy, ya uveren, budete zdes’ s podkrepleniyem (Lieutenant Litvyak knows our situation and you have my word that she’ll be here with reinforcements).“ he assured.

His words, instead of mollifying the mood of Andropov, instead made him clench his jaw in anger. “Ty slovo (Your word)!“ he said, fed up with empty platitudes without results to back them up. “Tvoi slova ne vernut Yuriya ili tekh, kto segodnya umer. Nas ostalos’ to’l’ko sent’, Aaron, vklyuchaya tebya. Yesli u vas net nichego, chto moglo by polnost’yu podtverdit’, chto oni pridut za nami, ili dazhe yesli oni voobshche yeshche zhivut, ya risknu svoey zhizn’yu radi vas i vashey. YA
ostayus' zdes', kak i vse ostal'nyye (Your words won’t bring back Yuri or anyone who died today. There’s only seven of us left Aaron, yourself included. If you don’t have anything to completely confirm that they’re coming for us or even if they’re still live at all, I’m done risking my life for you and yours. I’m staying here and so are all the rest of the survivors).”

Aaron stood there, motionless and emotionless before answering coldly, “Yesli vy chuvstvuyete sebya tak, mister Pochtal'on, pust' budet tak. YA sdelayu eto sam (If that’s the way you feel Mister Postman, then so be it. I’ll do this myself).” He looked over at Pytor and commented, “Vy mozhetе vzyat' etu vintovku u nego. Segodnya ne byl uvolen. Mozhno takzhe otdať yego v ruki tomu, kto ne boitsya vypolnyat' svoy dolg (You might want to take that rifle from him. Hasn’t been fired once today). Might as well put it in the hands of someone who isn’t scared to do his duty.” Then, his ears picked up the sound of approaching Neuroi and started to take off his parka, now ruined beyond repair from the heavy combat, keeping an eye down the way in case they showed up earlier than expected.

“Aaron!” Pytor called out, crawling frantically up to him with the rifle. “Pozvol' mne poyti s toboy! YA vypolnyu svoy dolg (Let me go with you! I’ll do my duty)!”

“Absolutely not Pytor.” Aaron replied flatly, now fully stripped of his coat and strapping his guns back on his body. “You freeze up when the combat starts and that’s something that can’t be relied on. You stay with Maxim and the others.”

“No (But)~” Pytor protested but Aaron silenced him with a hard rock back with his boot, his heel striking the concrete like a gunshot just after he finished securing his pistols.

He looked deep into the boys eyes and muttered emphatically, “Vy ostayetes' zdes', i na etom vse (You are staying here and that’s the end of it).” He gathered up his parka and handed it to him. “Derzhь moye pal'to (Hold my coat).” Without waiting for anything else, Aaron leapt up, flexed his claws, and flapped his wings expectantly. “Bring it on you bastards.” he uttered softly. His hearing picked up the enemies, at least a full ten count and he ran off towards them, his wings enhancing his naturally long stride. Plan is simple Aaron. Kill them all and don’t stop. As Divale’s form got smaller and smaller with every step, Pytor watched him go with a heavy heart. We shouldn’t be here. We should be helping him, not staying behind and watching him get killed. I must help him. In a flash, the boy picked up his rifle with a determined face and immediately got grabbed by Maxim.

“On skazal vam ne vykhodit' na ulitsu, i on imel v vidu rebenka (He told you not to go out there and he meant it child).” Andropov hissed.

“K chertu to, chto on skazal (To hell with what he said)!” Pytor yelled back in his face, surprising Maxim so much that he loosened his grip. He took full advantage and took off after the warlock. “Pytor vernis' syuda (Pytor get back here)!” Maxim called out, pleading for him to listen, but to no avail. The boy’s mind was made up and Andropov cursed silently to himself as he picked up a rifle of his own and ran after him. Meanwhile Aaron was practically right on top of his prey. Only a few steps more and jackpot. The moment he finished that thought, his feet took him to the edge of the corner just as a Legionary came into full view. Though the enemy lacked the means to properly convey the feeling of shock, it seemed to feel it judging by the way it jerked back for a brief second before getting run through by both of Aaron’s wings, the tips piercing it’s chest like a knight’s lance does a man at arms. He kept right on going, hard jarring impacts letting him know that he got more of them. The collective weight started to tax him and he lashed out with his right claw, the long razor sharp talons slicing through his little collection of sorts. As soon as they faded away into white shards, Aaron could see that they were getting out of his way, trying to draw a bead on him. However, the tunnel he was now in was narrow, so much so that his wings could touch both walls if
he fully extended them out from his body. He ended the spell that made his hands into claws and shoulder rolled forwards, his wings outstretched. The Neuroi nearest him could do nothing as his appendages took out their legs, like a cheating Roman charioteer trying to win a race by any means necessary. While that was going on, Aaron drew both his Torkerev’s and sprung back up after he went through a complete revolution. Beamers from the remaining foes fired, but Divale pushed against the far wall with his right wing and slammed his left foot into the near one. The momentum and grip of his boots allowed him to walk up the concrete barrier, bypassing the return fire entirely. He had the drop on them and wasted no time in pulling the triggers to his pistols, shot after shot hitting their mark. Neuroi bodies fell like rain and disintegrated. Knowing that some might still be alive from his tumble, he twisted his back so that he faced behind him. Sure enough, a few of the wounded Legionary’s were trying to crawl after him, using their beamers as makeshift hands to right themselves. They didn’t get very far as Aaron fired the remaining rounds in his clips into them, taking them completely out of the equation.

His body hit the right hand wall softly and he landed on his feet as he jettisoned the empty magazines, falling with a small clatter on the ground, and started to load new ones. The brass casings of the bullets dully glowed in the dark for a second before being rammed home and the bolts pulled. Then Aaron felt the urge to vomit again and was about to do so when he picked up more sounds of approaching enemies. Ah, I see now. They moved in unison to mask their true numbers. Clever fuckers. Forcing down the puke with a hard swallow and a trio of deep breaths, Divale sprinted again, however, this time, he saw that the Neuroi were waiting for him at the end of a small turn of a much larger tunnel and they had already spaced themselves out as to avoid the fate of their friends. Crimson beams sung through the air as Aaron twisted, turned, bobbed, weaved, and slunk his way through the maze of death, firing away with his guns the moment the opportunity presented itself. Early in the fight a lucky shot took one of his pistols out, the beam cutting and melting the barrel. Angrily, Divale threw the ruined weapon like a shuriken, the nonaerodynamic object spinning end over end like a dumb dumb round until it cracked against the head of one of the Legionary’s knocking it flat on it’s back. Whether it was the one that made the shot, Aaron didn’t know or very much cared. He closed the distance and with his free hand pulled out his PTRS-41. Though he had no more ammo for it, he knew from his numerous modification to it that it was a solid weapon. Dodging one beam, he ducked under the guard of one enemy and shoved the now empty pistol into it’s guts like a punching dagger, the force of his blow lifting it into the air. Then he thrust out with his antitank rifle and rammed the bulbous end of the barrel through a head and twisting it free. One enemy tried to slam both its beamers on his head, but Aaron preempted the maneuver by leaping up and cracking his head against it. The impact jarred his senses and Aaron temporarily saw stars. Oh no, don’t get another concussion here. Not now!

Suddenly, five shots from a rifles rang out from a far ways behind him, bringing him back to reality. Five Legionary’s got hit square in their chests and crumpled to the ground. As for the last Neuroi that Aaron had headbutted, it started to move and Aaron spun the heavy rifle end of end and rammed the butt of it through the back, a loud crunch emanating through the now empty corridor. He withdrew the gun like a sword and looked down the way with a puzzled expression. Adjusting to the dimness, he could make out the gunsmoke trailing from a semiautomatic rifle barrel, one that was firmly held by Pytor. Smiling, the boy gave him a thumbs up and Aaron returned it with one of his own. Then, the ground started to shake off to his right and Divale assessed the situation in an instant. Strategos! Down here!? He turned and screamed at the boy, ‘Bezhat’ (Run)!” just before the wall to his left started to crack, large deep fissures beginning to form and snake all the way up to the ceiling and across the ground that he stood on. Pieces of concrete started falling with a stony crack and Aaron whipped out his shotgun, pretty much the one weapon he had that he still had rounds for. He quickly backtracked away from the soon to be broken wall and preaimed for the lower glacis.

However, there then came another noise, one that overtook the approaching Neuroi by several
degrees, that of a violent explosion. The concussive waves of the detonation ruptured a human sized hole in the wall that Aaron had moved away from, white shards wisping through like snow through a drafty window frame. Curious, he moved forwards, keeping the Ithaca right in front of him. Loose stone moved from the opening and within seconds, out came a large rocket launcher, one that Aaron knew very well. His heart leapt for joy as he saw Sanya emerge, covered in concrete dust and looking upon him with a happy expression to her face. “So let me guess,” Aaron began, trying to inject a bit of levity, “killer traffic?” Sanya just rolled her eyes and walked on through the opening, followed by Eila, Aurora, Perrine and thirteen Russians.

“Really Aaron?” Aurora quipped, shaking her head back and forth at such a bad joke.

“Someone had to say it.” Aaron defended. He looked at the surviving members of their support groups and asked, “All that’s left?”

“Yes.” Sanya answered dryly. She looked over at Pytor who had come up from his firing position down the tunnel, casually tossing aside the empty clip and pulling the bolt back to his rifle. “This all your support?”

More footsteps came up the tunnel from behind Pytor and all looked. Maxim lead the way, leading five more people, his head downcast and face wracked with shame. “Those that had the means and wants to anyways.” Aaron acidly remarked, making sure his voice was loud enough for Andropov and the rest to hear. “Any of you got any spare ammo? We probably don’t have enough for a twenty one gun salute.”

“Ours has a bit, but not much.” Eila replied. “Perrine and them have much less since they encountered the Strategos first.”

“We’ll still share what we can.” Perrine stated. “I’ve got a clip and a half remaining for my Bren and Aurora has one round left for her 75mm plus some smoke grenades. How about you all?”

“Four rockets.” Sanya sounded off. “And Eila has probably half a clip.”

“Pistol ammo is gone, antitank rifle ammo is spent, one hundred rounds left for my machine gun, and my shotgun has eight remaining.” Aaron finished, looking up to the ceiling with his head cocked to the side as he recollected the key details.

“Alright people,” Sanya stated, raising her voice so that all could hear, “here’s the situation. We are on the final stretch and the nest is just down this tunnel and to the left. I know you’re all tired and lost friends, but just a little more and we can finish this. Get together and start doling out ammo. Make sure everyone has a full clip if possible.” Though indeed tired and scarred by the horrors they experienced in the tunnels under Vorkuta, the remaining survivors got to work without complaint. Aaron breathed in and out a few more times, keeping his gag reflex from spasming. He felt something graze his right shoulder and he turned. Maxim stood there, still looking like he had failed in some key duty. He tried to form the opening words to his almost assured apology, but Aaron cut him off, gesturing to the Russians who had followed the rest of his friends.

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to Maxim.” Aaron coldly said, walking away without another word, content in letting the former postman to wallow in his guilt alone. You deserve to you bastard. He moved up to Perrine who had her canteen open, drinking heartily from its contents. Small rivulets of moisture spilled out of the corners of her mouth and dripped to the floor. “Thirsty?” Aaron inquired with a cocked eyebrow. Perrine responded by throwing her head forward and taking the mouth of the drinking vessel from her lips, the sound of the water still left inside swishing around like the ocean beaches at Dover.
She nodded and commented, panting a bit, “It was rough going. Hardly had a moment to breathe before more of them came up.”

“You okay?” Aaron queried, expressing genuine concern.

“I’m fine.” Perrine answered, twisting the cap back on. “How about you?”

“Fighting the urge to lose what remains of my breakfast.” Aaron admitted. “Besides that, I’m just dandy.” Again, he noticed that Clostermann couldn’t hold her gaze with his for very long and his thoughts drifted back to earlier in the day when they had just set out towards the town.

He was about to ask her what was the matter when Sanya proclaimed, “If we’re all done, let’s move out folks. We got a Neuroi nest to put down.” Everyone fell in and Litvyak led the way down the tunnel, her friends taking staggered forward positions behind her, looking like a V formation of geese heading south for the winter. She pulled out the map from her right breast pocket and looked at one more time. The way would take them all the way to the outer fringes of the main loading and distribution chamber, one that would be filled with cranes, cargo pallets, small transport trucks, and depot fixtures like fuel tanks and repair stations. *Lots of cover for us and them. Plenty of space for them to see us coming and turtle up. We don’t have the rounds or manpower to launch a full scale assault. We’re going to have to do the heavy lifting.*

Looking over her right shoulder, she caught the faces of her friends either panning left or right, searching for enemies. Sanya could see the fatigue in their eyes, see it in their movements. *Just one more push. Just one more.* She made a small sloping turn and almost stopped dead in her tracks when she saw rays of light shining from some opening at the end of the way before they had to make the turn towards the distribution center. “Say Andropov,” Litvyak called out, regarding the leader of the Russian survivors. “Did the main hub get damaged during the main assault?”

Maxim scratched his head, pondering the question. “Not that I recall, but I’m sure the enemy caught the workers unawares. They might not have had time to close the loading doors before the attack hit.” *Which means that our shots and theirs might cause more to come on down to investigate.* Sanya moved up to the edge and placed her back against the wall. Removing her black plastic hair restraint, she held it out at an angle, allowing her to look into the chamber without exposing herself. About one hundred yards down the tunnel, the narrow passage opened up into a large chamber, filled with ruined machinery and light drifting in from above, parts of it dimming from passing cloud cover. Transports, many rusted beyond usability, lay off towards the far side and the repair and refueling stations were charred and blackened smears. In the exact center of it all was the nest, the size of two elephants standing on top of one another, panels of black circling it, like some kind of protective barrier, festooned with beamer pods, giving it complete three hundred and sixty degree coverage. Around it lay the cranes, making it look like some evil looking puppet hanging from a peg on a wall. As the panels circumnavigated around the target, Sanya could see that the core was fully exposed for brief moments. Slowly, but surely, a plan was forming in her head and ultimately came to fruition, just as her comrades inched up closer to her.

She placed the hair restraint back on, adjusting her hair as she did so, and regarded the gathering. “The nest is in the center of the room, one hundred yards. Nothing is obstructing it, but it has a barrier in place, some sort of moveable panels with beamer emplacements. They’re circling it constantly. Good news is that every so often, the core can be seen, but the bad news is that it’s only targetable for a short time.”

“What’s the plan Sanya?” Eila eagerly asked.

“Aurora casts Freya. The cold will render the panels immobile for a short time. Immediately after her, Perrine throws out her Tonnere, shattering any cover that thing can bring to bare. That will expose
the core, but then comes the tricky part. If some of the panels escaped damage from the initial strike, they will position themselves in front of it, blocking any incoming threat.” Sanya informed. She looked at Aurora and asked, “How effective are those smoke grenades of yours?”

“They’re good, I made them myself.” Aurora replied with pride. “You need to get close though, because the cover quickly dissipates after a few seconds.”

“How close?” Sanya pressed.

“Forty feet at minimum.” Aurora answered. “Best to get within thirty for best results.”

“I take it that will be my job?” Aaron theorized.

Sanya nodded. “You take the grenades and make a run for it. We’ll cover you as best as we can from here.” Without any prompting, Aurora handed the charges over to Divale, the explosives looking like chalk erasers with white streaks and pull pins sticking out the sides. So just pull and set. “Then I let loose with the rest of my rockets and it won’t have time to react. Boom. We win.” Aaron shimmied his way towards the turn into the long tunnel and closed his eyes as he positioned himself against the wall, the cold concrete bringing little comfort even after he hooked the smoke grenades on one of his belt loops. So let me get this straight: Have to make a mad dash of two hundred and seventy feet with no cover between me and it while under possible weapons fire from behind and beams from the front, precluding any dodging whatsoever. I can do this. “You ready Aaron?” Sanya asked. Divale opened his eyes and smiled.

“Bring it on.” he cheerfully uttered, readying himself for the deadliest footrace he ever participated in for a long time. Off in front of his was Perrine, clenching her right hand into a fist, coruscating blue lines of electricity crackling and popping as they looped around her digits. In front of her was Aurora, her right hand also focusing her magic that manifested as a ball of swirling cold that howled softly like a far off wolf calling out to it’s packmates. Litvyak put up three fingers on her left hand, starting the silent countdown. The ring finger went down and Aurora moved closer to the edge, her face hard and determined. Next came the middle and Perrine breathed in deep, readying herself for the discharge. Finally, the index looped towards Sanya’s palm and all hell broke loose. Aurora whipped around, facing down the tunnel and aimed her charged magic at the nest.

“Freya!” she yelled, firing a wide blast of subzero cold down the passage. As it flew down the way, everything that it touched was instantly coated in hoarfrost, crystals of ice forming into caltrop looking clusters all down the corridor. She watched it all the way, seeing it strike the unawares nest full on. Her aetheric shot managed to freeze many of circling panels in place, covering them in thick layers of frozen moisture. Some of the other panels ran into them, shattering like glass panes and falling to the ground like rain when they tried to deal with the lack of protection. Grinning at a job well done, the captain ducked back and Perrine stepped back and towards the right.

“Tonnerre!” Clostermann bellowed, letting all her magic go. Blue lightning shot from her outstretched hand and Aaron watched the lightshow with anticipation, gauging the amount of time that the spell would be active for. Don’t want to jump out in front of an electrical storm too soon. I’ve been struck by her attack once and I’m not to keen to be the recipient of it’s wrath again. “Go!” Perrine shouted as she withdrew her hand just as the last of her attack sped down the tunnel. Wasting no time, Aaron hopped backwards off the wall, spinning in the air until he came down on his feet, facing forwards down the way. After planting his feet, he bolted, pumping his legs and swinging his arms like a sprinter, head down to help reduce drag. Slowly, the sheer momentum pulled his head back naturally, letting him see what sort of damage the combined assault did to the Neuroi nest. As to be expected, the panels sustained heavy damaged and were virtually wiped out. However, even from this distance, Aaron could see that some of them were regenerating, far faster than what he would’ve
liked. Oh fuck me.

“They’re coming back online!” he yelled from behind his right shoulder without turning his head too far back.

“We see them!” Sanya roared back. “Open fire! Hit it with everything you got people!” Gunshots from machine guns and rifles rattled from his rear, rounds whizzing past him like bees going about their honey collecting business. He kept running, watching the bullets plink against the reformed panels, taking some out, but not fast enough. It was like the hydra of Greek legend; when one head was destroyed two more grew back to replace it. More and more kept getting regenerated. They can’t blow them up fast enough. Shit. Knowing what he was about to do would cost him speed, Divale unfurled his wings and placed them in front of him like a massive shield. His right hand gripped the sides of the smoke grenades clattering against each other and bouncing off the meat of his upper thigh. Not too much longer now. Maybe fifty feet. Then the nests beamer pods began firing. They concentrated on him, ignoring completely the witches and Russians pelting it, crimson light lashing against his wings. The impacts were numerous, each hitting with the force of a shotgun blast. Each served to delay Aaron’s frantic advance forwards, trying to halt his progress entirely. His pearly white shield was being rocked in all directions, making it difficult to keep it steady for but a moment. Still he continued to run with all his might. Sanya and company watched all of this from the tunnel entrance, their conventional ammunition all but spent, helplessly bearing witness to their friend’s plight. “Come on Aaron! You can do it! Get there! Get there!” Sanya muttered loudly through clenched teeth, readying her Fliegerhammer. She flicked a toggle along the side, one that connected to the main fire control unit, switching it from single fire to full salvo. As Litvyak did so, she heard Aaron scream in pain. Looking up, her eyes caught the glimpse of something flying backwards from him, a silvery white patch of something turning end over end trailing red liquid. It didn’t take her too long to realize that Divale had just got a part of his wing shot off. Another piece got blown apart, almost sending him backwards. Aaron was seeing red, the pain of being ripped to pieces nearly overloading his senses, save for his sense of awareness. Ten feet now. Just a little more. He realigned his wings as best as he could, but knew that the writing was on the wall. I don’t hear any more support fire. I’m on my own out here. Another beam struck home, the sizzling heat bloom cauterizing open wounds or opening new ones. Yet still he kept going, determined against all odds to accomplish this one task. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of pain, Divale got into position, planting his feet and holding what remained of his tattered wings at an angle and ducking as low as he could manage. He removed the smoke grenades from his belt loop and ripped their pins out. Within seconds, the white smoke began to flood the chamber, engulfing him and the target.

“Fire the m-!” he bellowed, the last part of his desperate plea drowned out by the freems of the Neuroi nest’s weaponry. Sanya needed no prompting, pulling the trigger to her rocket launcher. All four remaining warheads flew out of their tubes and spiraled through the air. They entered the fog of war, disappearing for a moment. A split second later, a series of explosions could be heard, but none could see if they did the job or not. Concussive waves of something dying could be felt even from the tunnel entrance, prompting them to shield themselves from incoming debris. Sanya waited until the worst passed before looking back down the tunnel. The smoke was still in place, whatever mixture they once contained sticking around like an unwanted house guest. She could hear no incoming fire, but did pick up the faint tinkling of Neuroi death shards falling to the ground somewhere past that cloud of smoke. Yet no sign of Aaron.

“Aaron!” she called out. “Are you out there?” Nothing. No reply, no hail, just silence. Her heart sank as she got up and jogged up the tunnel, Aurora, Eila, Perrine, and the rest of the remaining Russians who survived the days ordeal falling in behind her. “Aaron!” she screamed again, dropping her Fliegerhammer to the ground with a heavy thud and cupping her hands along the edges of her mouth, turning it into an improvised bullhorn. “Can you hear me?! Where are you?!” Suddenly, something cold be hear from behind the billowing curtain of smoke, a drip drip sound, like the one
you would hear from a leaky faucet followed by the dull clops of strolling booted feet. Seconds passed before a large figure emerged from the thick fog. Aaron walked out of the smoke, head held level, his wings a flowing with blood from numerous holes and tears, entire lines of his vitae running along the ground, his back, his arms, anywhere and everywhere.

He looked right at her and his comrades and smiled. “Right where he should be.” he uttered, his voice tinged with pain and he retracted his wings back into himself. “Nice shot by the way.” Relieved beyond words, Sanya sighed and when right up to him, giving him a hug, not caring a bit that her uniform was going to get stained with his blood.

“Thank God you’re alright.” she stated, holding his tighter and tighter like a boa constrictor. “When I saw you’re wings being blown off, I though you’re were going to-”

“Die?” Aaron finished, looking down at her. “Not if can help it.” The rest of the group reached the pair and started exchanging smiles, silent nods of approval, and the usual ‘Good job’.

“Is it dead?” Eila asked, still wary.

“Oh it’s gone.” Aaron assured, removing himself from the bear hug that Sanya had him in. “See for yourself if you don’t believe me.” Aurora gestured to the now dissipating smoke and Eila nodded, letting her sister tag along. The pair walked into the thick cloud and came out the other side within moments, empty guns held out in front of them. Thanks to the combined efforts of magic and munitions, the chamber was now wholly devoid of any surrounding cover or evidence that it was even used for the purpose that it originally served. Nothing remained of the loading center, not even a stray pylon near where the cranes once stood. Neuroi death shards floated in the air like loose snow in a gentle breeze. Looking up, the ceiling was open along the sides, like the slits to a window blind, letting in the shining sun overhead.

“We did it.” Eila proudly declared.

“Hopefully the worst is over.” Aurora remarked. As soon as she finished that sentence, a massive detonation from somewhere above them drew their attention back to the ceiling. Flames from some sort of explosive charge rippled along the edges. With nothing keeping it secure, the entire ceiling began to come down. “Run!” the captain screamed coming about and making a beeline for the tunnel entrance again. Eila ran after her, but in her hurry to get away from the cave in, she tripped over her own two feet, falling to the ground face first, the impact ripping a gash along the bottom of her chin. Sanya saw what happened the moment Aurora stopped to turn around and started to run towards her friend. Eila tried to get up, but darkness was descending upon her fast from the tunnel roof collapse. Desperation kicked in and she managed to get her left foot planted down and lunged right at Litvyak, right arm stretched to the point of coming of f its socket. At that point Aurora had come up and grabbed Sanya by the shoulders and leapt for the safety of the tunnel entrance. The trio had just managed to get beyond the border between life and death moments before the concrete ceiling of the distribution center crashed down hard, sending dust and concrete blocks flying everywhere. Forward momentum and the rushing dirt cloud propelled the three witches through the opening at high speed. Suddenly Sanya’s grip on Eila loosed slightly and then broke, sending the human sized missile straight at Aaron, who didn’t have enough time to react before the lieutenant’s head collided with his stomach, knocking him over. The impact wasn’t life threatening for he had just managed to tense his muscles to protect his internal organs, but the collision pushed all the blood that he had expended that was in his stomach right up his throat. He quickly pushed her off of him and turned his head politely to the left. A second later, he vomited profusely, the wracking heaves making him go into the fetal position. Perrine helped Eila get up and went over to Divale to try to help him too, but the damage was done and, thankfully, short lived.
“That’s one way to think with your head.” Aaron joked, raking his tongue across his teeth and spitting out any remaining blood still in his mouth. He could feel the warm blood infused puke running down his chin and all along his left side, smell the acrid sickly sweet aroma of bile and stomach acid. It nearly made him retch again, but once his body discovered that there was nothing left to give, it stopped. Gingerly sidestepping the vomit, Clostermann looped her left arm in the crook of Aaron’s right and helped him up carefully. Suddenly, a host of whistles was heard from within the chamber, echoing all around the walls of the tunnels. Sanya’s head whipped around and her heart skipped a beat. *Those are commissar whistles. I know that pitch anywhere. Which means—*

“Armiya zdes (The Army is here)!” Maxim shouted with glee. “My sdelali eto, rebyata! My sdelali eto (We’ve made it folks! We’ve made it)!” The remaining Russians cheered and started hugging one another as the dust cloud dissipated, revealing ropes being dropped from high above. Litvyak looked at the scene with wonder as scores of Soviet troops in their tan uniforms and full kit rappelled down from a height of twenty feet, lead by their unit sergeants with the commissars right on their heels. She walked out waving her hands in the air, trying to draw attention. Some saw her and immediately pointed her position out to the sergeants who barked out, “Secure them!” A dozen troopers advanced at the quick step and stopped ten feet away, raising their weapons. Though she knew they were friendly, Sanya couldn’t help but feel uneasy. Her thoughts drifted back to what Aurora had said at the cottage the previous day. *Things have changed in Russia.*

“Derzhi svoi ogon’ (Hold your fire)!” a authoritative voice bellowed. Some of the soldiers parted, allowing Sanya to gaze upon a man in his early fifties or thereabouts, hazel eyes and officers cap covering a balding pate with white hair bordering the fringes looking at her. He was rather short for a man and large around the waist. His skin was molted with liver spots, especially in the hands. As he slowly walked towards the group, the stars of his rank of lieutenant general shining bright from the sunlight coming down from the giant hole his engineers had made, he eyed each one of them in turn, as if assessing their worth. “Oni nashi gospoda. Vstan’ (They are ours gentleman. Stand down).” The surrounding men under his command lowered their rifles and he continued his stroll. “Menya zovut general-leytenant Nikita Khrushchev. My ozhidali, chto zdes’ budut tol’ko russkiye mirnyye zhiteli, a ne ved’my. Kto vy vse i otkuda vy prishli (My name is Lieutenant General Nikita Khrushchev. We had expected there to be only Russians civilians here, not witches. Who are you all and where did you come from)?” he asked, always keeping his eyes on them.

“Leytenant Sanya Litvyak, prikreplennyy k 501-mu JFW (Lieutenant Sanya Litvyak, attached to the 501st JFW),” Sanya replied respectfully with a salute. “Eto moi tovarishchi leytenanty Klostermann i Yuutilainen, a takzhe starshiy serzhant Diveyl. Vo vremya nozhikh putevshedstviy mi vstretili 502-go kapitana Yuutilaynena, kotoryy soglasilsya pomoch’ nam. My zdes’, chtoby raskryt’ taynu zhiv po inuchu, ja can’t help but feel uneasy. Her thoughts drifted back to what Aurora had said at the cottage the previous day. *Things have changed in Russia.*

Rather than answer her, Khrushchev merely turned around and yelled, “Radio!” Within seconds, a soldier carrying a large portable radio came up and set the behemoth down on the ground. The lieutenant general picked up the hand held speaker and pressed the send stud. “Dlya vsekh podrazdeleniy: prodolzhiyaye operatsiyu «Uran» so svey pospeshnost’yu. Podderzhivat’ prisutstviy v Vorkute, poka ne pribudut vpomagal’nye elementy. Eto vse (To all units: Proceed with Operation Uranus with all due haste. Maintain presence at Vorkuta until support elements arrive. That is all).” He placed the speaker back on his holder and regarded Sanya again. “Vy vse poyedete so moj obratno v shtab-kvartiru v Salekharde. Yesli povezet, my doberemsya tuda rannim vecherom i pomozhem uznat’, v chem zaklyuchayetsya eta vasha tayna (You’ll all be coming with me back to HQ at Salekhard. With luck, we’ll reach there by early evening and help discover what
Lieutenant Sanya Litvyak could hardly sit still in the front seat of the black town car that took her through the dimly lit streets of Salekhard. A blackout was largely in effect, save for the headlights and some small fires that led the way through the streets that were covered with hard packed snow and ice, the car’s chained tires keeping it from sliding all over the place. No light shone from the heavily curtained windows of the homes, short and squat wooden constructs that were so similar, the only way to tell which was which was to look at the number over the door. No one was outside this time of night. The rest of her friends rode in the back, Eila behind her, Aurora in the middle, and Perrine towards the right. As for Aaron, he rode in the back, resting comfortably inside the trunk, the cold night air having no effect on him. His eyes were constantly moving back and forth, keeping a look out for the trailers that had followed them since they left the HQ ten minutes ago. He doesn’t trust them and, though it pains me to say this, neither do I. Aurora was right, something has changed my people and I don’t think it’s for the better.

Her thoughts also drifted to the meeting with Khrushchev, though the word meeting wouldn’t be an apt term to use. It was more like an interrogation, all these questions in rapid fire succession. When did you hear this, who authorized that, what did you know and when? For a good hour, the Russian officer grilled them to charred cinders, until he left the room for a few minutes, minutes that were the scariest moments that Sanya had know for a long time. He could’ve come back alone or with people. If he didn’t come back alone, we would’ve been in trouble and I don’t know if Aaron would’ve be able to keep his composure. Thankfully for all involved, Khrushchev did come back by himself, saying that they were free to go. He had also handed her a piece of paper with an address and one word written over it: Pravda (Truth).

Ever since then, Sanya had been on the edge of her seat, saying nothing yet trying to focus on what was about to happen, what she was about to see. Silently she prayed that the direction wouldn’t take her to a tombstone. The car soon rounded a corner and came to a complete stop. Through the gloom, the headlights illuminated a man dressed in a thick coat, pants, and gloves with a shovel in his hands, trying to clear a path from the street to the front door of what was presumably his house. He was in his late forties, with flecks of gray in his dark brown hair, dark brown eyes looking at the car with fear. Sanya gazed upon him and her heart skipped a beat. Frantically, she opened the door and ran towards him, not even bothering to close it behind her. “Otets (Father)!“ she yelled with joy. At the mention of the honorific, the shovel fell from the man’s hands, the fingers going limp with shock. He fell to his knees and clutched his chest like he was having a heart attack.

“Sanya?” he murmured, squinting his eyes to get a better look at the young woman that was closing the distance between them with every passing step. Then, as Sanya’s pale smiling face pierced the darkness like a beacon from Heaven itself, her white hair fluttering behind her, his face brightened. “Sanya!” he cried, just as he extended his arms to embrace his beloved daughter. “Bozhe moy, ditya moye! YA ne mogu v eto poverit’ (My God, my child! I can’t believe it)” As he drew her closer, kissing her ever so gently on the forehead, he turned to the house and screamed, “Ekaterina! Vykhodi syuda! Eto Sanya! Eto Sanya (Ekaterina! Come out here! It’s Sanya! It’s Sanya)” Almost immediately, the door to the house flew open, bathing the outside with yellow light. Out rushed a woman, roughly the age of the man in a dress and a long dark shawl over it that came down to her ankles, her long white hair trailing behind her like streamers, tears of joy flowing down her cheeks upon gazing at the small witch that was hugging her husband of many years practically to death.

“Sanya!” she cried out, joining the pair and taking them all into her arms. As this joyous reunion, many years in the making unfolded, Eila and Aurora got out of the car, walked a little ways and and stood off to the side, letting the scene play out. Perrine also got out, barely beating out Aaron whose evacuation from the trunk caused the suspension to visibly rise. She looked at him and noticed that
he was rubbing his right eye, as if he was crying.

He looked at her and shrugged. “Can you blame me?” he sheepishly asked. “It’s not everyday that you see something good happen in this shit war.” Perrine nodded and looked away from him and Aaron then saw that same attitude that made him question whether she was alright. “You okay Perrine?” he inquired with genuine concern.

“I’m fine.” she admitted, finally regarding him fully, her eyes locked to his. “But not for much longer.”

“What do you mean?” Aaron pressed.

“What I mean is that when I tell you why, I won’t be.” Clostermann clarified.

Divale narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. “Go on.” he ventured, steeling himself for every possible explanation.

Perrine breathed deep and swallowed back her doubts and fears before beginning, “Yesterday, in the hot springs under the cottage when you told me that you just wanted be alone for a bit, I didn’t leave with the others. I stayed behind because I didn’t think that you were alright.” She watched as Aaron’s face subtly changed from one of trepidation to smoldering anger, his lips moving in tiny circles as if he was swishing something in his mouth. “You didn’t sound like yourself at all Aaron.” Perrine quickly added, trying to stave of the inevitable explosion. “I was concerned about you. I really didn’t pay attention to the conversation between you and her, honest I didn’t. I don’t know how she knew I was there, but she stared right at me when she hugged you. Scared me to death and I ran away. Strange that you didn’t hear me.” Nothing came from Aaron’s mouth but his eyes said what his tongue would not, both orbs searing a hole right through her soul. Struggling to come up with something that would calm him down or even make him see the light that was her reason behind it all she blurted, “I know after you got back from that excursion with Lynette that we promised to never spy on each other or suspect one another of plots or malice and I’ll always hold true to that just as much as you, but I was genuinely looking out for you just like you looked out for me an all of us throughout this mission.”

Finally, Aaron’s mouth opened a tad, “That my be Perrine, but that doesn’t change the fact that you broke a promise, a promise to me of all people.” he replied, placing emphasis on the last seven words, eviscerating his wingman from within. He turned his attention to the Litvyak’s, now standing up and wiping away their tears. “However,” he began, looking back at Clostermann, his cold stern stare making her even more sorry about telling the truth to him, “we’ll still be friends.” Divale saw her sigh in relief and took that moment to lean in and utter, “Friends with a little eff.” Clostermann crumbled and couldn’t even form a reply before Aaron turned and walked away, not looking back over his shoulder once and leaving nothing but the sound of his boots crunching in the snow and some strange noise that vaguely reminded her of a woman laughing in the distance echoing in her ears.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Aaron comes back from dealing with the press only to find himself in another war of words between Perrine and Yoshika, the former challenging the latter to a duel in a most undignified way. Despite his offer of forgiveness, Divale's hopes for an amicable reconciliation are dashed. The duel commences in the skies above the castle, yet ends with the destruction of an unexpected intruder. Clostermann learns to forgive and be forgiven, but the celebration on the ground is short lived for Aaron when he receives a distress call from Tunbridge Wells regarding a certain woman and a certain patch of woods.

Chapter XXXVII: For The Greater Good

Even when confronted by an enemy that threatens them all, humanity still doesn’t come together, instead going after their friends and allies in some convoluted asinine power grab before the end comes for them. Don’t they see that so much good can come from cooperation? Why is that? Is it something in it’s nature that makes it impossible, like an ever present need to dominate? Maybe it’s God’s way of punishing us, Tower of Babel style, so many different tongues and ideas circling around that none can ever come to an amicable solution for everyone. If that’s the case, peace is pipe dream.

Diary Entry December 14th 1941

Perrine walked to her chair in the messhall and sat down in silence, ignoring the usual hellos and how are yous from her friends. It had been a good week since she and the rest of those that went to Russia came back on a cramped submarine, a journey that was most unpleasant. Little to no amenities were on that leaky tub of a vessel, light was at a premium, and everything smelled of diesel fumes and sweat. The worst part of it was that there was no shower stall of any kind, forcing them to collect water from the bathroom sinks in tiny buckets and ‘bathe’ with wet rags. Despite their best efforts, by the time they got back to Dover, they all smelled rank and made a mad dash for the showers the moment they got within the castle. It was the most enjoyable feeling in the world at that point, the feeling of hot water and soap suds on one’s skin. What wasn’t enjoyable was the interaction or lack there of between Aaron and her. Even during the trip, he said little to nothing to her. Apparently, the betrayal hit him hard and he found it hard to fully trust her again. Sanya and Eila tried to talk to him about it, but to no avail. He was determined to go about his affairs as he chose. Perrine sighed and shook her head, her mind going back to that night in Salekhard, doing her best to ignore the empty seat on her right. Maybe I should’ve kept it a secret, not saying a single word. Things would’ve never have gotten this bad. It’s like when he first came up all over again, except now it’s him instead of me being the brick wall. She felt a tap on her right shoulder and she looked up with a jolt.
“You okay lieutenant?” Minna asked her, her grip on Perrine’s shoulder reassuring yet firm.

“I’ll manage.” Clostermann answered in a low voice, getting over the shock.

“Still not talking?” Wilcke inquired, taking her hand away.

Perrine shook her head no. “Hardly a damn thing. If I’m lucky, I’ll get a hey or good luck every now and then, but nothing sustaining. It’s horrible.”

“Such things aren’t good for either of you or for anyone else here.” Minna stated. “The report from Lieutenant Litvyak concerning your combined actions out in the field was exemplary. It’s a shame things are turning out like this. If this continues, I’m going to have to have a talk with him.”

“With due respect commander, please don’t.” Clostermann hurriedly advised. “It might make it worse.”

Minna cocked an eyebrow and queried, “Are you saying that you know better than I on how to handle this?”

Noting the tone of voice, Perrine’s shoulder sagged and she looked away, letting the argument go. Suddenly, the doors to the messhall opened again and in stepped Aaron with his hands outstretched one second and the next covering his face as if he was splashing water on his face to rinse off some shaving cream. “Holy fucking christ those people are merciless.” he muttered loudly, walking towards the table while rubbing his face with his mammoth hands. Upon arriving back in Dover, Aaron was introduced to something that he thought was long past him, something that he had shaken for good, the prying eyes and wiles of the public. Ever since his records became public knowledge, every beat reporter, interviewer, or semi competent radio host with a microphone descended on the base like mob of angry peasants. Instead of seeking redress, they sought answers, attempting to be the first to bring to the world the words of the last surviving warlock. They had been camped out like a besieging army around the outer walls for three days straight. Not wanting to have such a sight be a blemish on their reputation, Minna had ordered him to do several interviews today just to get them to disperse. Aaron started the process at one o clock in the afternoon. It was now five thirty in the evening and he was exhausted, annoyed, and hungry, a combination that made him a walking time bomb of strained nerves. Recollecting the room from memory alone, Divale walked around the chairs of his friends, squeezed into the space that separated Perrine and him, and sat down, still rubbing his face with his hands. Leaning forwards over his placemat, he sighed loudly and finally withdrew his hands, letting them fall limp to his sides.

“That bad?” Perrine tentatively asked, bracing herself for a possible tongue lashing.

“Bad?” Aaron replied, eyes looking right at her own and as wide as saucers with an incredulous look on his face. “Bad doesn’t even begin to describe the ordeal they put me through. Their batteries of questions made the interrogations of the London underground sound like friendly fireside chats you’d have with a old acquaintance. Relentless and absolutely non stop where did you come froms, how did you get heres, what do you do on this date with so and sos, and always, can you elaborates. Put me right off.” He put his hands up in the air and looked up at the ceiling as if pleading with God. “You have no idea know many times the same question was asked, but worded just so that it sounded different.” Aaron then looked back at her and pointed back at the doors leading out of the room. “I only hope that there’s a special place in hell for those people. If this were the United States, what they subjected me through would be in direct violation of the eight amendment. I never want to see another one of their kind again.”

“You’re perfectly fine in feeling that way.” Minna stated, adding her two cents to the conversation, “I’m not too fond of the wartime press corps either, but they serve a purpose. Without them, the
public wouldn’t know about the good we’re doing here and elsewhere. It gives them faith and hope.”

“Granted,” Aaron acknowledged, letting his superior have her point made, “but I wish they went about it in a way that wasn’t so beastly. There’s got to be a better way of dealing with them.”

“If you’re implying that we simply bar them from the premises, I’ll have to say no.” Wilcke said.

*Personally, I would have you round up the bastards and shoot them, but that’s just me.* Aaron looked around the room and inquired, “Anyone have any suggestions?”

“You could also do the submission route,” Erica suggested.

Aaron cocked his eyebrow and queried, “Come again?”

“Well,” Hartmann explained, “when I started to get kills galore when we started to expand our operations in mainland Europe, it drew a lot of attention from the media. Once they managed to track us down, they pretty much never left. Practically everyday, I was hounded by reporters and radio hosts all wanting my opinions on certain things and people and what I did that day. Very distracting so I decided to tell them that I wanted a press conference and I invited every big shot out there at the time. They came and I told them that given my responsibilities, I had to heavily cut down on the appearances and instead offered them a compromise: If they got together and submitted in writing a series of fifteen or twenty questions to me to answer for their readers, I’d fill it out and sent it back to them as soon as I could. It was hard to convince them at first, but I managed to win them over, and since then, I’ve been getting a piece of paper from the pneumo every month like clockwork with questions. I get it back to them when I can and they accept it.”

Aaron sat there and opened his mouth wide in disbelief. He couldn’t say anything for the longest time before he managed to croak out, “And this is acceptable for me to do?” he asked Minna.

“Perfectly fine.” Minna assured. “If you want, we can get together and come up with certain questions or topics that they can’t ask into the bargain.”

Divale smiled and nodded approvingly. “I would like that very much.” he said happily. Then the kitchen doors opened up and out stepped Yoshika pushing a heavily laden cart full of covered platters. Despite the metal plate toppers, Aaron and company could smell the food underneath. As he sniffed, his brow furrowed. *Now this is something that I never smelled before. Such a strange yet intriguing mix of spices. Some are earthy, some vinegary, but they complement each other. What in the world is it? He looked around the table and saw that the rest of the 501st had the same idea, with the sole exception of Perrine who simply glared at Miyafuji as she came closer with the cart, the greased wheels making a slight chirping sound as they rolled over the floor. His heart sank as he recalled how the pair used to fight, a confrontation that featured his wingman being the aggressor in all cases, letting loose with a blistering barrage of verbal insults. To her credit, Yoshika took it all in stride, doing her best to pay her no mind, but the days after they got back from Russia had not softened whatever tension there was between them. It's gotten worse and worse. Perrine has been going full tilt on the poor girl and it's not fair at all. Such things are beneath her. If she only told me why she has it in for Yoshika maybe I'd begin to understand. He leaned over and whispered, “Whatever you’re smelling, just be thankful that it isn’t that surstroemming crap.”

Without looking at him, Clostermann crossed her arms over her chest and harrumphed. “That remains to be seen. Unlike you, I’ve heard stories about what passes as food over there and it’s not pretty.” she whispered back.

“Can’t be worse then what I chowed down on during my European tour.” Aaron countered. “And those aren’t hearsay.”
Perrine gave him a stern glare. “Don’t you even dare tell me the don’t knock it until you try it spiel.” she warned.

Undeterred, Divale ventured, “Well unfortunately, today isn’t your lucky day you-”

However, before he could finish, Minna stepped into the conversation with a very loud readjusting of her chair, causing both of them to stop arguing and look at her. She wasn’t amused about what going on and stated flatly while staring a hole through both of them, “Not at the table you two.” Aaron let the matter drop by sitting up straight in his chair while Perrine looked away and down at the empty placemat. Content that she had quelled this little tit for tat, Wilcke then regarded Yoshika with the approaching cart. Miyafuji had just come to a halt and started to pull the platters toward her carefully. When she got a firm grip on them, Yoshika lifted up and turned around slowly, facing the table for a brief moment before setting them down with nary a clatter.

“Learned my lesson the last time. Never serve food for this many people the hard way.” The whole process took less than half a minute and she began passing out napkins and silverware. “Wish we had chopsticks for this. You can’t enjoy Japanese cuisine right with them.”

When she finished up that task, Miyafuji then addressed everyone at the table. “Today’s breakfast is nigiri with natto and kimchi.” With a mild flourish, she pulled off ever one of the plate covers and everyone looked down at what was underneath. Aaron saw a rather interesting collection of foods each with its own distinct smell and look. The nigiri was very small, probably half the width of his first two fingers, with a vinegared rice base and a thin slice of fish that he easily identified as salmon. It was plainly raw and had some slices of pickled ginger root and some strong smelling green paste at the far end. As for the natto, it defied anything that he’d ever seen. A large helping of beans sat upon a pile of rice, positively reeking like a very strong cheese, covered in green onion and a thin drizzle of mustard. “I know that smell. This is fermented.” Finally, the kimchi, was a small side of cabbage, by the looks and smell of it, pickled and mixed with chili powder. Everyone had their own little reactions to the food in front of them, ranging from intrigue, to apprehension, to joy, and outright disgust. For his part, Aaron, ever the one to charge head long into the unknown, picked up his fork, stabbed a portion of kimchi, natto, and nigiri in succession, opened his mouth wide, and shoved it all in. Yoshika watched him chew for a good few seconds and swallow it whole, seeing the food lump in his throat travel the length of his esophagus. “Do you like it?” she asked him. For a moment, Aaron swished the inside of his mouth with his tongue, getting the last of the sticky, slimy tendrils of the natto out of the recesses of his upper gum line.

“It’s really hard to describe.” he admitted, putting his fork down. “There’s spicy and sour all mixed in with a touch of heat. Closest thing I’ve ever had to this was hot sauerkraut with some peppers and fatty beef.” He furrowed his brow and added, “I personally like it.”

“Thank-” Yoshika began to say with a smile on her face, but she was rudely interrupted by a loud clatter from a dropped utensil on porcelain. The pair looked and saw Clostermann eyeing Yoshika with a face that was purple with rage, hands clenched so hard on a cloth napkin that knuckles turned white. Miyafuji drew back in fear with her left hand near her face. “Is something wrong?” she tentatively asked.

“Wrong?” Perrine began with menacing voice, barely keeping her anger down enough to form a coherent sentence. “I’ve been waiting for a breakfast for a good fifteen minutes, expecting it to be something palatable and all I get in return for my patience is this pig slop!” Towards the end, her tone rose and rose to the point of breaking, drawing a shocked silence from all present. In a flash, she cocked her right hand back and threw the napkin straight at Yoshika’s face. Though she didn’t bunch it up at all and it merely struck the Japanese witch with the force of a doves feather, the damage was done. Miyafuji started to cry, tears falling down her face before the napkin had even hit the ground. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and take this shit back to Japan where you
belong!” Clostermann ended.

*That’s fucking it.* Aaron’s patience with his wingman’s uncalled for behavior had reached it’s end. The dam holding back his temper burst and he reached out with his left hand, grabbing Perrine’s uniform collar hard and drawing a surprised and pained yelp from her. With a twist of his wrist, he forcibly wrenched her head around, making her face him and all his pissed off glory, face hard as granite and teeth clenched in anger. “The fuck is up your ass today?!” he bellowed. Before Perrine could even form a response, a shadow came over Divale’s head with the speed of light, before materializing as a gunmetal gray uniform sleeve and a small hand with trimmed fingernails.

“Back off and let her go master sergeant.” Minna ordered slowly yet forcefully. Aaron glanced at the hand for a moment as his eyes traveled the length of the arm until ending at the terminus point of his vision, his orbs unable to go any further. They righted themselves and stared right back at Clostermann, who looked right back at him in fear, fear that he’d seen only once, at the Vienna training battle close to a month ago. His breathing was heavy and ragged from the anger coursing through his veins. He truly didn’t want to let go at all, wishing that he could get some answers out of her. *But no matter what, she’s my CO and I said that I would obey.* Closing his spectacled eyes and sighing in defeated reluctance, Aaron let go slowly and let his left arm drop to his side. “Lieutenant.” Wilcke commanded. “Remanded to quarters, now.” Without protest, Perrine got up from her chair, straightening out the collar that Divale had wrinkled up with his hand, and walked on out, with nary a look back. Despite not being able to look directly behind him, the warlock could feel the ire of the commander blazing with the heat of an erupting volcano behind him. “As for you–” Minna began, but the rest of her sentence died from the sounds of a young woman sobbing. Aaron looked to his right and saw Yoshika standing near the head of the table, her hands to her face, crying uncontrollably. It broke his heart to see such a good person laid low for no good reason.

“What did I do?” Miyafuji mewled. “I’ve done nothing wrong.” She took her hands away, revealing her face and collective gasps from everyone present echoed throughout the room. Just over her left cheekbone was an ugly black smear of a bruise and her head drooped down, her chin in her chest. Minna’s eyes widened and her arms holding Aaron back from doing anything rash dropped. Sensing his opportunity, Divale pushed off his left foot hard and side flipped over the width of the table, tumbling like a pinwheel in a heavy breeze before landing perfectly on his two feet a foot and a half away from Yoshika.

Kneeling down, he instructed, “Let me see the bruise. Does it hurt bad?”

Miyafuji looked up at him with a confused look to her face. “What bruise? I’m fine.” Now confused as well, Aaron took a closer look at the mark. With his right index finger, her grazed her skin, feeling something greasy come off onto his digit. Retracting his hand and running it around his index and thumb, he recognized what it was. *Butchers crayon.* His head whipped around and he started to look for the napkin that Perrine had thrown at her. Finding it, he picked it up carefully and brought it back to the table, unfolding it and spreading it out over the wood. Parts of it were unintelligible, the meaning forever lost, but enough remained to catch the meaning in the fabric. **THE HANGER 1100 HOURS FOR THE RIGHT TO REMAIN.**

Commander Wilcke looked at the message and knew what it was. *Just like with Toth and Bishop. A duel.* “Did you know anything about this scheme of hers Aaron?” she inquired out of curiosity.

“If I did, I would’ve given her a lot more than a mere ruffled collar.” Aaron replied seething. “This–”

“Maybe she’s right.” Yoshika suddenly blurted out, looking away and low at the floor. “Maybe I don’t belong here at all.” With a sudden jerk of her neck, she looked at Minna and stated, “Commander, I-”
“No!” Aaron screamed, shocking all to silence. He left the table in a flash and walked right up to her in less than two strides. Yoshika didn’t know what to expect, but she began to cry again. I’m useless. There’s nothing more I can do here. Then she felt two long strong arms embrace her and draw her into a muscular midsection. Opening her tear filled orbs, she saw that Divale had come up and given her a hug out of silent solidarity. He took off his glasses and placed them in his back pocket. Looking down at her from his height, he said, “Don’t you ever say that here or anywhere where I can hear you again.”

“But-” Yoshika started to reply, but Aaron knelt down again and gave her a soft stare, one that stilled the words in her throat.

“Perrine is completely and utter wrong about you, just as she was with me not so long ago.” Aaron explained. “You belong here Yoshika. True, you weren’t here when it all started or came from a martial background like some of us here, but you recognized something that she has lost sight of. You see, we aren’t in this for money, pride, land, or love. We aren’t fighting against a tyrant or fleeing from persecution. We’re in this for the species. We fight for our right to live. Every single person who wishes to grow old, to see the beauty that this world contains, to enjoy life to it’s fullest is an asset to the war effort.” He pointed at her with his right hand, index finger extended. “You knew this and made a choice that not many want to make, yet you did. That and you’ve done so much good. If it wasn’t for you, Perrine and Gertrude would be dead. If it wasn’t for you, Lynette would never have gained the confidence to shoot down that Neuroi that threatened his very base I before I got here.” He paused and smiled. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d never would’ve taken the steps to try to get better. As far as I see it, you have the biggest heart in the entire squadron and I have eight chambers.”

His comment drew a chuckle from Yoshika who dried her eyes with her sleeve. “But a duel,” she said, shaking her head, “a duel that I might not be able to win.”

“You can win,” Aaron assured, “and you will.”

Miyafuji looked at him wide eyed as if she couldn’t believe what her ears were hearing. “You’re her-” she started, but Aaron abruptly cut her off.

“Who she is to me has no bearing on this present situation.” Divale emphatically stated. “Perrine may be my wingman and stand with her, but in life, there comes a time where you have to stand alongside what’s right, even if it puts you at odds with your allies.” He stood up to his full height and placed a meaty right hand on her shoulder. “I stand with you in this and I don’t know about everyone else here, but I can almost guarantee you that all here feel the same way.” Yoshika’s eyes drifted behind Aaron’s bulk and looked over her friends who had been listening to them talk. Their eyes were full of love and support for her. They are all behind me. “Yet now comes the hard part.” Aaron continued, drawing her attention back to him and taking his right hand off her shoulder. “The fight ahead. It will not be easy, but you can win this.”

“How?” Yoshika asked. “Perrine has been in the squadron for a lot longer and knows how to dogfight. I’ve barely been able to practice and train in those sorts of things.”

“Simple.” Aaron explained. “You have to get angry. May not be the best option you have, but its the only option you’ve got. Right now, she thinks you’re broken, that her ploy has unnerved you to the point of you giving up without a fight. She’s wrong. All Perrine’s done is give you focus, a reason to not only get back at her, but to get even. To do that, you need to bring all that’s she’s done to you, every word, every gesture, every imperceptible slight against you and coalesce it into a red hot bubbling liquid rage that will make you act and react in ways that she’ll be unable to fathom. She won’t have any way to counter it effectively. And when you knock that rich girl out of the sky and
she comes to on the ground, sore and defeated, you’ll be there, grabbing her collar, drawing her close to you, and screaming in her face, ‘My name is Yoshika Miyafuji! I’m a human being and I will be treated as such God damn it!’.” Aaron then stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. “So what do you say?” he asked. “You ready to serve her a hefty slice of crow pie?”

Miyafuji looked down at the floor and closed her eyes. In the back of her mind, she could hear the words that her father spoke to her many years ago. Use your power to protect people. Well father, to protect those that I care about, I’ll have to harm in order to do so. I don’t want to do it, but Aaron is right. I do belong here and I will remain here with them. They are my friends, my family. She opened her eyes and tilted her head up, face full of determination. “Commander Wilcke?” she inquired. When Minna regarded her, she added, “I accept the duel.”

Minna looked at Yoshika for a long time before nodding. Turning to Mio, she gestured out towards the messhall doors with her head. Sakamoto got the hint and politely excused herself from the table. “After the lieutenant has a quick word with the major, we’ll start getting everything set up.” she answered. “You can go to the hanger and get your preflight checks done now.” Miyafuji bowed respectfully and left the room without a word, that hard look on her face. Aaron in the meanwhile watched her go, walking back up to the table. “What are you thinking over there master sergeant?” Wilcke inquired.

Aaron plucked his glasses out of his pocket and put them back on his face. “I think someone is about to shock the world.” he replied with a slight grin, as he looked at Yoshika push the doors open and walk on out.

“I wouldn’t be to proud of that little pep talk you just gave.” Minna retorted, the sounds of the closing messhall doors dull and heavy. “This situation is as much your fault as it is hers.” Aaron whipped his head around and stared at his commanding officer, flabbergasted that she would eve say such a thing. “My fault?!” he said, placing his right hand on his chest. Minna said nothing and Divale sucked in his teeth and placed his hands into his pockets, slightly turning to the left. “Alright.” he admitted, putting both his arms into the air in resignation. “It’s my fault.” He pointed to the note on the napkin and the doors and acknowledged, “That is my fault, that is my fault, its all my mess.” He then reached over across the width of the table with his right had and pulled his plate over to him. “Yet I’ll tell you this commander.” he stated, taking a nigiri off the plate and popping it into his mouth. He chewed for a bit before maneuvering it to the left cheek, the fleshy pocket bulging like a chipmunks. “I clean up my messes. By any means necessary.”

Perrine closed the door to her personal locker and flicked the dial lock in silence, doing her best to focus on what she was about to do. Across to her left, she could see Yoshika lacing up her shoes with a look that she had never seen on her face before, her brown eyes burning with an intensity that rivaled Aaron’s when he got angry. Like her, Miyafuji keep her focus on her task, completing it quickly and efficiently before moving away and walking to the other side of the hanger. Though she could’ve turned to her right and looked at her, Clostermann felt a chill run down her spine when the Japanese witch revolved the opposite direction. Her eyes followed Miyafuji as she walked away towards Minna’s office, presumably to pick up her training gun. Will go for her 20mm cannon, one that’s similar to the major’s. Have to not get hit even once by that thing. With the exception of Commander Wilcke and Master Sergeant Divale, everyone was in the hanger, waiting for the duel to take place and minding their own business by way of cleaning their Strikers or talking in muted voices. She couldn’t hear what they were saying at all, but Perrine’s mind didn’t need much imagination to figure out what was being discussed. They don’t want this duel to happen. They’ve seen this exact same scene play out too many times to count in the past. All those other women, Toth,
nearly Bishop on a few occasions, and now with Yoshika. Then, she felt eyes looking upon her. Shifting her gaze, Clostermann could see the furtive glares she got from everyone in the room. There was no warmth in their eyes, no joy, no encouragement, just disapproval, contempt, even hate. It broke her for a moment, causing her to look upon her locker and press her head against the cool metal. The sensation did nothing to cure her doubts and the conflict raging within her chest. *They’ll never understand why I do this. If only they could truly see the merit in what I’m doing. This isn’t me being petty, it’s me being merciful.*

Light suddenly trickled in from the far end of the hanger and in walked Minna with Aaron in tow. The two were conversing in heated way, but Perrine couldn’t hear a single word of it for they spoke in hushed tones. However, even from this distance away, she could still read lips and could make out the phrases ‘not permissible’ and ‘five minutes’. This went on for a few seconds longer until Aaron put up his right hand, splaying his fingers out wide, again imploring the commander for five minutes worth of time. Instead of denying him his request, Wilcke nodded and Divale visibly sighed, his shoulders heaving up and down. He then started to walk up to the row of lockers where Perrine was and hardly looked at her. It was at that point that Clostermann noticed that he had something in his pocket, something small and box shaped. *Now what in the world could that be?* It didn’t take the warlock long to reach his locker. He looked it over carefully, making sure that it wasn’t trapped again. Though it took place long ago, Perrine could still hear the sound of Erica’s rump being twisted into that pie. *She said that she would get you back and she did with painting your entire room pink, save for your personal belongings of course.* She absentmindedly smiled as she remembered Divale getting Hartmann back for that by dredging up a ponds worth of frogs and setting them loose in her room as she slept. The lieutenant screamed her head off so loud she woke up half the squadron. Minna punished him by having him retrieve every single amphibian from her domicile, quite the feat considering how messy Erica’s room was. *Very strange that he didn’t get laundry duty for that.* “Why are you smiling?” she heard someone ask. Those words brought her back to reality and she again found herself in the hanger, looking at Aaron with an idiotic grin to her face.

Recognizing her error, Perrine stammered, “I-I was just thinking—”

“I find that very hard to believe.” Aaron rudely interrupted, opening his locker with his left hand and reaching into his pocket with his right. In a flat second, he fished out the object, but his hand was so big that his fingers closed over it completely, obscuring any possible views of it.

“I understand you’re upset, but this is for the greater good.” Clostermann explained.

“I’m not upset,” Aaron replied through his gritted teeth as he placed whatever it was in his locker, “I’m pissed right the fuck off.” At the conclusion of his sentence, he slammed the metal door to the locker shut, the impact sounding like a gunshot. He stared at her with a look of sheer disgust. “You’re a real piece of work you know that? A duel? Are you fucking serious? Of all the times to dig up eighteen century stupidity, you had to choose now? This is the twentieth century Perrine. Chivalry is dead and so are it’s grandchildren. How you went about this is so beneath you, a snake’s balls ride higher.” He calmly walked up to her, glaring at her from his vantage point. “You need to call this off for the greater good.” he added, mocking her statement from before.

Clostermann remained calm, showing no fear as she returned Aaron’s stare with one of her own, one of indifference and cool determination. “I’m not afraid of you.” she said, meaning every word.

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me Perrine.” Aaron pleaded. “I want you to listen to me and understand just how stupid this all is to me and everyone else. Look around you, no one wants to see this and no one is in your corner offering support.”

“You would if you understood the reasons why.” Clostermann retorted.
“And I might understand those if you actually told me.” Aaron countered forcefully. “Thought I’ve taken a few hard knocks to the old chrome dome, I’m far from stupid.”

“Says the one with such an deep perception of human psychology.” Perrine stated scornfully. She was starting to have enough and started to walk over to the launch dais, but Aaron placed himself between her and the launch pad with a deft shift of his body.

“We need every gun in the fight and this isn’t going to help us.” Aaron reasoned. “You’re only making the squadron weaker.”

“Out of my way Aaron.” she said coldly, trying to keep her annoyance under control. “My mind’s made up and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

Aaron’s shoulders sagged just like his confidence and he looked down for a split second.

Clostermann tried to then maneuver around him, but he suddenly blurted out, “I forgive you.” The answer stayed her advance, rooting her to the spot as her mind digested what she just heard.

She blinked quickly twice and ventured, “What did you say?”

Aaron looked back up at her with a soft stare. “I forgive you for what you did back in Russia.” he reiterated. “I won’t apologize for the what I said or how I reacted back there, but in terms of you spying on me, I accept the reasons why you did it and I’m willing to put that behind us.” He then put out his right hand, palm extended and added, “I’ll even throw in a bonus. I already said I’ll treat that as water under the bridge, but I’ll allow you to come back into the circle of trust with me. Call off the duel, and you’re back in no questions asked. It will be like this never happened. Let’s go back to being friends with a big F his time. What do you say?”

Perrine then had a conflict of conscience erupt within her soul. She stepped back and started to think on the offer, pondering that resulted in her putting her hands on her hips and pacing, mouth moving a million miles an hour, but with no words coming out. _Oh God what do I do? I want to get back in his good graces and I do want what we have as wingmen to continue, but I don’t want to lose face with everyone else by backing out of this duel. Yoshika needs to go and this might be my only chance to do it. Maybe I can- “Aaron-” _she began to say, but Aaron yet again cut her off.

“It’s a yes or no answer Perrine.” he said. “I can see the conflict within you. You know you both to happen, but you can only chose one. I’ll accept whatever you decide, but understand this: Short of a miracle, you’ll never get a better shot than this ever again.”

Clostermann then put her head in her hands and ran her palms from her cheeks all the way back to the nape of the neck, fingers digging into her hair and running along her scalp. With a quick jerk, she gestured for him to come over to her. Curious and somehow elated at this breakthrough, Aaron complied. Perrine then leaned in and whispered in such a low voice that even the warlock’s hearing could barely pick it up,” What are you willing to do to protect those that you care about?”

Aaron back his head up and looked at her with confusion. _What the fuck kind of- As soon as he thought it, his keen mind then broke the code and it made his eyes widen in realization, his mouth dropping open in surprise. Images flashed through his mind, scenes from the past encounters between her and him before they made peace, little bits and pieces of conversations from there and here, chaotically spinning about in his brain like a whirlwind, yet all making perfect plausible reasoning. Now I get it! The whole hostility between Yoshika and Perrine wasn’t due to her hating her at all. She wants her out to protect her from getting hurt, to not have her witness the horrors that will surely follow if she continues down this path. How far back does this all go? Did she try to do it to Bishop, me, and all the other pilots that had tried to make here? He placed his hands to his temples and rocked his head back slowly, eyes darting this way and that. After some time he looked
back at her and pointed at her with his right hand. “And you think this is the best way to show how much you care?” he inquired. Clostermann said nothing to defend herself, letting the revelation speak for her instead. Aaron violently shook his head back and forth and uttered disdainfully, “I can’t believe you Perrine. I can’t fucking believe you at all.” He started to back up and away from her. “You’re just as bad as someone I know.” he shot out before he turned around and walked away.

“I don’t know who this person is, but I’m not as bad as they are.” Perrine responded loudly, her voice carrying to all corners of the hanger.

Aaron whipped around, still retreating away, walking backwards. He rose both his arms into the air and admitted, “You’re right.” Divale let them drop down, his palms clapping against his thighs. “You’re worse.” he fired. Out of nowhere, he heard a slight throat clear and he quickly craned his neck around to see who made the sound. The tiny din came from Minna who looked at him in a way that reminded Aaron of the first night they met slightly over a month ago. Instantly, he felt afraid for he knew what he meant and that she knew what he meant by what he said. *Fuck me.*

By minute degrees, Wilcke’s mouth opened. “I seem to recall some crates down in the armory that need to be marked and put away.” she stated without warmth, her eyes piercing his soul. “Would you be so kind as to get them taken care of?” Aaron knew that there were no crates down there. The shipment doesn’t come in until tomorrow. However, he knew why she was saying it. She wants me alone to discuss this in depth. I really messed up now.

“Yes commander. Right away.” Aaron curtly replied with a salute. Rather then returning it, Minna merely gestured with her head towards her office and presumably the elevator. Understanding, Aaron quickly walked over to the office door and almost had his right hand on the knob when it suddenly opened. Out stepped Yoshika with her training gun, a 20mm cannon in her right hand. Slung over her back was a Bren. She looked up at him in wonder, but Aaron was in no mood for small talk and briskly walked past her without a word of explanation, closing the door gently behind him.

Minna looked on in silence, but inside she was raging. *How dare her even suggest such a thing! What the hell is he thinking in saying that!* She kept an indifferent face and called out, “Come on up sergeant! No time like the present.” Yoshika picked up her pace and trotted over, a look of sheer stone as she glared at Clostermann. *Looks like Aaron did more than give her confidence. He’s instilled in her an unshakable belief that she can win this. Perrine may have bitten off more than she can chew this time.* Wilcke spied the Bren and quipped, “Looks like the sergeant has taken the liberty of procuring your weapon for you. Seems to me that you’re getting forgetful at the worst time lieutenant.” Perrine stiffed a tad, taking the rebuke as well a foot does with a rock grating against it in a shoe. “Get to the launch pad for preflight briefing.” she ordered. Clostermann obeyed hurriedly, reaching the dais first and hopping into her Strikers. The pair fit snugly, as they always did, and she could feel the latent energy coursing through the complex circuitry. Miyafuji ascended the step soon afterwards, yet instead of going to her side of the launch pad where her Strikers were located, she went over to Perrine. With ease, she unslung the Bren and held it out to her. The two stared at each other for a good few seconds before the lieutenant reached out and took the weapon from the sergeant. As Yoshika turned away, her lip curled in contempt for a moment before disappearing. Perrine saw it and felt an icy cold sensation deep inside. *I’ve never seen her this angry, even in the beginning with all those arguments. What am I getting into?* As the Japanese witch went over to her Strikers and started to put them on Minna began her speech. “Alright you two. The rules for this exercise are simple and threefold. First, combat is restricted to castle grounds only. Go outside of the area, you lose. Secondly, no physical contact is allowed. If that happens, I’m calling the duel off and the offender gets grounded until I say further. Finally, maximum height is five thousand feet. Everyone understand?” Both Perrine and Yoshika nodded respectfully prompting Wilcke to conclude, “Then get on up and await my arrival. Launch when ready.” Almost as one, two separate
pairs of Striker engines roared to life and the resulting winds caused the commander’s auburn hair to swirl about. Minna paid the disturbance no mind, remaining as cool as the opposite side of the pillow, listening to the rotors swinging away and the locking mechanisms release the Strikers with a metallic clunk. Suddenly, the pilots launched themselves up into the air, going straight up into the skies, making sure that they kept apart to avoid getting caught up in their engine washes. Up and through the hole in the ceiling they went, into the early April day, a sunny slightly cloudy scene with little wind. With them out and about Wilcke then proceeded to walked over to her Strikers, but as soon as she was about to insert her right leg into the right machine, her communicator crackled to life.

“Dover Tower 5 calling 501st HQ! Dover Tower 5 calling 501st HQ! Please respond!”

Yoshika leveled off at five thousand feet, just as Commander Wilcke instructed and took in the sun. It brought little warmth as her mind wandered to when Aaron went past her into Minna’s office. He looked so sad, like he failed in something very important. Nearby Striker rotors shifting into the hover mode made her turn around where she saw Perrine brandishing her training Bren, looking away at the distant continent where her homeland lay. The sight made Miyafuji somber and she asked, “Are you okay?”

Clostermann whipped her head around in a flash, anger on her face. “I’m fine sergeant.” she snapped.

Yoshika knew that she was lying and pressed, “You’re not are you? What happened down there between you and Aaron?”

“It’s none of your business, now shut up.” Perrine retorted. With a simple twitch of some key leg muscles in a certain pattern, Yoshika flew on over to the lieutenant, hellbent on finding out the answer. Clostermann saw this and ordered, “Stay away from me you stupid girl. I’m warning you.” Her words had no effect as Miyafuji calmly hovered closer and closer. Perrine then aimed her machine gun directly at her and restated, “You go no further or I will shoot you.”

Yoshika spread her arms out wide. “Then go ahead and shoot Perrine, because I’m not stopping,” she replied. Clostermann said nothing in return, her right index finger firmly pressed against the thin metal trigger. Miyafuji kept right on going until her chest pressed against the tip of the barrel. The two stared each other down, neither saying a single word for a few seconds.

“Why did you have to be here?” Perrine asked, shaking her head to and fro. “You should be back in Japan. You should be back where you’re needed with your mother and grandmother minding that clinic. This place isn’t for you. Don’t you see that?”

“I’m here because I freely chose to be.” Yoshika answered. “I’m here to keep the promise I made to my father all those years ago, to protect people. You’re here because of a promise too, and like me, nothing will prevent you from fulfilling it, not even death itself.”

“You can’t possibly care as much as I do about the suffering of others.” Perrine shot back. “You weren’t there when Paris, my capital, my City of Lights had it’s home fires put out for good. You have a country to go back to. I don’t.”

Yoshika placed her right arm on Perrine’s shoulder and said, “If I didn’t care as much as I do about you and everyone else here, I’d never have stayed for as long as I have.” She thought for a brief moment and added, “While I do have a nation to call home, free from the enemy, I still fight to protect it and to liberate those that have already fallen. I understand why you want me gone Perrine.
and I don’t blame you for it at all.”

“Oh yeah?” Clostermann mocked, letting the gun dip lower to the point where an accidental pull of the trigger wouldn’t riddle Yoshika with painballs. “Then me then, oh wise one. Why do I want you to leave?”

“Because you’re afraid.” Yoshika simply stated, her voice level and emotionless. She saw Perrine’s eyes widen in anger at such a bold proclamation, but then grow subdued, and finally look away.

“You don’t want to see anymore people like myself die.” Clostermann’s face turned back face hers and Miyafuji could see tears forming at the edges. “I forgive you.” The sergeant took her right hand off Perrine’s shoulder. “You still want me to go?”

Before Clostermann could open her mouth to speak, Minna’s voice came over the comms. “Drop you training guns! Exercise is over! We’re under attack! Stay where you are!” Both witches complied and looked at the hanger opening. Out of it shot the commander, going at maximum speed and carrying three MG42s, one in either hand and the last slung over her back, ammo belts dangling like brass chains around her waist and shoulders. “Dover 5 reports two bogeys coming in along grid B2, low and hot! Take a gun!” Perrine took the left machine gun while Yoshika snatched the right. Minna hurriedly parceled out the ammo from her shoulders, unslung the last MG42 from her back, popped the receiver up, weaved the .30 caliber rounds inside, slammed it down, and pulled the bolt back. “Let’s move people! They’ll be over Dover airspace within five minutes!” She then sped off south east, both former enemies coming together behind here.

“Do we know the type commander?” Perrine asked, hefting the unfamiliar weapon in her hands.

“Dover 5 complied a list of possibilities from multiple perimeter reports over the past few months and have determined that they could be multiroles.” Wilcke responded.

“What are those?” Yoshika inquired anxiously.

“Fighters that can switch up their combat capabilities in midflight. They’re some of the most dangerous types a witch can encounter. Stay close to me and do as I say sergeant.” Minna illuminated with more than a hefty amount of warning in her voice. She looked out over the horizon and focused her magic, allowing her to enhance all in front of her many times like a hawk. It made her cold and her breath appear as mist, but it didn’t harm or hinder her in the least. They were now past the mainland and over the Channel proper. The waters were an azure blue and calm, starkly contrasting with the low hanging cloud cover that hung over everything like a white fluffy blanket, casting wide pillars of shadows. Wind was negligible and the sun was periodically covered. That doesn’t leave many avenues for ambushes, but we must be vigilant. Where are you two? Where is the enemy?

Then the edges of her vision picked up a pair of fast moving dots coming in low and fast. There they are. I just hope us three are enough. “Stick to me ladies and we’ll take them down! Climb to seven thousand feet and prepare to dive on them!” A shift of three pairs of Striker rotors upwards caused the triplets to climb hard, bleeding speed, but the price had to be paid to get the best attack angle. The cloud cover overhead came so close to their heads that some stray hairs from Minna actually cut a furrow into the mass, a deep gash that disappeared as quickly as it came. Wilcke slowed down and shouldered her MG42, keeping a close on on the two bandits that were closing in. The enemy fighters were rhomboid in shape like shaped pieces of black glass and had two beamer blisters on the front and rear. A trio of red lines ran across the width and pulsed with an unnatural rhythm, but Minna knew from painful experience that they knew they were coming. No surprises here. Need to make this quick. “Dive now!” she yelled.

As one, the witches dove on their foes, engines screaming like banshees. Wilcke’s trigger finger was itching to let loose destruction, but intuition stayed her instincts. Not yet. Not until we get closer. The
enemy fighters continued to grow and grow, their bodies going from the size of kites to barn doors. Suddenly, the both the Neuroi shifted their air frames to the left, going from vertical to horizontal and pointing their beamers straight ahead. “Fire!” Minna ordered, just as her finger squeezed the trigger. Lead spat out of the three MG42s and buzzed like angry bees as they flew through the air. In response, the enemy rose from their low altitude positions and spun, making them less of a target, beams freeming straight back at their assailants. Most the shots missed from both sides, with only the occasional glancing ricochet off an angled surface or the chiming of struck shields. After the pass, Minna and company started to veer to the right with the intention of pursuing their targets. However, the enemy wasn’t too keen on letting them get strafed again and pulled Immelmann turns at high speeds. Now the hunters were the hunted. Realizing what was happening, Wilcke barked, “Yoshika! Reverse and provide cover with your shield! We’re going into the scissors! Perrine! Reduce speed on three, two, one!” At the conclusion of the one, Miyafuji did as she was ordered and flipped over on her back, focusing her magic so that her shield would enlarge and cover most of the incoming fire that would be coming their way. Clostermann pulled back on the throttle, trying to match the commander. The maneuver was accomplished just as the Neuroi started firing again. Up and down they went as they navigated the scissors, sharply ascending and descending, all the while shifting speeds to create some sort of separation with the goal of getting the foe to break off or overshoot. Yoshika returned fire as best she could, pulling and letting go of the trigger sparingly as to conserve ammunition. Red beams plinked off the fringes of her shields, the echoing of the hits drowning out the gunshots and the Striker rotors. They’re moving too fast for me to do anything and they keep avoiding my shots. Such a small target in the front. Wait a second… that’s it!

“Commander!” Yoshika yelled into her communicator. “I have an idea. If you and the lieutenant pull a post stall high g flip, you might be able to get both of them.”

“No way.” Perrine retorted. “One might get past us and you’d be in it’s sights the whole way.”

“And we’ll be behind it and force it to disengage, to make a run for it.” Minna said calmly, nodding to herself as she formed a plan in her head. She turned and asked Perrine, “You ready for the turn?” At first, Clostermann was to surprised to react, which prompted Wilcke to explain, “It’s the only move we’ve got right now. Yoshika’s shields won’t last forever. We flip and fire when we see the targets. You take one, I get the other. Got it?” Perrine quickly regained her composure and nodded. She closed her eyes for a split second and silently prayed. Please God let this work. I don’t know how I’d be able to live down her death if it doesn’t. The pair dove one last time and Clostermann swallowed hard, waiting for Minna to give the order. A second later when the two started to climb up again Wilcke bellowed, “Kill them now!” With a flexing of her calves, the Striker rotors spluttered and died. The lack of forward thrust gave them a temporary period of weightlessness that they used to arch their backs. Incoming wind pushed them backwards as they spun around. The enemy was far too late in recognizing their error and could do nothing as the witches picked their targets and fired. Machine guns barked, bullets whined, and deep pockmarks appeared all along the tops of the Neuroi. One split apart down the middle, the two pieces spinning away into the water, while the other lingered for a bit longer before disintegrating into white flakes. Both witches then restarted their Strikers and placed themselves in a hover. “Double kill on enemy bandits confirmed Dover 5. Any more of them on your screens?” Minna relayed.

“Nothing on our end Commander Wilcke.” the radio operator for the radar tower happily replied. “Great job out there. You can RTB when ready.”

“Roger that Dover 5. Commander Wilcke out.” Minna answered. She cut the link and looked over at her pilots. Perrine hovered nearby while Yoshika did a lazy left turn. “Show’s over ladies. Let’s go home.” Thus the victorious witches started to make their way back to Dover castle, Minna in front with Perrine and Yoshika bringing up the rear.
While they were cruising at five thousand feet, Clostermann regarded Yoshika. “That was the dumbest idea anyone has ever suggested.” she remarked.

“If the dumbest idea ever suggested works, is it really that dumb?” Yoshika countered. Perrine looked away shaking her head. Miyafuji drew herself closer, making sure she didn’t get too close and whispered, “My question still stands you know.”

The French lieutenant looked deep into her Japanese counterpart’s eyes and slowly extended her right hand. “You’re not going anywhere Yoshika.” Perrine answered, smiling with tear filled orbs. “Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. You’ve earned your place here and can fly with me any day.”

“It would be my honor.” Miyafuji intoned, taking Perrine’s hand and giving it a squeeze.

All the while, Minna listened in on the conversation and gave a smile of her own. Well that settles that little spat. Now we just have to get Clostermann and Divale to get along again. “Minna?” Mio’s voice crackled over the air waves. “You read me?”

There’s concern in that tone she’s using. This can’t be good. “Read you loud and clear major. What’s going on?” Minna queried.

“We just got a message from Tunbridge Wells.” Sakamoto explained. “And it’s not good at all.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Against Minna's wishes, Aaron sneaks out of Dover Castle during the night in order to face down the banshee alone in order to protect his friends. Ismenoth successfully manages to halt his departure long enough to leave behind a message in the concrete of the vehicle depot, a handwritten carving that is found by Yoshika who raises the alarm. Divale reaches the woods and the demon within him again tries to reason with him, but like before pays it no mind. Within the lair of darkness, Aaron and the banshee meet and a brutal fight ensues. Yoshika, Perrine, Minna, and Shirley arrive in the nick of time to save him, but the warlock is grievously wounded and has to be given emergency treatment at Lucretia's flat. Desperate measures are taken and Aaron pulls through. Afterwards, he forgives Perrine and brings her back in his circle of trust. However, in the other room, Lucretia hides away and reads a foreboding letter from her mysterious benefactors.

Chapter XXXVIII: When The Night Comes Down

The face of evil takes many forms. Some may be hideous to behold while others could very well pass for the cripple across the street begging for alms. You have to be vigilant at all times, to suspect all with a clinical eye, and show no mercy when you discover it. Be sure to equip yourself for the task. Take nothing that is of no use. This last part may include friends as well, for while they will defend you for a time, you can never truly rely on them when the clash begins. You see, they know not of the evil that you know and thus will not react in the same way as you. This makes them a liability. In short, the only person you can count on is yourself.

Diary Entry February 20th 1940

The knob felt cool in his right hand as Aaron slowly turned it clockwise. He was in his room, fully clothed and it was pitch black. Darkness was nothing to him for he had memorized where everything was in his domicile by this point. Eschewing his glasses, Divale’s eyes gave off a bronze glow that weakly illuminated his hand and the watch around his wrist. The watch hands read 12:45 in the morning. Finally, the knob stopped turning and he gently pushed the door open. Aaron leaned in, poking his head carefully out, looking up and down the hallway. The witchfire torches burned softly in their sconces, their false flames dancing about, casting bulbous auras of light. Little of the way up or down the corridor was free from the light and it made him frown. That will cast shadows. We can’t have that. He held out both his hands, palms out, one arm going out to the left and the other to the right. “Extinguo.” Divale whispered. An invisible wind whooshed from his palms and flew down the hallway. As it passed, each witchfire torch flickered briefly and died, leaving no trace of their passing, not even a stray wisp of smoke. Aaron smiled and calmly strolled out past the threshold of his room and into the hallway. He took hold of the door knob with his left hand and pushed the door
shut. The bolt gave a tiny click as it closed completely and Aaron began to walk down the corridor towards the stairs, taking care to walk in places that would muffle his footsteps, like along the edges of the walls, slightly bypassing the plinths of armor or weapon cases. His ears concentrated on what was not only ahead but behind, wary that someone would could pop out at an inopportune time. If that were to happen, what would I say? Maybe just claim restlessness or even going down to the study to do another painting. They won’t know the difference. Soon, Aaron came to the stairs that lead to the ground floor and started to walk down them. Keeping his neck craned to the left and leading with his toes instead of his heels, he descended. Then, as he got halfway down, he heard something from below, a clattering of a tea cup on a saucer, and he froze like a statue instantly. His heart started beating rapidly and his eye darted to and fro, trying to judge where that noise came from. Sounds like the kitchen to me, which means that the messhall doors are open. Which also means that my most direct route is now exposed to prying eyes. Will have to get even sneakier.

Soon, Aaron came to the stairs that lead to the ground floor and started to walk down them. Keeping his neck craned to the left and leading with his toes instead of his heels, he descended. Then, as he got halfway down, he heard something from below, a clattering of a tea cup on a saucer, and he froze like a statue instantly. His heart started beating rapidly and his eye darted to and fro, trying to judge where that noise came from. Sounds like the kitchen to me, which means that the messhall doors are open. Which also means that my most direct route is now exposed to prying eyes. Will have to get even sneakier.

Taking a deep breath, he continued down the stairs, going that much quicker. Within a few more seconds, he finally made the ground floor. “Erit invertendo.” he whispered. He jumped up and flipped in midair. However, instead of falling back down to earth, he landed feet first on the high ceiling and crouched down as low as he could feasible could go. Magical wisps of dull blue drifted from the soles of his shoes, rooting him firmly to the surface against all known laws of gravity. Placing his palm against his left breast pocket, holding secure his spectacles as he unbuttoned it, Aaron fished them out and placed them on his face, holding them fast for his magic did not extend to his glasses at all. Slowly, he advanced while crouch walking, looking like a dwarf from Snow White trotting back to the cottage after a hard days work in the mines. He nary made a sound, listening intently for any other signs of the person he knew was going to be up ahead. An earthy scent reached his nostrils and his mind worked overtime trying to ascertain what it was. Not a cigarette for the smell isn’t that harsh. Maybe it’s tea. Yet what kind? It isn’t marigold so that eliminates Perrine, isn’t early gray so that nixes Lynette. Seems like it’s just plain tea leaves in water. Oh no. That only leaves two options Yoshika or Mio. One I can deal with, the other… No way around it. Need to get in, get past, and duck into the motor pool as quick as I can. Aaron picked up his pace, the door to the messhall still open, the moonlight from the windows inside casting a long silvery light. Good, that will let me know that they’re… As soon as Divale thought it, a black shape appeared at the base of the illumination, getting bigger and bigger, the sounds of not so subtle footsteps ringing in his ears. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Move it!

With circumstances as they were, Aaron took both his hands and touched the soles of his boots. Swirling his fingers against the tough leather, he took long streams of his magic and ran them along the length of his torso while falling forward. He managed to extend them out enough to brace his fall, but not in time to prevent a dull thud from emanating from the ceiling tiles. Divale then tried to crawl forwards in a mad attempt to get over the threshold or even to the far left side, but then the black shadow finally materialized into a new figure, that of Yoshika Miyafuji in a white kimono, holding a cup and saucer, the liquid tea steaming up.

Aaron watched her from above, like a spider eyeing its prey before diving on it with its fangs out. Unlike the spider however, he was far from secure in his position and he held his breath as the witch, barely five feet below him now, stood there breathing in the night air. Don’t look up Yoshika. Don’t look up please. His mouth went dry and his breathing became shallow to the point that if someone had found him right now that he would appear dead. Aaron’s heart was beating a mile a minute and he took a quick glance to his right. The passage made a sharp right up ahead, just before the exit into the main courtyard. It was a distance of fifteen feet away, so close yet so far. Scraping porcelain made his head whip around just in time to see Yoshika lift her cup of tea, place it to her lips, and take a sip, thankfully with her eyes closed. Alright Yoshika, you’ve had your tea, you got your fresh air, now beat so I can get- As if to spite him, Miyafuji then sat down on one of the wooden chairs outside the door, taking care to not ruffle her silk robe. Oh you little bitch. Frantically, Aaron looked up and down the hallway to see if there was anything, anything at all that he could use to cause a distraction. Then he saw it, a low hanging picture of some battlefield ages past across the way.
Keeping a close eye on Yoshika at all times, he reached out with his left hand and wiggled his fingers a tad. Swallowing back the blood in his mouth, the non verbal magic did the trick and the picture frame fell from it’s hook and fell to the floor front first, but not before bouncing up and coming to a rest in the middle of the carpeted hallway. The sound startled Yoshika mightily, nearly causing her to spill her tea. A terrified look came over her face, but when she saw the culprit, she let out a long sigh of relief. “Oh thank God.” she said, getting up from the chair and setting the saucer down on it. “I though someone was out to get me.”

Aaron stifled a chuckle as Miyafuji walked over to the fallen painting with the intention of picking it up and placing it back on the wall. Recognizing his chance, he got back on his haunches and briskly trotted over to the right side of the ceiling and moved down the hallway, regarding the way forward now. Though he wasn’t looking at his possible undoing, he could hear what was going on behind him. *There’s those footsteps of hers, at least four towards it, the slight cracking of the spine as she bends down to pick up the picture from the floor, the graze of fingers along old wood and slightly dusty glass. She’s moving too fast, have to leap for it.* He deactivated the magic holding him aloft and lunged forwards, the power in his legs taking him past the turn at a sharp angle. However, his descent was going to be far from being in a good spot. Due to the slim space, he saw that he was going to graze the wall with his body. *Hopefully she doesn’t hear me.* Using his double jointedness to his full advantage, Aaron tilted his feet in opposite directions so that his shoes wouldn’t scuff the wall. It ended up being the best that he could do for he landed up against the wood and stone surface. Though he braced himself well and made little noise, he immediately righted himself and listened for any signs of pursuit. Sure enough, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor towards him. *Fucking-* However, they suddenly stopped and the sounds of wood creaking reached his ears, making him silently sign in relief. Content that he had lost his incidental pursuer, Aaron then resumed walking down the way towards the vehicle depot entrance. He avoided the windows like the plague, doing his best to remain unseen lest some errant sentry on the walls looked down at the wrong time and saw him, ducking under them, getting against the wall, and crawling on the floor. It shaved seconds away but he didn’t mind. *I have all the time in the world right now.* Finally, he came to the door and reached into his back left pocket.

Aaron produced a lone bobby pin that he found on the ground in the hanger and finagled it into the door lock. His hearing could pick up the clicking and shifting of the lock pins as they rattled within the knob. Experience told him that he was making good progress and cracked the code within seconds. Adjusting the malleable metal strip he then turned the bobby pin hard right and the lock gave. *All too easy.* Divale then opened the door carefully and stepped past the threshold into the vehicle depot. It had changed little since he had last been in it, Shirley making doubly sure that everything was back to normal after the events at the coven. It was pitch black inside, save for narrow beams of moonlight coming through tiny slits in the garage door at the far end of the room. Aaron didn’t turn on the lights, knowing that it would be a dead giveaway to anyone looking over the place from the outside and merely advanced into the dark after closing the door behind him with a soft click. Navigating the black was easy for him, even with the moonlight rays, for his night vision was quite exemplary. It didn’t take him long to locate Sleipnir, nestled between a covered transport and the Elephant tank destroyer. He gazed at the massive machine longingly, wishing that he could take it with him. *Alas you are too slow for my needs. Maybe someday I’ll know what it’s like firing a 128mm cannon.* Then he turned his attention to his motorcycle. In the days after the temporary exile he endured with Shirley and Lucchini, he had repaired the machine expertly. The bullet holes and dents from the O’Bannon pursuit in Southend-on-Sea were long gone, the metal plates being replaced completely. Paint scrapes from stray rounds were power brushed down and painted over and various internal mechanisms were either replaced in full or soldered tight as a door to safe. Aaron left nothing to chance, testing his creation over and over, making sure that it ran exactly like he the day he first rode it. In all, it took him a good week to put the old girl back together. Unfortunately, judging from where the needle lay on the fuel meter, he had forgotten to fully gas it up from his last
ride, and thus made his way over to the large metal fuel tank in the left side of the room, a collection
of jerry cans off to the side of it. He picked one of them up and opened it up. As he held it under the
spigot and turned it on, seeing and smelling the gasoline pour out and into the portable receptacle,
Aaron’s thoughts drifted back to what had happened earlier yesterday.

The moment the playback on the communicator started, all everyone in the room could hear were
gunshots, lots of them. Most came from rifles, a few submachine guns, and maybe a machine gun or
two. Their intensity reminded Aaron of the dockyards at Southend-On-Sea, just without being on the
receiving end of a wall of lead this time. Mixed in there were voices of young men shouting orders,
but those were few and far between. Most of them were screaming in unholy terror at what they
were engaging. Divale could make out certain phrases like ‘What the hell is this thing?’, ‘It’s not
going down. How is that possible?’, and ‘It’s killing us and there’s nothing we can do about it.’.
Then, the airwaves became overwhelmed with a keening wail of vengeful sorrow followed by a
series of wet ripping and crunching sounds, like the kind you hear when a cook takes a bunch of
celery and breaks it in half. The voices gradually died down until all that was heard was the incessant
crying. As the playback ended, some strange guttural words were spoken in a language that chilled
the listeners to the bone. Minna stopped the playback on the comms and looked at everyone as she
sat in her desk chair. Her office, normally a place filled with friendly conversation and the scraping
of pencil lead on documents was silent. Major Sakamoto stood by her right side, stoic and rock solid
as ever while Aaron was at the front of Wilecke’s desk, his brow furrowed in deep thought. After a
draw moments, he nodded to himself and sat down in the chair provided. He breathed in deep and
asked, “How long ago did this happen?”

“How many men were a part of that perimeter guard?” Aaron inquired.

“Around eighty men.” Minna answered. “Any attempts to raise them have failed.”

Aaron leaned back and shook his head. *Eighty men. All dead within that forty nine second frame. Jesus Christ.* “Do you have any theories as to how the banshee managed to extend her presence
beyond the village in the woods?” Mio conjectured.

Divale gave her a quick glance and then look at Minna. “Best I can come up with is that somehow
the barriers around her prison were weakened somehow.”

“By what?” Minna queried.

“Haven’t a clue.” Aaron admitted. “It could be a particular planetary alignment, the anniversary of
the initial slaughter at Bedgebury, or-” He paused as the idea flashed through his mind, making his
superior’s nervous and anxious.

“Well, what is it master sergeant?” Mio pressed.

“Maybe someone broke them for her.” Aaron stated. His words made both Wilecke and Sakamoto
look at each other with concern.

“Who would do something like that? Much less have the knowledge of the banshee in the first
“Could be anyone in Tunbridge Wells or the surrounding areas.” Mio suggested. “Which means that makes everyone suspect.”

Divale shook his head. “Not a damn clue, but I can tell you it’s old, almost reminding me of Old English mixed with some sort of Celtic root.” he replied.

Tentatively, Minna pointed right at the warlocks chest and inquired, “Would she know?”

The room went silent as a morgue as Aaron pondered the question carefully in his head. “It’s possible.” he finally answered at length. He took off his glasses, folded them up, and placed them lenses up on the desk. “With your word.” Aaron intoned. Minna nodded curtly and Divale then took his right index finger and tapped each lens twice with the tip of his fingernail. “You wake in there?” he asked. After a few seconds, the thin glass began to cloud over, despite the overhead lights of Minna’s office. Mio looked over at Divale who in turn gave her a quick regard of his own. This won’t be as ad hoc as the last time I tried it. Don’t you worry about that.

“For you, I’m always awake.” Ismenoth cooed as the smoke swirled and eventually dissipated, revealing the face of the demoness herself, smiling and regarding the warlock with a loving yet seductive stare. It made Aaron want to throw up in his throat. “So,” she went on, looking over the scene and eyeing the witches in front on him, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m hearing a language that I don’t understand.” Aaron explained. “Something that I’ve never heard before. Was wondering if you could shed some light as to what it is and possibly what it means.”

The visage peered at right back at him and from nowhere a yellow hand appeared, resting at her cheek. “Oh, and what’s in it for me?” she asked, expecting to be rewarded for her efforts.

“Not getting a swift kick in the ass next time we meet would be a more than ample reward for your services.” Aaron replied without humor. It triggered an almost indistinguishable smile from Mio, one that vanished as quickly as it came.

“But I love the pain you give me.” the fiend answered mockingly. Her hand went away and she requested, “Play the message again in full please.” Wilcke then adjusted the communicator and pressed the activation stud. Again came the gunshots, the screaming, the dying, during which Ismenoth moved her head side to side, closing her eyes and moving to the beat of the slaughter like an infatuated listener to some heartfelt piece of music. The action was grossly disrespectful and Aaron couldn’t help but clench his right hand into a fist, wishing that he was in a position to curb her arrogance. However, when the words started to manifest, Ismenoth stopped moving and opened her eyes in shock. She tilted her head and leaned in. When the message finally ended, the demoness moved her tongue from within her mouth and muttered, “Well now… That’s something that I haven’t heard in a long time. Not since the days of Sigurd and Ragnar.”

“What is it?” Aaron inquired. “What does it mean?”

“It’s Old Norse.” Ismenoth answered. “The dead language of the ancient Vikings. The message is a challenge, a duel to the death between her and the one who listened.”

“Anything else?” Minna spoke up from across the way.

“Not that I heard.” Ismenoth replied. “Now, if I’m done here, I have a few souls that need a little
torturing. Tootles.” The image in the glass lenses fogged over and soon disappeared like spent rain clouds. After her passing, Aaron took his glasses back and placed them on his face.

“So it’s a fight she wants.” Aaron reasoned. “Then a fight she’s going to get.”

“But she won’t have it on even terms.” Minna declared. “You are going to go into Bedegbury Woods tomorrow with Shirley, Yoshika, and Perrine and put a stop to whatever this banshee is trying to accomplish. Understood?”

“Yes,” Aaron began, “I do understand commander, but with certain reservations.”

Minna’s face grew hard and all warmth died. “Explain.” she demanded, not liking that Aaron was, once again, trying to essentially get her to change her mind.

“This thing, this banshee is unlike anything I’ve encountered before.” Aaron started to say. “From our first meeting, I could correctly gauge her power. It’s massive, almost right on par with me. Whatever caused her to break the seals relegating her to that place will have more than pushed her beyond what I can deal with reliably.”

“Which is why you’re not going there alone.” Mio assured. “Any extra aid you can call on will be of use in this coming fight.”

“With due respect to you both, this extra aid you speak of will only turn out to be extra liabilities.” Aaron countered politely.

“How do you figure?” Minna asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re fighter pilots.” Aaron reasoned. “You’ve been trained to fight an enemy without a human face or reasoning. This is an advantage that has served you all well over the years. This enemy the furthest from. It may not be human now, but it was once, and it knows that. The banshee will use herself in a way that will cause you to fear her, to break your resolve in killing her.”

“Are you implying that I or my pilots are weak willed?” Minna queried in a menacing tone.

“Not at all.” Aaron immediately responded. “However, you’ve only had dealings with the enemy on the front lines, not the one lurking further afield.”

“You and I took down the vampire in Namur and you just got back from Russia after not only fighting the nest but also a pack of chorts.” Mio retorted. “In those instances I think we witches gave a good account of ourselves.”

“Was that due to you or the fact that I was there to begin with?” Aaron shot back. He saw Mio stiffen and pressed, “Face it: If it was just you or them in those situations, there’s no doubt in my mind that everyone would’ve died. There are things out there that none of you in this room can even remotely understand much less deal with. Yes, you’re well trained, yes, you have access to high powered weaponry, but you’re still pilots who work best at a distance. Bullets won’t reliably do the job in bringing them down. Enemies such as those we and others have fought require up close and personal work, work that I am qualified to do for I have the skills and know how. If you send me in with the three who got out of Bedegbury with me, you’re sending them into a situation where I can’t feasibly protect them. Someone is going to get hurt or worse.” He leaned in and presented his hands in prayer. “I beg you, just send me and I promise that I will kill this thing.”

“And what if you get hurt Aaron?” Minna inquired. “What if you get killed? Then what? You would’ve sacrificed yourself for nothing and the banshee would continue to increase in power, extending her murderous reach outwards beyond the woods, maybe even into Tunbridge Wells itself.
Can you live with the fact knowing that by refusing help that you would’ve doomed the lives of all those men, women, and children?” Aaron opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out, the statement making him doubt himself. Minna reached out with her right hand and placed it on Aaron’s right. “I know you care about us all Aaron and I applaud you for that. People like you are rare and should be cherished.”

“And protected.” Mio added. “I’ve met many soldiers in my time, but you are perhaps the best I’ve ever seen. One cannot find people like you anymore unless the stars align again. Please trust in what the commander is trying to tell you to do. I know you don’t like it, but as you said yourself, the banshee is significantly more powerful now and your going to need our help in dealing with it. Trust Minna. Trust us.” Both witches watched carefully, hoping that Aaron would see the light and acquiesce to their reasonable demands. Seconds tick by like running sap in winter before Divale’s head starts to move.

The squeak made by the spigot as Aaron turned off the fuel valve grated him back to the here and now. He closed his eyes and winced at the fact that he was breaking his word. God this hurts, but I have to do this. They can’t fight this thing like I can. Standing up, he took the bleeder plug off the back end of the gas can so the fumes wouldn’t concentrate and combust from static electricity. Wouldn’t want this plan to literally go up in flames. He smiled at the bad joke and turned around, only to have his grin fade away as Aaron saw, sitting on the back end of his motorcycle Ismenoth, her legs over the left side and lower pelvis situated awfully close to the gas cap, staring at him with those black eyes of hers, clothed in nothing but that cherry robe of hers that she wore during the coven close to a month ago. “Did I tell you that you could come out?” Aaron asked with a hint of disdain in his voice as he walked over to his bike with the jerry can in tow.

“You never ask permission when you do.” Ismenoth playfully retorted, spreading her legs and revealing the gas cap. ‘There’s always time to make amends.” As soon as he was close enough, Aaron responded by taking the feeder nozzle from the underside of the container, twisting it on, and putting it into the gas tank, the cap opening with a magical command. The fiend moaned as the metal grazed her maidenhood. “Using props in your routine with me eh?” she asked with a grin. “You have come a long way from when I first had you.” Divale ignored her and her yelps of pleasure as he tilted the can further and further up, filling the tank with gas. “Oh this is too much!” the demoness gasped, hands running through her hair, back arched back. “I must have you!” She quickly moved in to kiss Aaron on the lips, but was thwarted by his left hand that he interjected between her lips and his face, making a wall of meat and bone. “You big meanie.” she pouted. “Riling a girl up like that only to deny her.”

“Boo hoo.” Divale commented as he withdrew the nozzle and backtracked to the fuel tank. “Think you can control yourself enough to come with me?” He placed the gas can down and looked over his shoulder. Ismenoth was looking away at the concrete floor behind her, shoulders slack. Aaron rolled his eyes and strolled over. “Not you too.” he groaned.

Whipping her head back, Ismenoth stated, “That sour kraut commander of yours has a point. You should reconsider her offer.” Her words seemed to have fallen on deaf ears as the warlock closed his eyes and pressed his hands to his temples. Aetheric energy burned within his skull, an sapphire blue that made his hair stand on end and sway as if caught in a wind.

“Silentium.” he intoned, opening his eyes and gazing upwards. Aaron then extended his hands, palms out and a rush of invisible magic came forth, washing over all. It fluttered through Ismenoth’s hair and robe. She paid it no mind, but was still worried about the road that Aaron was hellbent on going on.
“Don’t you have any second thoughts about this?” she hurriedly asked as he started to mount Sleipnir.

“I’ve had those.” Aaron replied at length. The moment his legs were over the seat and he sat down, the motor of the beast he created roared to life loudly. *That’s all fine and dandy my friend. Roar away to your metal heart’s content. The spell will prevent any from hearing you.* “I’ve also had second, third, even fourth thoughts about this whole thing, but the more I think about it, the more I know that I’m right in doing this.”

“You’ve made this mistake once before.” Ismenoth warned. “You barely got out of that snafu even with my help.”

“Obscurum.” Aaron said, making himself and the motorcycle completely invisible to the naked eye. He then waved his right hand in the direction of the garage door, casting the spell outwards to encompass the portal itself. Turning palm upwards, he rose his arm, like a conductor during an aria when he implores the singer to sustain. Slowly, the door rose from the ground, the clanking metal slabs and chain pulleys going up and rolling. *Combined with the other, even if there were guards keeping a close eye on things from above, they wouldn’t be able to see or hear what’s going on, giving me plenty of time to get out and have them be none the wiser.* Suddenly, he felt two hands jam themselves into his front pockets, the long fingernails of Ismenoth coming a bit too close for comfort near some jewels. “Don’t get any ideas back there.” he deadpanned as he revved the motor more.

“Consider it just payback for earlier.” the demonness shot back, coupling it with a slight pinch from her left hand. The brief discomfort made Aaron’s eyes twitch for a second before he let loose with the throttle and kicked the stand up. Sleipnir shot forward, roaring into the night and soon flew past the garage door in a blink of an eye. Divale then unfurled his wings and flapped them hard, arching his back and pulling up on the handle bars like a pilot does a flight stick. Up went the bike, passengers and all, rising like a bird breaking out of a dive. The stone walls got bigger and bigger as they got closer and closer. It soon got to the point where Aaron could make out the faces of the guards out on patrol that night and smell their breaths. He jerked hard left, making the bike horizontal as they reached the acme point of their projected trajectory. Whizzing past, Ismenoth looked behind her, watching the guards continue their rounds, blissfully unaware of just how close they just came to being knocked off the battlements like bowling pins. Her eyes drifted to the garage door and noticed that it was closing. The sight made her smile. *You think you’re so clever don’t you Aaron? Your spells may have shrouded you and any sounds from your escape, but they don’t do diddly squat for smell.*

Yoshika dried the cup with a small white rag she got from the hanger over the sink, the movements making a sound that reminded her of running a finger over a pane of glass. She lifted it up with her left hand and peered into the porcelain to check her work. From the moonlight coming in from the kitchen window, she could see that there was no moisture remaining and smiled to herself. *Perfect dry every time.* Standing on her tippy toes, Miyafuji opened the cupboard above her head and placed the cup inside, setting it gently within the bowl of another. Closing the cupboard door, she then wrung out the last drops of the water the rag soaked up. Barely anything came out of the cloth and Yoshika looped it back over the wooden rung that she got it from. She sighed with relief as she then turned and walked towards the kitchen door. *A good cup of green tea always hits the spot on a sleepless night.* Pushing the door open, Yoshika then entered the messhall. It was empty and immaculately clean, not a stray crumb of dinner anywhere, even in the corners. Her mind drifted back to the meal and her eyes lingered on two chairs that sat on the far right. *It was nice to see Perrine smile a bit more last night. Apparently all the bad blood between us is gone for good. We actually had a decent conversation about teas. Even Aaron got in on the action with a few*
suggestions of his own. Her brow furrowed as she started walking through the room, making a beeline for the open messhall doors. I still feel this coldness between the two. He still hasn’t gotten over what she did. Hopefully they can resolve this soon. They do make a good team. Soon, Miyafuji crossed the threshold, her steps taking her into the hallway proper. Yoshika then reached behind her with both hands, took hold of the door knobs, and softly closed the doors behind her.

She felt a yawn coming on and she raised her arms over her head, the involuntary reaction making her mouth open wide and her eyes squint. It was at that point as she inhaled through her nose that she caught a whiff of something strange, so much so that she stopped mid breath in surprise. Looking around, she tried to find its source, but there was nothing and no one in the hallway save for a few pictures and chairs. Curious, she followed her nose, letting it guide her down the corridor towards the vehicle depot. What is that smell? The odor started out light, but very chemical laden. As she neared the door to the vehicle depot however, the scent got more powerful and distinct. Then a revelation passed through her mind and she almost blushed with embarrassment at not identifying it beforehand. That's car exhaust. But who would be in the garage this time of night? The commander has a strict rule forbidding anyone from taking anything from here after curfew. A chill ran through her as a possibility began to take hold. Could it be a robber? Might have to go inside carefully lest they’re looking for trouble. Trying to be a stealthy as she could, Yoshika moved in next to the door. With her right hand, she tested the lock and was shocked to find out that it was unlocked. That made her even more nervous for if her suspicions about a possible robber were correct, then the door was opened from the outside, meaning that the intruder was already inside the base. Her mouth went dry as she summoned up the courage to open the door. As soon as it was open just enough for her to stick her head through, Yoshika peered in and saw nothing out of the ordinary at first, but then, even though it was quite dark inside the garage, a long black line on the ground, turning away from a parked transport and towards the closed garage door.

Yoshika slunk past the door carefully, making sure that her kimono didn’t get caught on anything and waltzed inside the room, keeping to the shadows and covering her nose. That smell is strong in here? What happened? Nearly up against the concrete walls, Miyafuji crept along, bypassing workbenches, weaving past low hanging chains from the ceiling, and finally ducking behind the tank destroyer. All the while, her senses were on full alert, searching and scanning for any sign of the intruder. As she got closer to the spot where the line appeared to have started, she noticed several details that made her eyes widen. The black line was a massive skid mark caused by someone letting the throttle ride wide open, the rubber from the tires fully seared onto the concrete floor. A few drops of gasoline could be seen on the surface, probably from a gas can. However, those two paled in comparison as to what she discovered by virtue of her own memory. This was where Aaron’s motorcycle was parked. If that is gone then that means… Then Yoshika’s eyes pick up another line, this one thin and carved into the concrete, leading away from the bike and veering to the right side. Following it with her stare and her feet, it didn’t take long for her to find it’s terminus point. Looking down, she saw a bit of scrawl on the floor, the writing fluid and beautiful that said: Bedgebury Woods. Aaron in danger. Send help. A Friend.

It all made sense to her now and she did the only thing she could possibly think of in that moment. With a rush of churning feet, Yoshika turned and ran out of the depot, stopping only to frantically open the door, not even closing it as she continued to run back up the hall and make a left towards the inner part of the ground floor towards the stairs. Flailing her arms back and forth like a sprinter, Miyafuji brought everything that Mio had taught her about properly sprinting to the fore, but that relied on properly maintaining one’s focus. At this point, focus wasn’t in her vocabulary anymore, only sounding the alarm to Minna. It wasn’t long before she reached the stairs and she scampered up, lunging up, taking two or three of the steps at a time. By the time she got in the middle of it, her legs and lungs began to burn from overexertion. The pain made her wince, but she didn’t care. I need to
tell Minna. *We need to help him.* Those thoughts made her forget her place momentarily and just as she was about to clear the last few steps, her right foot tripped on the edge of one and she fell forwards. Thankfully, she managed to catch herself before collapsing to the floor, saving her legs from getting marked up by the steps. Yoshika skidded forwards a tad on her hands, getting rug burn in the process. Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself back up and continued to push onwards. Her pace was waning and the pain in her legs was increasing with every step, breath coming out in gulping heaves like a fish out of water. Making a quick left, her weary limbs finally made it to Minna’s door and she just had enough strength left in her limbs to make a pair of fists and slam them repeatedly on the door. “Commander Wilcke!” she wheezed as loud as she could. “Commander Wilcke, open the door!”

Over the sounds of flesh hitting wood, Yoshika could hear hurried footsteps from within and a few seconds later, the door opened, revealing Minna wearing nothing but a white T-shirt and panties, hair mildly disheveled and eyes rimmed with sleep. “Sergeant Miyafuji?” she began to say, but the moment her eyes adjusted, Minna realized that something was up and immediately snapped out of her fugue. She took Yoshika by the hand and led the wheezing woman inside her room, not bothering with closing the door. “Calm down. Breathe. Hold your arms over your head. It will help you get more oxygen in you.” she ordered. Miyafuji did as she was told, but her legs gave out from exhaustion and her body collapsed with a thud. Wilcke then walked over to her nightstand and picked up the half full glass of water she left there the night before. She backtracked to Yoshika and held it out to her. “Here. Drink this.” Yoshika couldn’t speak a word of thanks, but nodded as her rashy hands clasped the cool glass and brought it to her lips. Minna patiently waited as Yoshika drank heavily, draining the water in a few gulps before asking, “What’s going sergeant? Why are you up at this hour?”

Yoshika swallowed the last bits of water down her throat and began to explain, “I couldn’t sleep and went down to the messhall kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. I-” Then, a loud burp emanated from her throat, reverberating throughout the room. Miyafuji clapped her hands over he mouth, face red with embarrassment.

“So you went to the messhall for tea. Then what happened?” Wilcke pressed, not caring about the faux pas at all.

Yoshika composed herself and began again. “I did so, drank it, washed up, and was about to walk out when I noticed a strange smell when I reentered the hallway. It was coming from the vehicle depot and I thought someone was in there. Went down the way, saw that the door was unlocked and went it. There was no one inside, but the whole place reeked of exhaust. Found Aaron’s motorcycle missing with a long skid mark trailing from where it was parked towards the garage door which was still closed. Drops of gasoline were on the ground and I saw a message written in the concrete, like someone took a chisel to it, saying that Aaron was in Bedgebury and needed help. It was signed a friend.”

Wilcke took this all in a was having an internal panic attack as a result. *What!? Aaron left to face the banshee alone?!* “Are you certain of this sergeant?” she inquired in a level a tone that she could manage.

“Absolutely.” Yoshika answered immediately. “We need to help him commander. What do you want me to do?”

Minna helped Miyafuji up to her feet and took the empty glass from her hands. “Get Perrine and Shirley up ASAP and meet me in the hanger. Move it!” she ordered. Yoshika nodded, forgoing the customary salute and ran out the door. Wilcke then power walked over to her dresser and pulled out her dress uniform out of the top drawer. As she snaked her arms through the sleeves, her mind
pondered as to who the messenger could be and the only explanation didn’t sit well with her. Could only have been Ismenoth herself. Guess a demon can be on the right side for once. Oh Aaron, you have really fucked up now. No one disobeys me like this and gets away with it. The moment I get my hands on you, you’re going to wish you stayed back in France.

The night air whistled past them as Aaron and Ismenoth rode further and further along the winding dirt road towards the outskirts of Bedgebury Woods. His eyes panned this way and that, looking for potholes in the gloom. The moonlight above helped him greatly though his natural sight made such a thing more of a hindrance than a perk. It had rained in these parts earlier that night, filling the potholes with water that had yet to fully dry out. The reflections played hell with the surrounding environment, but Aaron maintained his breakneck speed regardless, using his magic to add to the pace. No matter how careful I’ve been, there’s always the chance that I’ll be discovered and they will come looking for me. Need to make this as short and sweet as I can. His groin got squeezed a tad as Ismenoth readjusted her grip. For a moment, he thought about looking over his shoulder at her, but decided against it. She’ll just give me her sweet nothings. Then a realization came over him, something that he knew could’ve happened sooner had he just been more observant. Hasn’t said a damn word since we left Dover. Not even a peep out of that god forsaken mouth of hers. Most of the time, I have to talk to her just to get her to shut up, but now she’s like a mute. I never thought I’d see the day that a demon was scared to silence. Amusing, but reassuring. At least now I know I’m not the only one. Aaron then took a right turn hard and soon came up on a long field of grass cut close to the ground. Further on, like an ominous dark mass, was Bedgebury Wood itself. Despite being under the auspice of Tunbridge Wells, there wasn’t as single person about. Probably retreated to a safe distance or dead. Least they trimmed the grass before they left. That will get me closer. Though the skies were clear, clouds gathered and swirled around the place, as if a maelstrom had suddenly made its presence felt on land. The air went down by several degrees, too small of a decrease for many to notice, but Divale felt it as clear as day. There’s some very powerful magic at work here and it’s a lot further out than I remember it to be. The bitch has gotten stronger.

Aaron quickly spied a small path that lead from the road to the field proper and slowed down, going over the change in elevation nice and easy. He eased up on the throttle as they took a fairly bumpy journey through the uneven grassland, the tires going over rocks and burrow entrances. The noise generated by the motorcycle didn’t cause anything to move out of its warrens. “Still as dead as doornail around here.” Ismenoth commented, looking around as her robe fluttered slightly as they continued to make progress. “Her aetheric radius has increased.”

“How observant of you.” Aaron mocked as he brought the bike to a stop and kicked the stand down. He parked Sleipnir roughly fifty feet away from the woods, closer than Shirley and in front of the entrance they took. Nothing had changed at all and when he killed the engine, nothing but silence reigned. No bird caws, no insects, not even the errant squirrel bounding from branch to branch, causing dead wood to fall and crash to the ground. “Would you like a medal?”

Ismenoth rubbed small circles towards the center of Aaron crotch and remarked lustily, “I could certainly go for a purple heart right about now.” Aaron then grabbed her wrists with his hands and pulled them out of his pockets and pushed them back towards the demoness. Swinging his right leg over the handle bars, he dismounted the bike and fished around in his right back pocket. Ismenoth hopped off the backseat as well, smarting from her denial and watched Aaron pull out a water canteen. He screwed the cap open and held it in his right hand, but instead of drinking from it, Divale poured a generous portion of water on both his hands, switching the canteen from one to the other. “Why in the world are you washing your hands at this juncture?” she asked.

Aaron tossed the water canteen to the ground and dried his hands on the upper parts of his pants.
before answering with a sly grin, “You should always wash your hands after handling trash.”

The fiend’s sallow face grew red with anger. “Watch it buddy,” she growled, “or I show you how I handle trash.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Aaron mocked, walking forward a few steps before turning around. “Now, you coming or not?” Ismenoth swallowed back an acid reply and power walked to his left side and together they strolled in practical lockstep towards Bedegbury Woods. Their feet crushed the long grass and the brushing sounds they made when the blades grazed their legs made it appear that they were being followed. It was all an illusion however, there wasn’t a single person around the place as far as both of them could figure. Nothing stirred on their journey unless they disturbed it into motion. No animal sounds for miles, not even a random gust of wind. It was if time itself stopped. The whole experience was unnerving to Aaron, but he encountered such things before. *And it was usually just before something bad happened.* Closer and closer they ventured to the opening leading into the woods, but when they both got to within feet paces or so, an intense feeling of nausea crept over them, stopping them in their tracks in wonder and doubt.

“You feel that?” Ismenoth asked taking a quick look at Aaron.

Divale nodded. “Aetheric damping field. A pretty powerful one too.”

“We should go back.” the demonness once again pleaded. “Let’s do what your commander wishes and do this later on when we have some of her pilots with us.”

“I’m not going back Ismenoth.” Aaron retorted, his voice as cold as ice. “My mind is made up. The longer we wait for sunrise the stronger the banshee’s power will be. By the time we come back here, she’ll be so powerful that even if I had the whole squadron with me, we’ll still get beaten. I’m not waiting or backing down. This ends tonight.”

“Aaron please.” Ismenoth implored, walking right in front of him and interposing herself between him and the woods. “Think about this for a second, just one fucking second. The banshee is goading you into a fight in her terms and if you do as she wishes, you’re going to end up on the losing end. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.” Aaron rolled his eyes in response and started walking slowly forwards. Knowing that it was now or never to get him to change his mind, Ismenoth braced herself and pushed against his chest with both hands with all her might, but Divale just pushed her backwards as if she was nothing but a frail withered branch on the ground, her feet carving small trenches in the earth, uprooting the long grass like weeds. “Aaron!” she called out, but her cry fell on deaf ears. Then, her hands started to sink into his chest as if it were made of quicksand, sucking the rest of her towards him. *He’s taking me back in. No!* Wildly, she flailed around like a struggling swimmer, trying to break the current, but it was no use. Aaron had caught her hook, line, and sinker and there was no use in resisting. He knew that as well as she, but yet she still fought like a cornered lion. Soon, her head was the only thing left of her to absorb, her face mere inches from his own. “Aaron I’m scared!” she screamed.

The outburst shocked him into stalling the process for a brief moment. He looked at her, thinking that it was some kind of ploy to get him to release her, but then he realized that she was telling the truth. Ismenoth’s breathing came out in tired heaves and some sort of moisture that could be thought of as tears rimmed the sides of her black eyes. *Mother of God, she is scared.* “That damping field is easily the most powerful that I’ve ever felt Aaron and I’ve been around a long long time.”

“You can still use your power to shield me from it’s effects can you?” Aaron inquired, curious and, for the first time in close to twenty four hours, feeling that icy cold tingle of doubt lingering in the back of his mind.
“I can get the low tier spells and incantations through no problem.” Ismenoth began, looking slightly away as she thought about it. “As for the mid level stuff, it largely depends on what you do with it. You may be restricted as to what effects you can use. Higher powers are a complete write out. That effectively eliminates deitatum, your ace up the sleeve Aaron.” She looked back at him with fear in her eyes. “You go in there, I won’t be able to effectively protect you.”

“I didn’t need it when I faced down the succubus.” Aaron countered, remembering his past encounter with the entity.

“That’s because you knew that you didn’t have to to kill her.” Ismenoth shot back. She moved her head closer to his face, eyes locked on his. “Don’t go in there or you’ll die.” she stated, hoping for him to see her side and act logically. All Aaron did was stare right back at her, his normally vibrant bronze eyes dull like a dying fire. That’s it then. He’s going in no matter what. Damn you Aaron.

Can’t you see that you’re going to die?

As quick as a flash, Ismenoth closed the remaining distance between them and kissed Aaron full on the lips. “For luck.” she said as she withdrew. “You’re going to need it.”

“Noted.” Aaron deadpanned as he resumed his absorption of his demonness. It took barely a fraction of a second and of his magic before the rest of the fiend’s cranium vanished into his chest and disappeared back to her internal realm. Now that that is over, we can get to more important things.

He then looked into the foreboding woods and narrowed his eyes. She does have a point. This will not be a cakewalk, but I can’t take the chance of my friends getting hurt or killed. I’ve lost enough already and I’m not going to lose anymore. Breathing in deep, Aaron slowly walked forwards, the long grass getting shorter and shorter until nothing but a thick layer of fallen twigs, pine needles, and dried leaves remained. The rain had soaked the area, muffling most of his already soft footsteps. His head moved from side to side and all around, taking in anything and everything that could be a possible ambush point. After a few dozen paces, Divale entered the banshee’s lair and felt an intense chill run through his veins, making him involuntarily twitch his right eye. Paying it no mind, he concentrated on locating where the enemy was. All senses were brought to bear for the task. Though he knew he was in mortal danger, Aaron kept calm, his heartbeat normal. Going through his memory, he recollected where he and Yoshika walked and retraced his steps. Even in the darkness, his vision could almost see the depressions in the ground where he and his friends had placed their feet over a month ago. Nothing’s changed.

A bright light and the woods remain, but the weather is quite different. Snow mixed with other bits and pieces of debris litters the ground, four inches high in most parts. It was late afternoon, but as was customary in this land, little to no light came from above, the sun shrouded by a pall of malignant energy, courtesy of the Neuroi. Feet crunch the powder flat, slightly deeper sections going up and over a pair of boots that were falling apart at the seams, penetrating the thick rags that acted as makeshift socks and freezing the flesh within. The sensation is disagreeable, yet manageable. Two hands clutch a rifle, a M1 Garand, the length of the weapon burned by many a close encounter with a Neuroi beam, but still serviceable. Ammunition was another story. A brain goes to work judging the number of rounds left by the weight of the gun. Numbers are crunched and a result is spit out: three shots maximum. Vision pans around the area, peering through the sea of elms and ashes, their leaves long since fallen. Instinct takes over logic and an unseen spine feels a tingling sensation going up and down each and every single vertebrae. Breathing slows yet the heart rate increases. Standard flight or fight response and it’s happening for a good reason. Nothing can be seen, heard, or felt, but an alert mind convinces the rest of the body that they’re being watched. Suddenly, a twig snaps a long ways off. The head whips around to face where the sound came from. Nothing more from that direction. Hands clutch the rifle tighter. Then, another sound from the far right, this one closer. Theories as to what this thing could be are brought to the forefront of an adrenaline overloaded consciousness. The snapping of a twig denotes something at least as big as a raccoon. Eyes glimpse
and ears pick up the scratching of something against a large clump of bushes behind him. The realization of being stalked kicks in, as does the admission that it was significantly bigger than a raccoon, probably a bear most likely. A sharp cracking noise fills the air and a pair of legs dart the body backwards as a large tree falls to the ground, taking out whatever was unfortunate enough to be caught in its path. The wood hadn’t even hit the ground when ears pick up another sound, a deep growl that certainly didn’t belong to any bear known to man, coming directly from behind.

Aaron whipped his head around after shifting his feet ever so slightly to allow him to run off in case he was outpositioned. Yet nothing was there, just empty space and darkness. He pivoted in place and searched his surroundings for any sign of the banshee. He could tell that he was in a large clearing, one that was far too geometric to have formed naturally. It didn’t take him long to realize that he was back in the exact same area that Perrine got shot with the graveyard gun. Immediately, his eyes looked down, seeing if there were any more traps lying around. “No traps or tricks this this time.” a voice called out from above.

“Unguis.” Aaron hastily uttered while unfurling his wings. With a string push from his right leg, he leapt backwards and brandished his claws, positioning his wings so that he could strike at multiple attack vectors. Looking up, Aaron was momentarily puzzled when he could not find the source of the speaker. Then, a sliver of tree cover parted allowing some moonlight to trickle down, making pillars of light no less than twenty feet away from him. It all reflected off of something and Aaron had to squint his eyes to make it out. When he did however, he recoiled in horrified shock. Far above him in the treeline, he could make out hundreds if not thousands of pin head sized glittering orbs looking down at him. They periodically darted in all directions, never staying still for long. Then, he saw something move within the moonlight, a yarn thin furry leg belonging to some species of indigenous spider. Quickly, his mind worked form a rough numerical estimate, yet before he could, his sensitive hearing could pick up a wet scratching sound and some sort of tightening. It lasted only a few seconds and soon something started to slowly descend from the black heavens of the woods. First came two feet, the toenails long, chipped and brown from age and decay, the gray dead skin tight around the bone structure and musculature. A flowing white gown hung from above the ankles and Aaron braced himself. Like a diva being lowered from the stage rafters onto her assigned place to begin her aria, the banshee of Bedgebury Woods drifted to the ground, lowered by a chair made from thick strands of wispy cobwebs. Her overstretched smile and beady black eyes greeted him with an emotion that could almost pass for delight.

“I’m surprised you came alone considering how you ran off like a coward the last time we met.” the banshee goaded as her arachniod spawned throne came to a stop. She lifted herself from the seat and floated down the remaining few feet to the ground. “I warned you to stay away warlock, yet here you are.” She cocked her head to the side and asked, “Are you that much in a hurry to die?”

“I’m not the one that’s going to die.” Aaron boldly retorted. “As for coming back well, you know how us men are bad listeners.”

A phlegmy chuckled came from the banshee’s throat. “I’ll certainly miss your sly quips when I rip your heart from your chest and squeeze it dry.” she said sadly.

“Why did you challenge me?” Aaron demanded, keeping his eye trained on the creature at all times.

“If you must know,” the banshee muttered, playfully tapping her long thin sharp claws against her legs as if keeping in tune with some melody, “you are the only one that could possibly muster enough power to remote hinder my designs. When I kill you, I’ll absorb your power and that demon within you will serve me well in launching my dark crusade against all of England for what they have done to me and my people.”
“Killing them won’t bring them back.” Aaron countered. “No amount of slaughter will.”

“No it won’t, but it will make me feel better.” the banshee admitted.

“Enough talk.” Aaron stated, cracking his neck. “Let’s settle this.”

A series of cracking noised came from close behind the banshee and Aaron could see the top of her gown rippling like water. Then, with an explosion of fetid matter, two more long limbs appeared in the guise of shaven spiders legs, each of the ends tipped with a long flayed stinger, like a cat o nine tails, a green liquid dripping from the barbs. Each drop that came loose and hit the ground evaporated with a harsh hiss. “Your pride will be your downfall warlock.” she warned as she hunched her back and started moving to her right.

“Your overconfidence will be yours.” Aaron shot back as he moved to counter her advance.

Going around in a small circle, the two combatants eyed each other, gauging their respective opponent and devising strategies to take them down. Though many miles away from the capital, the tension was London fog thick. Suddenly, Aaron snapped his right index and thumb, uttering, “Concin frigore.” The incantation triggered a massive blast of chilled air that rushed towards the banshee. As if she anticipated the attack, the fiend backflipped and used her new arms to carve into the soil. When the razor sharp stingers came up, so to did a wall of writhing earthworms that took the impact of the spell dead on, freezing by the hundreds in an instant, the cold making a crackling noise like a roaring fire. Upon completing her maneuver, the banshee inhaled and let forth a scream that echoed for miles, shattering the wall of now frozen worms and projecting it back towards Aaron. He leapt up into the air and wrapped his wings around him, resembling a drill bit to shield himself. The pellets all failed to penetrate, all pinging off his feathers. The rest of the nearby trees weren’t so lucky, the shards going in every direction like grenade shrapnel, mowing down thin saplings and branches or gouging quarter sized holes deep into old growth. Divale could see out of the corner of his eye that a decently sized piece of dead wood was coming down nearby as he spun and descended down to earth. Taking a chance, he spread his wings back out and reached out with his left hand, grabbing the wooden trunk. Undeterred, he banshee ran towards him, claws to her sides and head down, looking forwards with that grin of hers, teeth gnashing in hate. Aaron chucked the wood like a makeshift spear, aiming for her face. In retaliation, the banshee flicked a single finger in front of her nose and twisted it unnaturally, the wood splitting down the middle as if it were being turned into lumber at a saw mill. The two halves careened away from her body and she continued to close the distance.

“Murus ignis.” Divale intoned, gazing intently at the ground a few feet in front of him. His eyes burned as the spell manifested and shot forth, bathing the earth in flame. A quick jerk up with his neck and the low lying pyre rose into the air like a red geyser. An angry bellow answered and through the fire and the flames the banshee cartwheeled, lashing out with all four of her limbs, each intent on quartering him.

Aaron backed up hard and fast, parrying each blow as it came, both arms and wings moving in tandem, his body weaving and contorting. He then sideflipped, using his left wing to push himself and whipping his body around with a roundhouse. The banshee managed to catch his leg with her right stinger and tried to stab down into his calf. However, it was just a feint as Aaron then grabbed the limb with his left hand and pulled himself closer, twirling like a ballerina behind the banshee. With a cry of triumph, he brought down his right hand, fingers splayed out for maximum damage. Sensing the danger, the banshee kicked up and out like a heifer attacking a farmer in his attempt to brand her. The blow caught Aaron square in the gut, sending him flying but not before the tips of his fingers dug into the flesh of her back. Droplets of black blood trickled down the ruined back of her dress, the fluid smelling of centuries old death and decay. Grimacing as best she could, she turned and growled like an angry beast. Aaron casually flicked his wrist and cockily jested despite the bruise that he could feel forming, “First blood.” Wasting little time after his witty one liner, he beat
the air with his wings and lunged at her. Now on the defensive, the banshee brandished her natural weapons and kept them moving as to keep her assailant on his toes. Aaron swung feints and haymakers, stabs and curving slashes, everything in his arsenal in order to overwhelm through sheer speed and power, but the undead fiend held serve and shoulder rolled backwards to get some distance. Divale would have none of it and sprinted towards her, but it was at that moment that the banshee sprung her trap and reversed course, now coming forwards with a quickness that caught him off guard. He barely had enough time to backpedal and shield himself with his wings before the banshee stabbed out with her left hand. The blow narrowly avoided his neck and grazed off the flesh and muscle between it and the tip of his collarbone. The pain was intense but Aaron had little time to feel it as the banshee’s stinger looped low and took out his legs, sending him to the ground.

“Yet not the last.” the banshee cackled. Hitting the ground hard, the enemy pounced on him like a tiger, all her fingers out and ready to impale him.

“Liquidum.” Divale grunted. His physical form began to change from solid to liquid and he soaked into the earth moments before ten digits and two barbs slammed into the now vacant spot. Snarling at being cheated, she withdrew her claws and stingers and looked around for her prey.

“You won’t win by playing hide and seek warlock.” she seethed, breathing like a wild animal. Suddenly, her ears picked up a bird chirping underneath her. Looking down in surprise, she saw Aaron’s face rippling like a puddle of water in the dirt.

“Who said I was hiding?” he jested. The banshee stomped on the visage with her right foot, sending the image in all directions. However, each of the droplets started to grow tall and wide, forming a circle around her. Confident that this was ploy to surround her, the banshee spun in place, the stingers gushing out a viscous green fluid that upon striking the objects caused them to melt like ice cubes on a hot stove top. Suddenly, she felt something was above her and quickly looked up just in time to see a massive balled fist coming for her face. Aaron’s blow connected hard and he could feel something break as his momentum caused the banshee’s head to dip down. Once he made earth fall again, he followed it with a right knee to the jaw, his kneecap shattering teeth. Some of them managed to cut through his pants and embed themselves into his flesh, making him wince. He rushed forward, trying to continue the punishment, but the banshee dissuaded him by flailing out with her stingers, making him jerk back. The fiend staggered a bit and quickly righted herself again. Panting, she took her right hand and felt her face, wiping away the black blood that oozed from her lips and vacant gumline.

“My face, my beautiful face is ruined!” she exclaimed, lamenting at her lost beauty.

“That would imply that it was to being with my dear.” Aaron mocked, wiping his right knee and picking out the cavity ridden incisors.

“I’ll make you suffer!” the banshee retorted, bending her knees in readiness for the next attack.

“Bring it on.” Aaron stated. “I can go all night if need be.” He held his wings and talons out and smiled. I got this. If Minna could see me now, she’d be very impressed.

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“If Aaron thinks for one second that I’ll be impressed with this little stunt of his, he’s got another thing coming.” Minna commented from the front passenger seat. The jeep, being driven by Shirley down the road towards Bedgebury Woods, bumped and jostled her and the two other passengers, Perrine and Yoshika relentlessly, but all understood the discomfort was worth it. The urgency was there and everyone was tense, dreading that they weren’t too late to save him. It had been a silent trip until the commander had spoken up.
Perrine knew the words were directed at her and replied, “I just hope we are not too late.” She looked over at Yoshika and gave her a nod of thanks for getting them up the moment she discovered the message. Yoshika reciprocated the gesture with a nod of her own, coupled with a smile.

“Don’t worry about him Perrine.” Shirley quipped from the drivers seat, trying her best to cheer people up. “I’ve seen that man do some incredible things back at Southend-On-Sea and if he could survive that with barely a scratch on him, he’ll be just fine.”

“For his sake, he’d better.” Minna pointed out, looking at the captain. She then turned her head out towards the windshield, looking out into the night. It was still clear and the moonlight aided them greatly in navigating the dirt road, which now due to the recent spring rains, looked all the more worse for wear. Potholes that were once the size of tennis balls were now the diameter of dinner plates. Shirley did her best to avoid them of course, but given the circumstances, sometimes she had no choice but to run over a few just to maintain the breakneck speed she was going. Wilcke didn’t feel any fear about it at all. *Shirley is the best driver we got. We’re safe.* Running her hands through her hair yet again, she lamented to herself that she didn’t see that this would happen. *I should’ve known that he would do something stupid like this. Should’ve saw this coming miles away, but I didn’t. He tricked me and Mio and we fell for his ruse. Well Aaron, it’s not going to happen again, never again.* “I just wish I knew why he does this to himself.” she muttered softly to herself. “He doesn’t have to at all. There’s nothing to gain.”

“He cares for us.” Yoshika simply answered, overhearing the commander’s monologue. “Aaron has taken to us and has made it his personal mission to make sure we’re alright.”

“We’re more than capable of protecting ourselves Sergeant Miyafuji.” Minna retorted, a tad irritated that she was overheard. “Besides, Master Sergeant Divale violated a direct order and put himself and now us in immediate danger.”

“We each have different ways of showing how much we care I suppose.” Perrine stated. Minna opened her mouth to say something else, but something in the distance caught her eye and that something was a gigantic plume of green flames erupting like a geyser in of Bedgebury Woods followed by three concussive booms that send parts of trees flying in every direction. *Holy fuck. What the hell is going on in there?* Her vision also caught a glimpse of Aaron’s motorcycle that was parked nearby.

“Captain Yeager!” Wilcke ordered. “Set us right next to the bike pronto!” She turned around in her seat and added to Yoshika and Perrine, “Prepare to get out and stay low. They don’t know we’re here and that means that those spells they’re using will not be telegraphed. Be on your guard.”

“Yes ma’am!” both witches in the back chimed, just before another detonation ripped through the moonlit night. Shirley pull up right alongside Aaron’s bike and placed the jeep in park. Without even using the doors, Minna leapt over the passenger side and landed square on her feet. Perrine and Yoshika were doing the same and feverishly pulling their weapons out of the back. Though she was the first to disembark, Shirley overtook her and got to the rear of the vehicle before she did. By the time Wilcke got there, all her pilots were armed. Yoshika had her 20mm cannon, Perrine her Bren, and Shirley her BAR. Reached over the drivers side passenger seat, teh commander fished around and pulled out Lynette’s anti tank rifle. *According to Aaron, conventional weaponry will have little effect on banshees. This however is very unconventional and will hopefully do the job if worse comes to worst.* She racked the bolt and turned to her squadron.

“Let’s get into the woods. Stay out of sight and no one fires until I give the order. Is that clear?” Minna explained.

“Yes ma’am!” the trip in front of her stated.
“Captain Yeager, point. Sergeant Miyafuji gets rearguard. Move out!” Minna ordered. Shirley immediately turned and moved at the quick step, BAR out in front of her, scanning for targets. Minna fell in right behind her, followed by Perrine and Yoshika. As they ventured closer and closer to where they were reasonably sure that Aaron had entered from, the titanic that waged deep within the woods was illuminating the dense growth with unnatural lighting and strange otherworldly sounds. Here a flash of blue followed by what could be thought of a thunderbolt striking the ground and over there a gust of wind that blew dirt and dead foliage so hard that no one could see through it. Sounds of heavy breathing and cries of triumph and pain could be heard. All this unnerved the witches, none more so than Minna who clenched her jaw tight and gripped her antitank rifle that much harder. Please let us not be too late. Soon they came up to a clearing and Shirley put up her right fist, signaling for the rest of them to halt and hunker down. At first, Wilcke could see nothing in the gloom, just dirt, trees, and silence. Suddenly, a cracking noise was heard and her eyes looked up and away to her right. A massive tree, probably so old that it saw the original inhabitants of the British Isles slowly toppled down to earth, its long branches smacking and breaking smaller trees and dead wood. She held her breath, watching the falling tree and hoping that it wouldn’t come anywhere near her or her friends. I already have one person coming out of this worse for wear. Please god don’t let anymore get caught up in this. A few seconds later, the earth shakes with impact for a moment before another sound is heard, that of splitting wood and heavy footsteps.

Minna looked on in wonder as the trunk began to split down the middle, sundered by a pair of angelic wings and talons. They disappeared, withdrawing into the wood. In a flash, the two halves of the tree pushed apart revealing Aaron looking out into the night. He looked unscathed, save for a few nicks on his collarbone, a little tearing on his right pant leg near his knee, and some minuscule cuts across his face, not to mention the streams of dried blood near his ears, nose, and the corners of his mouth. His breathing was measured and he remained tense, a fact that made it perfectly clear to Minna that the banshee was still standing.

As if that realization made her manifest out of nowhere, the banshee materialized out of the gloom like a midnight stalker, walking slowly towards him. Her face was a mangled mess, a few of her teeth missing, thick ropes of mucus and black blood running down her cheeks or dangling from her lips like Christmas tree ornaments. Her white gown was tattered and slashed, revealing wounds that would’ve been fatal for anything remotely considered mortal. Even from her concealed position, Minna could see pulsating organs, long since withered and dead leak bilious fluids that hissed when they hit the ground. Her long fingers and stingers still moved with a mind of their own, twitching as if highly agitated that their prey was still alive. “I’m getting really tired of this you’re still alive story that’s playing out for you warlock.” she growled, circling to her right.

Aaron moved counter to her, going left. “I concur.” They locked eyes and strolled opposite to each other so that he was on the left while the banshee the right, eventually stopping in a way that looked to Minna and the rest of the witches looking on in horrified wonder that they were about to face off once more. He smiled and brandished his natural weapons. “Let’s finish this.” Without hesitation, the banshee snarled and rushed at him, howling cries of hate. She lashed out with her left arm and stinger at the same time, hoping to end the drawn out fight right then and there. Divale stood there motionless until the last split second before he plunged his right wing down hard. The tips of his feathers failed to penetrate the soil at all, instead splaying out and forming a point where he could push off of and he did, sideflipping end over end into the air. The banshee soon knew of her error and tried to get out of the way, but Aaron was too quick for her, reaching out with his right hand and digging deep into the flesh and bone of her left arm, right at the elbow. It went clean through the desiccated limb as well as the base of the stinger behind it, both body parts flying this way and that and vanishing into the night, trailing black blood that splattered anything it touched. The banshee bellowed in pain and loss as Aaron landed on his feet, cackling as he rushed at her, “Apparently you’re not a poker player my dear. Four of a kind always beats a pair.”
Unexpectedly, the banshee met his challenge and ran at him again, her stumps gushing black ichor. Aaron’s mood went from triumphant to fearful as he felt something coming from behind him. Sure enough, his instincts proved right and his progress was halted stone cold as some unimaginably strong force wrapped around his wings and started to pull him backwards and down to the ground. His peripheral made out a writhing mass of long black worms emerging from the earth directly behind him like a tree, long tendrils of the squirming things holding his angelic appendages lock tight to the point that Aaron couldn’t retract them back into his body even if he wanted to. The banshee closed the distance and barred right into him, knocking him off his feet and sending both of them down hard, her bulk firmly on top of his, nearly knocking the wind out his lungs into the bargain. She then reached behind her, grabbing the lone stinger with her right hand and brought it over her back, plunging down like a dagger. Aaron had just enough sense to block her attempt, using both his hands to stave off death, but only just. “To bad I seem to have trump.” she gloated, showering him with globules of spittle and flecks of blood. She shifted her weight, applying more pressure. Divale could see the barbed end of the stinger coming closer and closer to his chest, her murderous intent clear. She’s going right for my heart. Can’t hold on much longer. What do I do to get out of this one?

A crack of a large caliber gunshot rang throughout the woods followed less than a second later by an explosion of blood and gore from the banshee’s right shoulder blade. Without the bone and corresponding musculature, the hand went limp, but not before it jerked spasmodically, slicing through his uniform and grazing the skin of covering his left pectoral. Her hand then went limp, the fingers hanging down useless like ceiling streamers as the stinger settled down tip first off to the side. With a roar, Aaron used all his strength to twist hard with both hands. The move ripped all the ligaments and snapped wrist bones as he brought her own fingers back at her, the digits going through her skull at an awkward thirty degree angle. At first, the banshee’s eyes flicked to and fro as if processing what just happened, but then streams of blood began to ooze out of her sliced cranium before separating into porter house steak thick slices, cascading like a toppled tower of dishes onto the ground with wet thunks. The worms that held Aaron fast dissipated, falling back to earth and burrowing back to whence they came. With his strength back, he pushed the dead banshee off of him, her blood bathing his face and getting into everything, his ears, eyes, and ears. Flipping onto his stomach, he puked, his own blood mingled with his enemy’s pouring out of his mouth. The vitae spread out in a large pool around him, getting his hands and lower torso, soaking clean through his uniform. Man Yoshika and Lynette are going to be pissed come laundry day. He then thought back to the gunshot and looked off into the woods, trying to gauge where it came from and, more importantly, who fired. Movement caught his eyes and he squinted. Out of the shadows, a trail of gunsmoke coming from the long barrel of a gun coiling like a serpent as it rose into the air. The stark contrast between the dark and the wispy light illuminate a pair of brown eyes at remained trained on him like a hawk. From those two orbs, he knew that it was Minna and that he was in deep trouble.

Commander Wilcke stood up and racked the bolt to the antitank rifle. “Kind of late to be taking a midnight stroll without leave wouldn’t you say master sergeant?” she asked as she walked towards him, shouldering the gun. Three more shapes emerged behind her and Aaron breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Shirley, Yoshika, and Perrine, the original visitors of Bedgebury Woods reuniting.

“The thought crossed my mind commander.” Aaron sheepishly admitted, pushing himself up and standing on his two feet. “Thanks for the save.”

“Don’t thank me.” Wilcke replied, turning over and looking at Yoshika who stood there with her weapon, bowing slightly.

Aaron couldn’t help but smile and shake his head. “What tipped you off?” he asked.

“I smelled the exhaust fumes and followed the trail.” she answered.
Aaron playfully knocked himself upside the head with his right hand. *Of course the thing I forget.* He stood up and made a move to walk towards his friends, but he only took three steps before a searing pain raced across his entire body, causing him to fall to his knees hard, grimacing in pain. Yoshika saw this happen and immediately ran to him, concerned for his health. When she got to him and tried to get a look at him, she grew fearful. Even in the darkness, she could see Divale’s pallor lighten rapidly and his breathing was off, gulping large amounts of air as if he just came up from under water. “Aaron! What’s wrong?” Miyafuji asked anxiously as the rest of the group rushed over.

Aaron tried to answer her, but the pain prevented him from doing so effectively. It was intense, like having a hot poker fresh from a fire shoved underneath his skin. He could feel something move within him, some sort of infection, but his body and magic was powerless to do anything to stop it. His stomach was doing somersaults and the mere thought of moving seemed like a herculean task. *Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.* “I don’t feel so good.” he uttered weakly at last. “It’s like I have no energy and I feel nauseous.” His balance gave out and he collapsed onto his back, putting his hands to his eyes and moaning.

“Sergeant?” Minna inquired, not liking what she was seeing one bit. “What’s going on? What’s wrong with him?”

“I honestly don’t know.” Yoshika admitted, reaching out for Aaron with her right hand. “His wounds aren’t lethal at-” Her statement died as she touched Divale’s arm, the words replaced with a shock of surprise. He was cold, ice cold to the touch, like a body that was just pulled out from it’s drawer in the morgue. Then her mind began to put two and two together and she cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. “Aaron’s got hypoxia!” Spurning herself to action, Yoshika went over behind him and started to loop her arms underneath his armpits in an attempt to get him up. “He needs treatment elsewhere. Help me get him up.” All three witches went over, each taking a position near Aaron, Perrine at his feet, Minna and Shirley by his right and left side respectively. As one, they took a hold of him and tried to pick him up, but Aaron’s bulkiness proved to be too much for them to adequately handle and they struggled mightily to even lift him three inches off the ground before one of them had to set him down. All the while, Aaron was breathing hard and fast, his eyes full of fear. Miyafuji hated every second of it and in desperation called out into the darkness, “If anybody can hear me, help us!”

Someone did hear her cries, but it wasn’t a random soldier from the perimeter. A bubbling sound came from Aaron’s throat, saliva coming up like the head of a beer that just got poured into a glass at a bar. Yoshika tilted his head to the side, leaned forward, and pressed both her hands down firmly on his diaphragm, expelling the spittle lest it choked him. It flew out of his mouth and fell less then two feet away. As soon as it hit the ground, the frothy mass began to spread like some sort of spill and rise up into the air. Minna stepped aside and aimed the antitank rifle at it. “Get away from it!” she barked. The witches didn’t even have time to think about moving before a section of the expelled body fluid formed a pocket of sorts, one that was being filed rapidly by a full mouth of teeth and a tongue.

“If you want him to live, I suggest putting that gun away princess.” a woman’s voice demanded. Minna’s eyes widened. *Ismenoth?* The mass coalesced into the shape and dimensions of the demonness within Aaron and soon adopted all it’s unnatural features. When the metamorphosis was complete she looked over at then all with her black eyes and ordered, “Move away. I’ll handle this.” Though shocked at her sudden appearance, Perrine, Yoshika, and Shirley did as she ordered, giving the fiend space. She got down on her haunches and looped her left arm under Aaron’s head and the right near his knees. A deep breath was heard and Ismenoth then began to lift Aaron up off the ground, coming up of her haunches and standing upright, holding him like a weightlifter does a barbell at the gym. With that done, Ismenoth turned to Minna, looked down at her bare legs, and asked hurriedly, “I assume you drove?”
“Move out!” Wilcke barked, turning away and practically jogging out of the woods, the other members of her squadron on her heels. Despite the weight she was carrying, Ismenoth caught up to them quite easily, Aaron’s arms and legs dangling line dead fish on a line.

“Make sure that you keep him conscious.” Yoshika reminded her as they traversed the brush.

Ismenoth glared at the Japanese witch and replied coldly, “Do I look stupid to you? I know what the fuck I’m doing. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to bail his ass out of trouble.”

“How is his magic not working?” Perrine asked, looking at Aaron’s still slightly bleeding wounds. “Shouldn’t they be clotting by now?”

“The banshee had some sort of aetheric barrier in place before we got there.” the demoness explained, adjusting her grip. “I warned him to go back and wait for morning, but the damned fool refused to listen. It prevented me from bringing his higher magic to the fight.”

“With the banshee dead, you should be able to help him now right?” Shirley asked, looking over her shoulder.

“She managed to infect him with her poison before he killed her. It’s still blocking me from helping him.” She turned to Yoshika and muttered menacingly, “If he dies because you can’t help him, you will pay dearly.”

Before Miyafuji could offer a response, they emerged from the woods and could see the jeep. Shirley and Minna got there first and started to realign the seats to accommodate a fifth and sixth. “Where should we go?” Shirley queried when she finished her end of the bargain and hopped into the driver’s seat.

“Easiest would be Tunbridge Wells.” Minna suggested as Perrine opened the driver’s side passenger door, allowing Isemnoth to unceremoniously shove Aaron through the slot like an artillery round.

“That’s a no go.” Ismenoth said, getting into the jeep proper now. “I can hardly do anything to help him from the inside. We have a better chance of saving him if I stay like this.” Minna looked at her and held back a curse word, but just. That makes things that much more complicated. If she’s out and about, everyone will think that we consort with demons. Dover is too far away and London very well could. “Well, come on, let’s fucking go! Tick tock bitches!”

A snapping of a pair of fingers was heard, drawing everyone’s attention to the snapper. It ended up being Perrine who looked at them all and said, “We go to Lucretia.”

With a quick pull, Lucretia opened the front door to her flat and looked out into the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of what she was sure of someone knocking at the wooden portal just moments before. Clad in only her robe and wearing her slippers, her eyes feverishly looked all over the place, gazing out into the London night. The lampposts cast an eerie glow in the fog that covered the entire street if not the city, creating patches of dull yellow with gray edges that looked like worn paint smudges, barely illuminating the streets, the surrounding houses, or even the corner that lay sixty feet off to her left. Straining her senses to the maximum, her hopes faded one by one as nothing stirred in the evening air, even with looking down, there wasn’t any footprints that would assuredly be there from the moisture laden ground. She sighed in defeat and leaned against the door frame, closing her eyes and shaking her head. Ever since she received that letter several weeks ago, she had been obsessing over it, expecting any day for the herald of the mysterious O.M to arrive. She had memorized the phrases by heart by now and had destroyed it through placing it in the fireplace, piece
by piece, lest it be discovered. Breathing in deep, she turned away from the night and started to go back inside, back to bed, when suddenly, her eyes caught the sight of the faintest edges of a letter hidden in her wall mounted mailbox. Her green orbs widened and she hastily opened the lid and reached in, her right hand pulling out a letter with a red wax seal, one that matched the previous one. Her heart began to beat faster. *At long last, word has come. Soon the wait will be over and Aaron will be saved.*

As soon as she thought that then did the screeching of tires disturb the silence around her, nearly causing her to drop the precious information in her hand. Whipping her head around, two glowing lights in the middle of the road that were coming closer and closer. Not knowing what was going on, Lucretia pocketed the letter in her left front pouch and wandered down the steps, curiosity taking hold of her. *Who on earth would be driving like a maniac this late in the evening?* Then she could pick up voices in the dark, faint at first but becoming ever more distinct as the vehicle rocketed down the street. There were at least four, maybe five voices clamoring together, yet on in particular stood one from the rest. *Wait a second… that almost sounds like Yoshika… my God it is Yoshika!*

Throwing all caution and manner to the four winds, Lucretia ran out in the middle of the street, holding her arms out and yelling at the top of her lungs, “Yoshika! Is that you?!”

Miraculously, the voice answered her cries right back with, “That’s Lucretia! Shirley, pull over.” The twin headlights jerked to the left side of the street and brakes whined as they brought what Lucretia could now see was a jeep to a halt. Through the glare of the headlights and the mists that surrounded everything, the tiny form of Yoshika could be seen hopping out of the back passenger side door. “Doctor Domino, it’s Aaron! He’s-” Lucretia’s senses blanked out the last bits of what Yoshika was saying, the mention of her beloved’s name the only thing that resonated in her mind. *Oh no. Oh God no.* Domino ran towards the jeep, her feet hurting like the dickens as the thin soles of her slippers beat the rough asphalt of the street. Shirley then got out of the driver’s seat along with Minna from the front passenger seat after killing the engine, moving in a position to block her.

“Hold up.” Minna ordered as calmly as she could putting out her right hand. “Where is he?!” Lucretia asked. “What’s the damage?!” Then her eyes picked up the sight of a very tall figure clad in what looked like a waterproof tarp holding something in it’s arms, a body. Another figure, this one assuredly his wingman Perrine hopped out the other side, seemingly not wanting to be anywhere near the mysterious stranger. It gently, yet quickly exited the vehicle and moved up the street to her flat. Dismissing Minna’s orders, Domino went over and gasped in horror. Though the night was as dark as it could be, she could plainly see Aaron’s skin glowing like cut marble, white as death itself. His eyes were wide open, blood shot and rolling up into his head, the breathing ragged, and his lips a dull purple with the corners of his mouth dribbling saliva and flecks of vomit. Clotted blood from something covered his face and chest, giving off a foul reek that could make a rodent sick. Most disturbing was his fingertips, the points a blue color. Lucretia knew what that meant right off the bat. “Get him inside quick! He’s going into mid to late stage hypoxia!” Not needing any more prompting, the figure seemed to pick up the pace and practically run up the street and was halfway up the stairs to her flat before everyone else sprung into action, following up and into the flat Lucretia was the last one inside and she closed the door and locked it tight. Turning around she could see the tall stranger look around feverishly.

“Where do we set him down?” the figure asked, the voice belonging to a woman that Lucretia unfortunately knew very well indeed. It chilled her to the bones as the head turned around and jerked backwards, the hood coming off in a flash, revealing the face of Ismenoth who looked at her, imploring her to come up with an answer.

“Why are you here?” Lucretia inquired forcefully, gathering her courage and walking right up to the demonness.
“The fuck does it look like?!” Ismenoth barked back, looking down at the mess than Aaron had become and right back at her. “I’m saving your lover’s stubborn ass so unless you want him to die, you get off your high horse and fucking help him!”

Suddenly, Aaron started heaving and Ismenoth had barely enough time to tilt his head with a twitch of her wrist before he spewed a trail of yellow green onto the floor. He coughed hard and wheezed as he closed his eyes, “The world’s spinning so fucking bad. Can’t see straight.”

“Don’t close your eyes.” Lucretia stated, trying to keep herself calm. “It will only make it worse.”

“Tick tock bitch.” Ismenoth muttered, not caring about the conversation at all. Domino glared at her, but noticed everyone else in the room all waiting for her to give them orders.

“Commander, get the kitchen table cleared off. Captain, get some washcloths and wet them. Lieutenant, grab that coat hanger near the door. Sergeant, get the blood packs from my small refrigerator. As for you, follow the commander and set him down when she clears it off.” Lucretia ordered. Ismenoth fell in behind Minna who rushed into the kitchen like a whirlwind, grabbing the left most edge of the linen and giving the whole tablecloth a sharp tug. The fabric whizzed across the polished surface so fast that nothing fell over, not even the small vase of fresh flowers that Lucretia had picked the morning before. Not even waiting to fold it, Wilcke just let the cloth fall where it may and began feverishly whisking away the vase, napkin holder, and salt and pepper shakers. By the time, she got them of the table, Ismenoth was already in position and gently lowering Aaron onto the wood.

“Hopefully this holds his weight.” the demonness nonchalantly stated. She started with the lower body, moving her hands underneath so that Aaron would be set down little by little, yet still secured if the table decide to give out. It didn’t and the fiend cradled his head to the table. “I told him not to go alone.” she suddenly uttered, as if she was having a conversation with herself. “I knew something bad like this would happen, but no, he had to go all in on a stupid gamble and now he’s like this with me here cleaning up the mess.”

“That’s rich.” Perrine mocked as she entered with Shirley, holding the coat hanger and wet rags respectively. “A demon actually looking out for a mortal.”

“Happens more often than you think Frenchie.” Ismenoth hissed back. “He’s my charge remember.”

“If you don’t get out of the way, he’s not going to much of anything to anyone.” Lucretia emphatically said, Yoshika with the blood packs to her right. Needing no prompting, Ismenoth stood aside, growling at Perrine as she did so. Clostermann placed the coat hanger to Aaron’s right and Yoshika got to work, getting the blood packs latched and the feeder tubes hooked up. Shirley went over to the right with the wet rags and started placing one on Aaron’s pale forehead and using another to wipe whatever crusty vomit still remained on the sides of his mouth and chin. Lucretia supervised the whole ordeal while checking up on Aaron’s vitals. A simple pulse check told her everything: He was in rough shape and fading fast.

“We need to get oxygen into his blood quickly to in order to treat him effectively.” she asked Yoshika who got the feeder tubes in and was letting a few drops escape in order to make sure that no air remained.

“Ismenoth said that he was infected with magic after getting nicked by the banshee.” Miyafuji explained. She then found some veins and carefully stuck the needles into them.

“Where’s the wound?” Domino asked.

Ismenoth came back to the table and announced, “Allow me.” She took a hold of the front of Aaron’s uniform, looping her fingers deep into his undershirt and pulled. Both garments ripped in
half, the buttons flying in all directions like flies escaping a swatter. It didn’t take long for Lucretia to
find the wound, a paper cut thickness, but it was blue and the color was spreading all over his chest
like a rash.

“If it’s magical than a simple suction attachment won’t work in getting it out.” Domino deduced. She
turned to Yoshika and asked, “Will your magic be of use here?”

Yoshika at first had no clear idea, but as she thought about it, her head started moving up and down
in an affirmative. Looking over at Ismenoth, Miyafuji recollected, “When I helped Gertrude, Aaron
used a spell called foderunt. It helped me locate and seal the worst of the damage. Can you use it?”

“Yes. Give me a bit to summon it up.” Ismenoth answered, rubbing her hands together more out of
nervousness than glee.

“Might want to shorten the bit to now.” Perrine suddenly stated, pointing at the suspended blood
packs. “Look.” Everyone took a gander in that direction and saw the plastic bags of dark red blood
start to fold in on itself like a crumpled paper bag at an alarming rate, one that was too fast to be
anything natural.

Lucretia immediately went back to Aaron’s vitals. “His pulse is rising fast. His heart is beating faster
and harder because it senses oxygen in the blood. Whatever it is you need to do, do it quick. Those
are the only two I have. When those run, we’ll have no shot at saving him.” she reported.

Ismenoth closed her eyes and concentrated, beads of sweat appearing on her forehead from the stress
and strain in using magic to try to not only keep Aaron alive, but to provide a view of what was
killing him. After a few seconds she said, “I’ve got it ready.” and extended her right hand towards
Yoshika who looked at it with dread, remembering who Aaron allowed her to tap into his magic.

“I don’t trust you.” she said.

“Likewise short round,” Ismenoth retorted. “but I trust you enough to help me save his life. You
want extra insurance? Here it is; you do this for me, I’ll make it so that you don’t have to keep
holding me to form the connection.”

Despite her reassurances, Yoshika couldn’t help but feel uneasy, that something was up. Then Aaron
convulsed on the table, the wood creaking and the feeder tubes swinging around like snakes hanging
from a tree. “Lucretia! Lucretia!” Aaron called out pitifully, his eyes shut, lacking the strength to
open them.

In a flash, Domino was there, clutching his right hand with both of hers. “I’m right here Aaron. I’m
right here. Everything is going to be fine. Try not to move.”

He tried to give her hands a squeeze, but could only manage a cuff at best. “I wish I could see you
one last time before I go.” he garbled out as his lower body started twitching uncontrollably. “Body
is starting to fail me, involuntary tics, trying to jumpstart my dying organs.”

Yoshika looked at all of this and swallowed hard, making her decision. She extended her right hand
and took Ismenoth’s. As soon as the tips of her fingers curled around the sallow skin of the demon,
she looked over at Aaron’s body and saw inside him, specifically his major and minor arteries and
veins. All were filled to the brim with some sort of green ooze that writhed within them like
tapeworms in an intestine. It glowed with a malignant light, one that filled Yoshika with despair. “I
can see it, the poison.” she reported looking at the sheer volume of the stuff, and withdrawing her
hand. “It’s everywhere.”
“Then you’re going to have to be everywhere.” Shirley deduced, looking up at her as she replaced one of the damp cloths on Aaron’s head.

“What do you mean?” Miyafuji asked.

“Think about it sergeant.” Minna commented. “An enemy is heavily entrenched in front of you. You know where they’re concentrated. What do you do?”

“Hit them where they’re weakest?” Yoshika ventured, not knowing what she should say.

“They’re weak nowhere.” Perrine added. “That’s because they can reinforce any point that’s attacked. If you want to destroy an enemy like this, you hit them from all angles, pressure them to commit and stand rather move about.”

With that part of the explanation given, Yoshika began to understand. *I need to use my magic to press it out of him, probably right out his wound if possible.* “I know what to do,” she intoned, holding out her hands. *Here goes nothing.* Then she activated her magic, projecting her aura out and around the entirety of Aaron’s still twitching body. She could see the vessels and capillaries that made up his face. It was twisted in pain. *Don’t worry Aaron, I’ll get you out of this.* Moving her hands about in a circle, Miyafuji fully encapsulated the body and started to press them together slowly. Though nothing was there between her hands to impede their progress, some strange force seemed to resist mightily, trying to stop her. The resistance surprised her at first, but it only served to redouble her efforts, putting more energy into her attempt. Her hands started to shake with exertion and her face became beaded with sweat as she fought tooth and nail against the poison. Over time, her efforts did not go unrewarded. The glowing green of the intruder was being forced to retreat.

“Down to a quarter liter for both packs.” Lucretia rang out. “Now a fifth.”

Yoshika paid the dire situation no mind, her sole focus fixed on beating back the green menace. She could see the veins in both her hands come closer together as they neared the center of the aetheric aura. *Almost there.*

“The packs are almost out! Remove the tubes Lieutenant!” Lucretia ordered.

“You can do this sergeant Miyafuji.” Minna assured. “We all have faith in you.”

Redoubling her efforts, Yoshika managed to get the poison concentrated right under the original entry point, the scratch that the banshee gave him. She then cupped her right hand, placing it below and to the side of her left, the gesture looking like she was supporting a small pole to a tent.

“Pulse and heart rate are dropping! We’re losing him!” Domino cried out.

Yoshika then gritted her teeth and gave out a bellow that rang throughout the room and beyond as she pushed up with both her hands. Aaron’s body rocked hard on the table as a geyser of liquid erupted from the wound, like a backed up shower drain, bubbling and streaming down his sides. “Don’t touch it!” she ordered, causing everyone to step back. For a good few seconds the gushing poison leaked out of him, dribbling across the table top and dripping onto the floor, steaming and reeking of crushed ivy, lasting for a split second before it evaporated into nothing. Everyone looked on in wonder and anxiety, hoping that it was in time. Ismenoth looked off to the side, furrowing her brow. Then her face brightened and she exclaimed, “He’s in the clear! You did it!” All gave a raucous cheer, Lucretia’s being the loudest. “Magic is coming back to the full and his passive healing is not that far behind. I can take it from here.” She then turned and walked towards Miyafuji, triggering everyone to reach for their pistols. The demoness paid them no mind as she looked down on the Japanese witch that saved Aaron’s life. “I guess I owe you one.” she simply said.
“I want nothing from you.” Yoshika replied sincerely.

Tilting her head to the side and shrugging, Ismenoth conceded, “Suit yourself. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me.” Suddenly, her body disappeared, vanishing into thin air. The tarp that covered her fell to the floor with a crump.

“Good girl.” a weak voice croaked. All in the room looked and saw Aaron open his eyes, his glowing bronze orbs looking out at the world once again. Lacking the strength to turn his head, he contented himself with a meek smile. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. Wish I could’ve seen the look on her face.” Then with a loud crack of wood, the table finally gave up the ghost, all four legs snapping simultaneously and sending the main body crashing to the floor with a loud clunk. Aaron gave a small ‘oof’ and muttered, “Sorry about the table Lulu.”

“You nearly die in my kitchen from getting involved in a fight that you shouldn’t have fought alone and you are sorry for breaking my table?” Lucretia asked incredulously. She shook her head and placed her right hand on her forehead. “Men.” she mumbled under her breath. She then regarded Shirley and Minna and said, “Let’s get this place cleaned up. Yoshika and Perrine will monitor him.” Soon the room was filled with the hustle and bustle of bodies moving things around and cleaning dirty surfaces.

Perrine gave Yoshika a hug of gratitude, a gesture which prompted Miyafuji to quip, “Aren’t you glad I stayed?”

Before the grateful French witch could reply, Aaron beckoned, “Hey Perrine.” She turned and saw him raise his right hand up, barely being able to crest his chest in height. Clostermann took it with both hands and Aaron looked at her, nodding all the while. “I’m so very sorry for how I’ve acted towards you. I fucked up.”

“It’s all right Aaron.” Perrine assured. “I forgive you.”

As soon as those last three words left her lips, Aaron looked like he was about to cry with joy, but no tears came. “Let’s go back to being friends with a big F.” he offered.

“Was she ever not?” Yoshika pondered out loud.

Aaron chuckled, more or less, and his smile grew wider. “I guess not.” Lucretia looked on this scene and also smiled, remembering what he said at the coven. I’m the fastest person in the room to say fuck you, but I’m also the fastest person in the room to say I’m sorry. She carried all the used rags and walked around the corner, making her way to the makeshift hole in the wall that doubled as her laundry room. When she got there, she placed them all in the wicker basket and then remembered the letter in her front pocket. Quickly, she looked everywhere, making sure that she was alone. Content that she was, Lucretia pulled the letter out of her front robe pocket, broke the red wax seal, and began to read. ARRIVED IN THE COUNTRY YESTERDAY, BUT IT’S TOO DANGEROUS TO MOVE. I’VE DISPACTCHED A REPRESENTATIVE OF MINE TO MEET YOU AT YOUR FLAT. THIS INDIVIDUAL SHOULD ARRIVE WITHIN THE WEEK. MAKE SURE THAT YOU ARE ALONE AND REMEMBER THE PHRASE, ‘THE SUN IS SHINING’, TO WHICH YOU WILL REPLY, ‘YET THE ICE IS SLIPPERY’. ALL WILL SOON BE EXPLAINED AND TELL NO ONE. O.M.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

After healing back up from his injury, Aaron goes back to Dover Castle, expecting a return to normalcy, but instead gets a strange message from Minna. He rendezvous with her and several other members of the squadron who then proceed to tell him the reason for the summons. Apparently there was a little incident involving Erica and a particular pair of panties that caused pandemonium for everyone in the castle and personal embarrassment for the commander. Knowing that she can't punish her herself for fear of bad publicity, Minna enlists Aaron to do the honors. Operation Gegenreaktion is launched, triggering a duel for the ages and a peace treaty signed with a kiss that isn't chocolate.

Chapter XXXIX: Running With (And From) The Devil

Out of all the creatures on this earth, women elude me despite having many an opportunity to get to know them better. Though just like us, minus the aesthetics and rearrangement of internal plumbing, personality wise they might as well be a separate species. However, this much I have learned: The deadliest adversary you can possibly have in life is a woman with an ax to grind.

Diary Entry April 12th 1944

Lucretia watched Aaron as he put on his white undershirt, minding the old wound site. It had been a few days since he’d been brought to her flat and on the outside looked like he was back to his old self. Nothing at all remained of the scratch, not even the finest pale ridge of a scar. Per Minna’s instructions, he had been taking it easy as he healed, though he did take certain liberties during that time. He cooked breakfast for her in the morning, mere hours after he’d been too weak to even raise his voice. The very next day, he even found the strength to repair her kitchen table. As for yesterday and last night, Domino could not help but smile. It was like we made love for the very first time all over again. “Stai bene (You alright)?” Aaron asked while he pulled his shirt down.

She walked up to him and placed her right hand on his chest, right where the wound was and explained, “Sono sorpreso che non ci sia una cicatrice che consideri quanto male sembrava (I’m surprised that there isn’t a scar there considering how bad it looked).”

Aaron placed his right hand over hers and looked in her eyes lovingly. “Un graffio è un graffio. Posso facilmente prendersi cura di quelli e non hanno nulla a ricordarmi di loro (A scratch is a scratch. I can easily take care of those and have nothing to remind me of them).” He then looked down, dredging up a thought from deep within his brain. “Sono contento di non avere una cicatrice da questo. Non è stata la mia migliore dimostrazione. Ho avuto così tante opportunità per terminare quella lotta presto, ma non riuscivo a capitalizzare, non potevo eseguire (I’m glad I don’t have a scar from this. It wasn’t my best showing at all. I had so many opportunities to end that fight early, but I
just couldn’t capitalize, couldn’t execute).”

“È un male che vorrei che ci fosse (Is it bad that I wish there was)?” Lucretia inquired, taking her right hand off his chest and wrapping both arms around him, hugging him tight. Aaron returned the embrace and understood why she said it before the love of his life added, “Onestamente pensavo che avrei perso te. L’abbiamo fatto tutti (I honestly thought I was going to lose you. We all did).” She then looked up at him with her green eyes and pleaded, “Non fare mai una cosa stupida come quella di nuovo Aaron. Promettimi che non andrai mai in una cosa del genere senza aiuto (Don’t ever do something stupid like that again Aaron. Promise me you will never go into something like that without help).”

Aaron nodded, leaned in, and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Ti prometto Lulu. Questo non accadrà di nuovo (I promise Lulu. This will not happen again).” he stated sincerely. He then let her go and started to put on his uniform, looping his arms through the sleeves. He still felt bad for putting everyone in such a state of mind, even after he forgave himself for such idiocy. She’s right Aaron. You could’ve died that night. You need to start trusting people more or else you’re going to get it good. “Vorrei che non dovessi tornare indietro (I wish that I didn’t have to go back).” he said, buttoning up his uniform. “Mi sei mancata (I’ve missed you).”

“Aaron.” Lucretia admitted. “E non solo per ieri (And not just because of yesterday).”

Aaron smirked a tad as he reached the last button on the collar. He was about to do it up, but then thought against it. Never liked buttoning up the collar. Feels too restraining, like it’s trying to choke me. He then smoothed out his front and asked, “Come sto (How do I look)?”

Lucretia shrugged and offered, “Come l’uomo dei miei sogni (Like the man of my dreams)?”

Divale chuckled and waved politely farewell as he walked towards the door putting his glasses on. “Ci vediamo di nuovo (I’ll see you again).” he said as he took hold of the doorknob and opened the door, bathing himself in the light and sounds of the city of London. People were out and about and cars rumbled down the street. Over the din of the engines, one could hear the paperboy on the corner, blurting out today’s headlines. He breathed it all in and looked over to the near side of the street to his right and saw his motorcycle resting there. According to what Lucretia told him, it was picked up and deposited there yesterday by order of the Tunbridge Wells defense commander himself in gratitude for having dealt with the banshee. He trotted down the steps, leaving the door open for it was a nice day out. Aaron gave the bike a quick once over as Lucretia stood off to the side, leaning on the door frame, arms crossed over her chest, gazing at him. Content that nothing was off, Aaron got on Sleipnir, the engine coming to life the instant his bulk sat down on the seat. Again, he waved goodbye to Lucretia who returned the gesture and kicked the stand up. Within a heartbeat, he cranked the throttle and he sped down the street, leaving nothing but the smell of exhaust fumes in his wake.

Domino watched him go, keeping her eyes glued to him as he continued down the road, mingling briefly with the traffic before deftly maneuvering around the cars that impeded him. It didn’t take him long to reach the corner that would take him out of London and back to Dover Castle, whizzing around the bend. She sighed and was about to close the door when she suddenly heard a woman’s voice call out, “The sun is shining.” Those words, spoken with a slight Austrian accent caused her to stop in her tracks and whirl her head towards who spoke. Her eyes rested upon a young woman, most of her features hidden by a long black trench coat with brass button, very odd considering that it was far from cold out. The woman looked at her with her cat’s eyes, one blue and the other hazel, the orbs set in a face the color of beige with wisps of brown hair from her bangs dangling in front them, the style short, almost like something that one would find in the military.
Remembering the phrase Domino answered confidently, “Yet the ice is slippery.” Finally. After long last, the herald has arrived. The mysterious woman gave a weak smile and walked towards her, going up the steps slowly, and pausing at the threshold, a mere foot away from her.

“A pleasure to finally meet you at last Miss Domino.” she politely stated, offering her right hand. “My name is Helga. Helga von Krieger.”

The wind whistled through Aaron’s hair as he raced up the dirt road leading up to Dover Castle. He casually looked up into the sky and grimaced a tad. Over the last few days, the weather had been night and sunny, but today it was nothing but heavy overcast with rain in the works sometime today. Just my fucking luck. Hopefully I’ll make it before it starts pouring. He revved the engine more and went up into the air for a brief second as he crested a small rise in the road. He came down softly and could finally see the castle proper. Helmeted heads of guards could be seen bobbing about the walls as they went about their patrols. They were manned today due to the weather, presumably fogging up the radar sites around Dover. A few saw him approach and waved down from the walls at him. Aaron returned the gesture and was thankful they were there for he knew as well as anyone what the enemy liked to do on overcast days. They sure do like to attack during those times. It’s like they know the limitations of our defense perimeters. Course if that were the case, why don’t they launch a massive attack? Well, it could be worse. As soon as he thought it, Aaron spied a detail that he missed during his initial survey. Outside the gate were a half dozen cars parked side by side along with trucks that had numbers etched onto the sides of them. His mood soured on the spot and the left side of his lip curled in contempt. And it’s worse. If it’s not the Neuroi plaguing us it’s the other great enemy: paparazzi. I don’t see hide or hair of the bastards but it doesn’t mean they aren’t there. He could still remember the last time he had an interview with them and he hated dwelling on it. Aaron was about to cloak himself with his magic when his communicator crackled to life. “Master Sergeant Divale? Where are you?” Minna asked in a nasally voice, the pops of the signal ringing in his ears.

Aaron brought the motorcycle to a complete stop and answered, “About a few hundred feet from the main gate commander. You might want to brace yourself, we’ve got visitors.”

“They’ve been here for the past ten minutes now master sergeant. I need you to come to the hanger asap.” Minna ordered.

It was at that point that Aaron got a sinking feeling, the kind one gets when one believes that something was up. “What’s going on commander? Is everything alright?” he inquired warily. Nothing came over on Wilcke’s side and it took a few seconds for him to realize that she had cut the signal. The realization made him feel cold and unsure momentarily with how to proceed. Now that is very strange. It isn’t like her to just cut the comms like that without proper protocol. Either this is very important or a set up. Best use caution. “Obscurum.” he intoned, waiting until the magic enveloped him and Sleipnir. Might not see me, but they can hear me. They’ll know I’m there, but they won’t be able to react in time effectively. He then cranked the throttle hard, the tires kicking up sod as he veered away from the gate and raced around the outer wall like he was in a grand prix of some sort. His body was jostled this way and that due to the uneven ground. To make matters worse, the fields were home to nearly a few dozen rabbits, their holes practically invisible almost to the point where you had to be on top of them to find them. Aaron just gritted his teeth, clutching the handlebars tightly. This isn’t good for the suspension. He started to make the wide sweeping turn to the right, but suddenly, he clipped the outer edge of one of the rabbit holes, causing the bike lean hard. In a flash, Aaron unfurled his right wing, his feathers digging into the ground as he arrested the fall and pushed himself and the bike upright. Flicking the dirt away like water, he could then see the hanger, the wind sock atop the pole outside to the left barely moving. He also noticed that the front door was wide open, another curious detail that he knew would never happen with Minna. Rather
than race up next to the building, he slowed down and kicked the stand. Getting up off the seat, killing Sleipnir’s thrumming engine in the process, he walked over the remaining hundred or so feet, maintaining his invisibility the whole time. “Imago calor.” he whispered quietly. His eyes adjusted to the new vision allowing him to see through the walls of the hanger. Inside, he could see four heat signatures, all seated at what could only be a table that was directly on top of the launch dais. *Looks like a fucking town meeting in there.*

Erring on the side of caution, Aaron paused just to the left of the door and was about to call out to those inside when a voice spoke up. “It’s alright master sergeant. Nothing’s amiss here. Get inside and let’s have a friendly chat.” Minna ventured, uttering a shrill nose blow afterwards. Divale sighed with relief and dispelled his enchantments. *Need to not be so paranoid these days. You’re safe here.* He then walked past the threshold and immediately saw Minna, Mio, Gertrude, and Lucchini all sitting down at a small table. One seat was empty, one that sat directly across from the commander. “Also, please shut the door behind you please. The cool air isn’t good for my cold.” Minna requested with a slight sniffle.

“Neither is being out of bed.” Aaron countered, closing the door as ordered. “A good cup of tea and some hearty soup will suit you better.” He then moved in quickly, lest he looked like he was dawdling, taking the entire few steps leading up to the dais with a simple hop. “I’m kind of surprised that there isn’t any breakfast here.”

“We already ate.” Lucchini quipped. She then sniffed the air and gave a sly grin. “Judging from the perfume on your neck, so did you.” Aaron suppressed his embarrassment by putting up both his hands in mock surrender.

“You caught me officer.” he jested. He let them drop and looked at Minna who certainly looked like she was suffering from a cold, with her runny nose, the congested breathing, and a slight bend to her spine due to fatigue or muscle ache. “So what’s really going on commander?” he asked.

Wilcke inhaled through her nose hard, pulling back some mucus. “While you were recuperating at Lucretia’s,” she began, “an incident took place her that involved Perrine.”

Aaron’s eyes widened and he tilted his head off to the side in confusion. “That doesn’t make any sense at all commander. After she and Yoshika made up—” he started to say, but Minna held up her right hand, silently asking for quiet.

“Her undergarments were stolen.” Mio explained. “Yoshika’s and Eila’s were nabbed too. Strangely enough, Eila in turn tried to purloin Sanya’s, but that didn’t end well for her, judging from the lump on her head that Yoshika treated.”

“So, if she wasn’t at fault, who was?” Aaron asked, still not getting any sort of clarification.

“I did it.” Lucchini quipped in a low voice, drawing a stare of disbelief from Aaron. “But please understand that I only took them because mine went missing. I put them in the cubby I always use before I went to the bath and when I came out, they were gone. No one else was out at the time so I took the only pair I could get my hands on. They then spotted me doing it and I panicked. To slow them down I took Yoshika’s panties and Eila’s.”

“Most of the squadron ended up chasing her all over creation.” Gertrude remarked. “Took us close to fifteen minutes to track her down and apprehend her. She nearly would’ve got away with it had it not been for her accidentally flipping the alert on and getting finally brought down by Erica.”

Aaron put his hands on his temples and shook his head side to side. “Alright, hold on.” he said, rubbing clockwise, attempting to grind some sense into what he was hearing. He looked at Mio and
Minna and inquired, “With respect, where the hell were you two when this was all going down?”

“We were with the grounds crews at the hanger, getting everything ready for Erica’s commendation ceremony. In recognition for her two hundredth kill, the German War Ministry awarded her the Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves. We honestly knew nothing about what was going on inside. However, when the alert got tripped, we instantly radioed the rest of the squadron, telling them to get to the hanger and the radar towers around Dover. The towers gave us clear skies for miles around and it was at that point that we knew knew something was amiss, so we investigated. Found the whole lot of them in the motor pool with Hartmann holding Lucchini by the collar. She produced the stolen items and told us what happened.” Minna illuminated, taking out her handkerchief again.

“So you called me here, nearly putting me on edge thinking that something was wrong, just to tell me about a glorified schoolboy pantie raid?” Aaron queried, holding his hands out in front of him.

“The story doesn’t end there.” Mio emphatically stated. “As punishment, Lucchini was made to sit during the ceremony without her panties on. Everything goes off without further hiccups and we rise to applaud her. It was at that moment that a small breeze came up and lifted a small section of Erica’s skirt, revealing to us all that she was the one who stole Lucchini’s panties and thus set off this incident in the first place.”

Aaron heard this and suddenly got why Minna had summoned him here. “Oh.” he uttered slowly, leaning in, moving his tongue within his mouth like he was trying to get that last bits of peanut butter off his teeth. “So now the purpose is revealed.” He pointed a finger from his left hand at Minna and deduced, “You want me to get back at her because you don’t want to punish her yourself for fear of bad publicity.”

Mio grabbed the hilt of her katana and warned, “Watch it Aaron. You’re already in enough hot water.”

“It’s alright major.” Minna stated plainly, her words waving her friend off. “He does have a valid point, but you seem to forget a very important detail master sergeant: I’m sick and thus can delegate responsibilities to other squadron members when I see fit to do so.”

“So then delegate it to Mio, citing your condition as the reason and have her do this.” Aaron suggested. “Why do this the roundabout way?”

“Erica’s not stupid.” Gertrude interjected. “She knows that there will be a reckoning coming for what she did and suspects that it will come from our side. You however have no connection to the whole debacle and thus can act with near impunity while being free from her prying eyes.”

“And she deserves it too.” Lucchini chirped. “The bitch still hasn’t apologized to me at all.” She looked at Barkhorn and hastily added, “No offense.”

“None taken at all.” Gertrude assured.

“Well,” Aaron began, “where I’m from there’s a saying: Always be the one who swings the sword and I deeply think that this isn’t my responsibility so I’m out. I’m not doing it.” He then made a move to get up out of his chair and leave the table when his right arms was gripped by Francesca.

“But Aaron!” she exclaimed, clearly perplexed. “Don’t you care about what she did to me?!!”

Aaron looked at green eyes and illuminated, “I do Francesca, I really truly do, but this isn’t my fight. There’s nothing to gain from this besides petty revenge.”

“Then why don’t we raise the stakes?” Minna interrupted, steepling her hands in front of her. “What
do you want?”

The question made Aaron’s brow furrow and he put on a quizzical look. “Excuse me?” he asked.

“What do I have to give you to get you to accept?” Minna clarified.

Though Divale was of the right mind to up and leave, the commander’s words glued him to the spot. He slightly shrugged off Lucchini’s grasp and inquired, “What are you willing to give?”

“Everything is in play Aaron.” Mio pointed out. “Anything you could possibly think of… within reason.”

So much for getting a million dollars. “Up to and including my indefinite grounding?” Aaron asked. Mio looked over at Minna with a look that made everyone in the room know that this was a huge request. Shortly after he was stabilized, Wilcke had a very heated discussion with Divale, most of it behind closed doors and for good reason. While she had a good idea about what was said, what was clear was that Aaron was severely punished for his transgressions. Most of the time, going AWOL would in times of war carry a mandatory military trial and an immediate dishonorable discharge from the Allies. In Aaron’s case, Minna had thought it more beneficial for him to serve an indefinite grounding, one that could only be revoked by her word only. She also made it known that given the earlier incident with Shirley’s Strikers, he was on his second strike and that if there was a third, there would be ‘dire consequences’. Wilcke nodded and the superiors regarded Aaron who kept his calm despite getting what he wanted. “I want my indefinite grounding revoked for the next forty eight hours so that I can participate in the scheduled mock duels tomorrow with Perrine, starting now.” Aaron demanded.

“Why ask for forty eight hours when only twenty four are needed?” Minna inquired with a raised eyebrow.

“After being cooped up for a few days, I need to stretch my wings before they’re shuttered.” Aaron answered truthfully. For a good second, it looked like his request was going to be denied until Wilcke offered her right hand, palm open in front of him. Aaron couldn’t help by smile on the inside.

“Score one for mercy.”

“So do we have a plan or are we just going to wing it?” he asked.

“We do have a plan.” Minna replied with a sly grin. “I like to call it Operation Gegenreaktion (Backlash).”

“Thank you very much!” Erica called out from the motor pool door, waving at the departing horde of reporters with her right hand. She then pushed the release button that caused the garage door to come back down. Though she saw them turn their backs and leave, she kept a wary eye on all of them. Slowly the door came down, seemingly taking forever to descend to the concrete floor. To pass the time, Erica absentmindedly looked down at her chest, her eyes locked on the newest medal in her collection, the Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves. It was a square piece of metal, a black unadorned cross held up via a ring loop by a silver clasp in the shape of an oak leaf. A long black, white, and red ribbon completed the ensemble. The door finally clanked down hard on the concrete floor of the motor pool and she slowly turned around, touching the medal with her left hand, rubbing the cold cross with her thumb and forefinger. Such a tiny thing for something so momentous. You’d figure that it’d be bigger. Hartmann chuckled to herself, thinking about what Aaron’s explanation would be if her were here. It’s all about the war rationing. Her guffaws died in her throat as she thought about him, imagining how he must of looked after the battle with the banshee. When everyone got back, everyone was tight lipped about what they saw, even the normally talkative Shirley who she could
almost always count on for news outside the walls. It took a good four hours and a few glasses of wine to get Perrine to open up about the ordeal. From what she told her, Aaron ended up on death’s door and for a moment looked like he wasn’t going to make it. Thankfully Yoshika brought him back from the brink just in the nick of time. *I knew that girl from Japan had something in here that made her belong here.*

Content with her thoughts for the time being, Erica turned and started to make for the door leading back into the base when suddenly her communicator crackled to life. “Anyone reading this signal, is anyone in the depot right now?” a masculine voice asked anxiously, the sounds of an engine nearly overtaking the bulk of the message.

Hartmann knew who it was right away and put her right hand on the sending stud. “Aaron is that you?” she asked, not believing for a second that he managed to recover that fast from what had been described as a near fatal injury.

“What do you think Hartmann?” Aaron radioed back. “Are you in the depot right now?”

“Yeah, just sent the reporters packing. You might want to be careful or else they’ll turn their attention on you.” Erica advised.

“Oh I saw the vultures as soon as I got outside the main gate. Masked myself pretty good so I could avoid them. Get the door open because I’m coming in hot.” Aaron relayed.

Quickly, Erica slammed her right hand onto the button. With a protested groan, the door pulleys began to wind the long chains back up. Over their rattling, a loud highly tuned engine thrumming like some massive cat from the ice age began to reach her ears, the horsepower going up and down from applying the brakes and throttle, and it was getting closer by the second. *He’s going to ram into the door!* “Aaron! Break off! You’re coming in too fast!” she shouted into her communicator.

“I’m fully committed now.” Aaron informed, his voice calm as a stagnant pool. “Just passed the second gate and turning into the final stretch. Get out of the way black devil.” Hartmann jumped to the far left side of the garage door, by this time only three feet from the ground and the noise from Aaron’s motorcycle was getting louder and louder. Curious, she got down on her haunches and looked out underneath the door. At first, she could see nothing at all, and it caused her to furrow her brow, but then a section of the world started to ripple like waves of heat from overheated asphalt in summer. It captivated Erica as she watched it swirl and warp into a clear ovoid shape with a rough textured exterior. It was at that point that she knew what the mysterious thing was: the front tire of a motorcycle. It got bigger and bigger, going from the size of a pea to a melon within a second flat. Self preservation overtook her mind and she looked away, flattening herself against the wall. A grinding sound could be heard, but not one that was metal on earth, but something else. In a flash, the twin linked bodies of Sleipnir and Aaron slid under the small space, the bike being held up at a slight angle by his right wing to prevent damage. Erica watched wide eyed as Divale concentrated on getting past the threshold, the tips of his hair brushing the lip of the garage door. The whole process took less than two seconds and as soon as Aaron was safely inside, Hartmann pressed the button one more time, causing the garage door to jerk violently before coming back down.

As for Aaron, he made his right wing spasm, sending him and the bike into a spin that kicked up loose dust from the concrete floor. He turned the wheel expertly, man and machine revolving like a top as he guided both towards a slim space between the Ferdinand and a troop transport. Improbably, he managed to thread the needle, parking the motorcycle right smack dab between them. Aaron brought the motorcycle to a complete stop, comically looked to his right and left, looked up, and uttered, “Like a glove.”

“Good thing that Minna wasn’t here to see that little stunt.” Erica remarked as she walked up to him,
the garage door clunking down for good this time. “She would’ve done a lot worse then ground you.”

Aaron kicked the stand down and got up from the motorcycle, looping his right leg over to the left, the engine dying the instant his rump left the seat. “Why do you think I asked ahead?” he asked with a sheepish grin on his face, arms extended out to his side. Hartmann smiled and embraced him, for she did indeed miss him and he her, more so for the jokes and the prank war than out of any real connection.

“So can I see it?” Erica eagerly asked.

A confused look came over Aaron as he peered down at the expecting witch. “This a trick question?” he pondered at her with a cocked eyebrow. Erica responded with a sly double shifting of her eyebrows up and down. Divale let her go and took one step back, lifting up the shirt with his left hand and pointing out the now nonexistent scar with his right.

Erica went forward a bit and squinted her eyes, trying to see the wound but failing. “Strange that I can’t see it.” she muttered, eyes looking over his chest and sifting through the old scars. “The way that Perrine described it made it look like you got mangled.”

“It would’ve been mortal had it not been for Yoshika’s quick thinking.” Aaron quipped, letting his shirt drop. He then spied the new medal that Erica was wearing and gestured with his head at it. “Speaking of new apparel on one’s chest, where did you get that little guy? That from today?”

“It’s my Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves.” Erica answered, smiling proudly. “Got it a few hours before you got back in recognition for my two hundredth kill.”

“A hundred?” Aaron inquired. If they awarded me one for every two hundred I’ve bagged, every square inch of my chest would be covered with the damn things. “Good for you Erica.” He then looked towards the door leading out of the depot and asked as he walked towards it, “Is there anything to eat in the messhall?”

“Not a whole bunch of much.” Erica admitted, trailing after him. “Everyone had a hearty meal before the ceremony.”

Well this chafes my ass. “They probably also pinched some victuals for the after party later.” Aaron absentmindedly commented as he rounded the corner.

Hartmann stopped hard in her tracks, the sound of her boots hitting the floor making Aaron wheel around. “What do you mean after party?” she queried. “There isn’t going to be one.”

Divale found it very hard not to let his jaw drop, instead looking like he was spluttering out some nasty drink. “Are you joking me right now?” he asked, shaking his head in wonder. “Something like that should be celebrated and celebrated thoroughly.”

“Commander Wilcke frowns upon social gatherings like that.” Erica pointed out. Especially after the one where me and Krupi-

“Well if the rest of them can’t celebrate a great achievement, we can.” Aaron stated with determination, fishing around in his back pocket. After a bit of rummaging, he produced a tiny key and offered it to Erica. “Up in my room, tucked underneath my bed pillow is a little something that I’ve been saving for an occasion like this.”

Hartmann reached out for the key, but then withdrew her hand, eyeing the offer with suspicion. “How do I know that this isn’t some sort of prank?” she asked.
Aaron rolled his eyes. “If this was a prank,” he began with a bit of annoyance, “why would I be giving you the key to my room?”

Erica thought it over in her head. *He could always use his magic to seal it, but the offer seems sincere and he does have a point. This should be celebrated and if he’s the one buying…* Tentatively, she reached out again and took the key from his hand. “This better be good stuff.” she said cheerfully as she breezed past him in the opposite direction.

“It’s a golden vintage I assure you.” Aaron called out as Erica disappeared from his sight. Hartmann heard his words as she picked up the pace, eager to see what Aaron had in store for her. *Hmm, golden vintage. What could he mean by that? Cognac? Whiskey? Maybe even a chardonnay? I could really go for a good wine right about now. Doubt it’s beer, but then again, he’s got all sorts of tricks up his sleeve.* Coming to the stairs, Erica took them two at a time at first, wanting to reach the top. Around the midway point, she stopped briefly. *What the hell am I doing? There’s nothing going on that needs my attention and he’s certainly not going anywhere either. Best to just take my time.* Thus, she continued up the stairs and reached the top, her hand grazing the wooden banister. Reminding herself where his room was again, she turned left and ventured on, chuckling lightly as she recalled the last time she was up there. *Got him damn good for that lemon meringue up my ass. Painted his entire room pink from top to bottom. Strangely didn’t give me shit for it, claiming it brightened up his surroundings.* Then she frowned and shivered as his revenge for that stunt went through her brain. *Then came that night when the bastard somehow managed to open my window without me noticing and deposited a pond’s worth of frogs in my room. The fuckers got all over my bed and jumped all over my body for hours before one of them landed on my face, waking me up. I’ll get him later for that and I know just what to do. But first…* Her thoughts died as she finally came to the Aaron’s room door. Hartmann got the key out and placed it in the lock. Before turning it, she took a quick glance around her, seeing if there was any tricks or traps. Satisfied that there were none, she turned the key in the lock clockwise and pushed the heavy door open. Not making the rookie mistake of entering as soon as it unlocked, she stood at the threshold and peered in.

Aaron’s room was virtually unchanged for having left it several days ago. Everything was neat and tidy, reminding her of Gertrude’s but this one clearly had a man’s touch applied to it despite having a not so fresh coat of vibrant pink paint everywhere. Erica took great care in not getting so much as a drop on his things. *It’s the code: You only strike at things that aren’t personal.* Cautiously, she went inside, looking up and around, for even then she wasn’t entirely convinced that Aaron hadn’t set a trap for her. Her boots made a dull clunk on the rough hewn floorboards as she walked to his bed. She leaned off center a tad o get a glimpse underneath. Seeing nothing there, Erica turned her attention to the pillow and lifted it up gently, keeping as much distance between her and it. It didn’t take long for her to see what Aaron had kept underneath it. As it turned out, there was a green glass bottle about the size of a standard flask and roughly the same shape, but wider with a cork stopper filled with a dark liquid. There wasn’t a label on it anywhere, not even some raised lettering along the neck to denote what it was, a fact that filled Erica with immense curiosity. *Now what in the world could you be I wonder?* Hartmann picked up the bottle, feeling the cold surface and hearing whatever it was inside swishing around. She started to leave the room and activated the send stud on her communicator. “I’ve got what you had under your pillow Aaron. What is this and where are you?” she asked.

The sound of water falling into some sort of receptacle reached her ears, the static pops commingling with the echo, creating a weird ambience. “I’m taking a leak right now.” Aaron answered. “Wait for me outside the restroom.”

Slightly grossed out, Erica killed the link and journeyed down the hallway, making a right at the bend. She spotted the door, one that was right next to a window that looked out towards the hanger, or at least it would were it not for the wall. The only thing that would be visible would be the
windsock. Hartmann paused at the window and looked out of it, seeing if the winds were good, but as soon as she located the pole, her eyes leading up to the top, her jaw dropped and her heart skipped a beat. Instead of the usual single red orange cloth, there was a long line of dazzlingly white panties, held together by wooden clothes pins. Suddenly, the bottle began to vibrate in her hand, causing her to yelp and jump in fright, dropping it. The vessel hit the floor hard, but didn’t break, bouncing up off the carpet twice before coming to a complete stop. The liquid inside leveled out strangely as if there were elevation differences, though there were none at all. Markings began to rise from the liquid, shapes that Erica quickly realized were letters, arranged to say one word: Sucker.

“Alright everyone, you all know what to do to make this look like this was unexpected?” Mio asked, addressing the other members of the squadron that gathered inside the hanger. As per the plan, Sakamoto contacted everyone else via private channels, letting them know what was going happen and had them all ferried out of the castle secretly by way of Aaron’s magic. It was very touch and go for some of it because a lot of the timing depended on Hartmann’s caution. It seems as if that has paid off. The pilots in front of her nodded enthusiastically, Lucchini especially. She looked over at Aaron who was absolutely devouring an MRE off to the side of the group, brown streams of some sort of gravy running down the far sides of his face and inquired, “How long do you think it will be before she notices?”

“Mewell.” Aaron replied with his mouth full. He then wiped his mouth with his right sleeve and swallowed the rest of whatever he chowed on down his throat before continuing, “I’m not an expert, but if I were the lieutenant, I’d be figuring out what’s going on right about-” He never finished that thought as somehow, a shrill scream of rage could be heard from somewhere far away.

“Guess we have our answer.” Mio deduced. She looked at the rest of the squadron and ordered, “Get into your assigned places ladies. We have a scene to set up.”

“I’ll just be off to the side and look pretty if you don’t mind major.” Aaron quipped as he tilted he MRE bag up again and let the last dregs of his breakfast run into his open mouth. He turned and walked to one of the benches nearest to the launch dais, shaking the remaining drops of gravy out of the bag and took it away, feeling the warm loving sensation of being full. Divale licked his lips clean of the gravy and was about ready to crumple it all up and throw it into the nearby garbage bin when Lucchini popped her head up from launch dais, a big smile on her face.

“I can’t wait to see her get it.” she commented, wiping off any dust on her Strikers with a rag. “I’m so excited it hurts.”

“I’ll bet.” Aaron said as he balled up the empty MRE bag and casually tossed it into the garbage bin. He gave a small burp as he wiped his mouth again.

“What was that stuff by the way?” Lucchini asked.

“Southern style biscuits and gravy.” Aaron answered. “At least, that’s what the label said. The biscuits were hard and tasted like chalk and they fucked the gravy all up. You use pork gravy, but the philistines put in brown beef gravy. Not a good decision on my part.” He smacked his lips with a disgusted look to his face and asked, “Is there any coffee around that I can wash this down with?”

“I’ve got espresso right here.” Lucchini remarked, reaching down and pulling up a small cup on a saucer. Steam was coming off the brown liquid and it smelled strong as all creation. “Before you ask,” she added, offering the cup to Aaron, “I did cut it with water this time.” Divale nodded in thanks and took the cup from Francesca, blowing into it with several light breaths. He recalled the first time he had espresso and nearly gagged at the mere thought of it. Honestly thought the stuff was
normal coffee, just pressed into blocks. When I actually got enough water gathered, setup a strainer, and ‘brewed’ a cup, something within me said, “Don’t do this.” Yet, me being me at the time, I drank the whole thing anyway and ended up not sleeping for a good two days after being hyped on caffeine. I honestly thing that was around the same time I met that German housfrau...

A screeching noise cold then be heard outside and it was accompanied by a revving engine. Oh boy is she pissed off. Taking a jeep to the hanger at breakneck speed. I should probably make myself a tad but scarce. Aaron quickly took and sip, jogged behind Lucchini’s parked Strikers, got down as low as he could behind the launch dais, and began to patiently wait. Between sips of espresso, he and everyone else that was doing their best to not make it look like none of this was planned from the beginning, could plainly hear the jeep engine screaming closer and closer until another screech could be heard again, followed by the sounds of tires plowing up long sections of the earth. A door is opened and is slammed shut just as quickly, the sound hitting with the force of a bunker buster bomb. Heavy footsteps tramped through the grass towards the hanger door and a very angry hand heavily rested on the door knob and cranked it hard clockwise. The moment that sound reached his ears, Aaron went under like a crocodile in a river, relying on Lucchini for his eyes.

Francesca saw the door open and immediately grew tense, afraid even as the form of Erica Hartmann stood at the threshold, glaring at everyone in the hanger with a stare that no one, not even her wingman Gertrude, had ever seen before. Her stare bored a hole through flesh and bone with fierce intensity. The face, one normally carefree and full of mischief, was a vibrant shade of purple and her breaths came in hard heaves, like she was coming off running a marathon. “Where is he?” she hissed through gritted teeth, her voice sounding phlegmy and rough.

Major Sakamoto moved in towards her and took a quick gander outside the door before inquiring, “You do know that you’re supposed to park all vehicles off to the side lieutenant?”

“Fuck the parallel park job.” Erica snapped back, shocking everyone in the room with such flagrant insubordination. “Where is he?”

“Watch it lieutenant.” Mio warned, her face stern. “Commander Wilcke has taken leave to get over her illness and has left me in charge. I’m not as forgiving as she is.”

“Noted.” Hartmann curtly replied. “Now major, with respect, where is that no good dirty rotten son of whore?”

“Why do you ask?” Mio queried, as calm as a still ocean.

“Because he has done something to me that I demand satisfaction for.” Erica retorted, barely keeping her cool.

The major was about to say something more, but Aaron sprang up from behind the dais so quiet like that no one heard or even saw him. “If it’s satisfaction you want,” he said playfully taking another sip from his espresso, “then I’m your man.”

Erica’s eyes flashed as she began to walk swiftly towards him, her boots pounding hard into the concrete. Lucchini saw her approach and peeled away, leaping off the dais. Aaron just stood there watching the steamed German hop up onto the dais and hold position in the center. With her right arm, she pointed directly at his chest and demanded, “Come here, if you’ve got the balls.”

Still holding the cup and saucer secure with his two hands, Divale made a move to get up onto the dais, but Mio called out to him, “If you go up there master sergeant, I cant interfere.” He nodded in acknowledgement and with one giant step with his left leg, scaled the steps and met up with Erica face to face, or rather face to belly button considering the size disparity.
“You broke the code you unehelich (bastard).” Hartmann seethed.

“You did what I had to do.” Erica countered, trying to reason her way. “Mine weren’t out of the wash yet and Lynette told me that they wouldn’t be dry in time. There was no way in hell that I was going to receive an award in damp underwear.”

“I’ve worn worse.” Aaron pointed out.

“I did what I had to do.” Erica countered, trying to reason her way. “Mine weren’t out of the wash yet and Lynette told me that they wouldn’t be dry in time. There was no way in hell that I was going to receive an award in damp underwear.”

“I’ve worn worse.” Aaron pointed out.

“Those with what you’ve worn, this is about what you’ve done.” Erica said, brushing his comment aside as if it meant nothing. She took a small step closer and looked up at him with fire in her eyes. “Take them down now and I’ll consider letting you keep your testicles attached.”

Aaron met her gaze and replied with one word, “No.”

“Then I’ll make you.” Erica stated, reaching into her coat pocket. Mio instinctively moved in, hand resting on the hilt of her katana as she watched the scene unfold. Hartmann took out a single black leather glove, cocked her arm back, and slapped Aaron across his lower jaw with it. The snap of the leather sounded like it hurt, but if it truly did, he showed no signs of it, not even a wince. With that done, Erica announced, “I challenge you to a duel.”

Aaron blinked once and cocked his head to the side. “A duel?” he asked in apparent disbelief. “Are you in that much of a hurry to be embarrassed even more?”

“I’m not going to get embarrassed.” Erica proclaimed. “I’m going to get even and shut you up for good. So let’s go.”

Aaron thought about it and sucked in his lips for a quick second. “This whole stunt of yours is completely lame, and so are you for thinking you can beat me.” he jested.

“There’s always a first time.” Hartmann replied. She then noticed that he looked off to the side, at nothing in particular, and got even more annoyed. “Quit stalling!” she blurted.

“I’m thinking actually.” Aaron illuminated, turning his attention right back to her.

His answer caught her flatfooted and she asked, “About what?”

“If you are that convinced that you can beat me,” Aaron reasoned, “then I guess there is nothing wrong in raising the stakes a little.”

“A bet?” Erica inquired, slightly dumbfounded. “You serious?”

“Are you?” Aaron asked, letting the question float. Nothing was said for a good ten seconds before he continued, “When I win, you will let those hang up there for the rest of the day and you’ll apologize to Lucchini for taking her drawers without permission. If,” It was here that he placed emphasis on the if, “you win, I will take those down, put them back where they were, and will do you chore for a week.”

“Not good enough.” Erica replied, shaking her head from side to side vehemently.

“Then what would you suggest?” Aaron asked, draining the rest of his espresso.

“You do everything you say.” Hartmann began hesitantly. She then looked around the hanger, her
eyes lingering on everyone there and smiled. Aaron grew curious. *What is she thinking in that head of hers?* "However, in addition, if you lose, you’ll also kiss someone in this hanger as well.” The moment she said those words, a collective sharp intake of breath echoed throughout the room, even from the major.

“I take it one that you choose?” Aaron inquired with a slight mocking tone.

Erica merely pointed her right index finger at Aaron’s chest and replied, “I’m not choosing Aaron; you are.”

Both of Divale’s eyes bugged out and he started to giggle which soon turned into full blown laughter. His face was red when he finally answered, “Not a chance in hell. You can shove that condition up your ass.”

He turned around, gave the saucer over to Lucchini, and was about to do the same with the cup when Erica stated behind his back, “Wow, and all this time I thought it was only your eyes that were yellow.” Now, what Hartmann didn’t see, Francesca did, and what she saw filled her with dread. Aaron’s body went rigid with shock and he clenched his jaw with anger, and not the pretend kind either. The fingers on his right hand curled around the cup and the container disappeared. He rose up to his full height and turned around, staring at Erica with real ire now, the bronze color in his eyes an orange glow, the kind that came out when he and Gertrude faced off. Suddenly, a cracking sound could be heard. It was coming from Aaron’s right hand and it trembled as his immense strength crushed the porcelain. It went on for a few seconds before he decided to let go, the shards of the cup falling to the dais with the sound of tinkling glass followed by the almost silent pattering of blood dripping to the concrete. With crimson running down his hand, Aaron pointed a blood stained finger at Erica, the sudden flicking of the digit sending droplets of blood out towards her. One drop managed to hit her square in the face, on the lower left cheek, barely an inch away from her upper lip.

“You want a fight you little black devil?” he queried. “Well, you fucking got one. Any time, any place, with any thing.”

Hartmann stuck out her tongue and casually licked the warlock’s vitae off her face. She articulated her organ inside her mouth like a connoisseur before breaking out into a smile of triumph. “So it begins.” she simply said.

“Before it does,” Mio interjected, taking this moment to act, “there will be one other condition to this duel. No matter who wins or loses, the little prank war between you two is over. No ifs ands or buts, completely over. If anyone of you decide to renew it, the offender with be my sparing partner for a week. Is that understood?” Aaron and Erica both nodded silently, acknowledging the major’s wishes. “Now that that’s settled, I’m going to go into the office and think about how best to make this duel as fair to both of you as possible. Do what you will until then.” She then turned and hastily walked over to the office without another word. Everyone watched her open the door, walk past the threshold, and closed it politely behind her.

Aaron then regarded Erica and she looked right back at him. A mutual understanding passed between them and the two backed away from each other and got off the dais. “Oh dear.” Lynette commented as she took up a broom and dustpan. “Things are going to get worse before they get better.”

“Most things do.” Divale muttered as he took a gander at the multitude of cuts and punctures in his right hand, wounds that even now were fading away from his healing factor. He rubbed the dried blood off with his right pant leg and sat down in a nearby chair, watching Bishop sweep up the bloody shards of the cup.
“Will you be alright?” Perrine asked him as she walked over. She took a quick look over her shoulder and saw Erica fuming, saying something in hushed tones with Gertrude in German. Though she understood some of it, most went over her head.

“Oh yeah.” Aaron answered, holding up his right hand and showing her that the wounds were almost completely healed around the ruddy flesh of his palm. He sighed and looked up at her. “The bitch really pissed me off you know that?” Divale informed. “That wasn’t me acting back there at all.”


“It means, ‘I’m going to cut off his cock and put it where his asshole is’.” Aaron explained. “Jokes on her though because there isn’t a knife in the world sharp enough to cut it.” He laughed a bit at the end, but Perrine looked past it and saw that he was using humor to focus himself on the duel.

“Have you ever been in a duel before Aaron?” Clostermann asked.

“Only once believe it or not.” Aaron answered. “All it was all due to a huge misunderstanding. My opponents name was Elijah Clove, commander of the fourth coterie, The Sawbones. Those guys were our medics and they were damn good ones too. Capable of doing all sorts of things under battlefield conditions that no one else would dare attempt. Elijah was the best of the best, everything I learned about medicine I got from him and I always thanked him for it. However, a few days after Polesti, he came up to me and demanded a duel. Completely out of the fucking blue and I asked him why. He then proceeded to tell me that despite his coterie saving more lives, many of the men thanked me instead of him and he didn’t like that, saying it was a stain on his honor.”

“He was jealous of you?” Perrine queried.

“That he was and he wanted satisfaction really bad.” Aaron admitted reluctantly. “I tried talking him out of it, saying that it wasn’t worth getting all worked up about, but he insisted and kept on pestering me about it until I just threw up my hands and said, ‘Fine. You got your duel, now lets go.’ Since he wanted it more than me, I let him choose the place, the weapons, and conditions.”

“Risky.” Perrine pointed out. “He could easily force you into a match where you might not win.”

“I knew that.” Aaron acknowledged. “In fact, I wanted him to so as to give him a sense of confidence in an attempt to use that against him. After a while, he leads me to a deserted apartment building and tells me the rules. It was going to be fought with throwing knives, not real ones mind you, but aetheric ones that had a suction cup for a tip. They function just like the real thing and hurt just as bad, much like the painballs you use for training. If you got drilled with one, directly or indirectly, meaning that ricochets counted, you lost. As the real kicker, we both had to fight each other completely naked.”

“Naked?!” Perrine blurted, unable to comprehend why that would be so.

“It was to show one another that we fought honorably, that neither of us had any tricks up our sleeve.” Aaron stated. “So we both strip down and enter in opposite sides of the compound at the specified time. Bear in mind, this happened in the dead of night, like maybe eleven in the evening. Well, I go in and I’m flabbergasted. Inside the hallway I was in, knives hung from everywhere. There were hanging from the ceiling, sicking out of the walls, jutting up from the floor, anywhere where they could fit. Hundred of the damn things. Didn’t have much time to admire the scenery as Elijah came storming in with a fistful of knives and started chucking them with reckless abandon. I had to use everything in my skill set to avoid getting hit, blades were flying like bullets for a good
fifteen minutes, until at last, I got him.”

“How did you do that?” Perrine inquired, very curious.

“I threw a knife at an awkward angle and Elijah had to shoulder roll low and away to avoid it.”

Aaron recalled. “He didn’t have much time to react, so he just went for it, but you see, I had another knife in my hand that threw a split second after the first. It struck the blade of the first knife, bounced off hard, and stabbed him right smack dab in the ass. However, it turned out that the suction tip of the knife got him full on the anus. Now, little known fact here Perrine, when you strike the anus with enough force, the sphincters all open up, and if anything is up there that you don’t want to come out, it all comes out because there’s nothing holding it all back. Needless to say, that’s what happened to dear Elijah and you can only imagine the sight of a grown man, shoulder rolling down a hallway, shitting an explosive stream like a pinwheel fireworks display for a good thirty seconds.” Perrine’s face grew sour as the though crossed her mind. “Now, I’m not saying that I’ll be looking for such a shot on Erica, but if the opportunity presents itself-,”

The door of the office opened up and the conversation got cut short as Mio entered the hanger again.

“Lieutenant Hartmann. Master Sergeant Divale. Front and center.” Both pilots instantly obeyed and stood at attention in front of the major. “I have a scenario for the both of you, one that I think will test your abilities to the fullest.”

Gertrude watched as Erica took off her overcoat while holding the training pistol, a Colt 1911 in her teeth. Her shoes were already off, the white socks in stark contrast with the green grass field outside of the hanger. The whole squadron was at Aaron’s CQC exercise compound, or at least what Major Sakamoto called it. They all sat in high chairs, similar to the ones that lifeguards would use, each one giving them a clear view inside the compound’s latticed roof. While she and Hartmann were at the other end, Perrine and Divale were on the other, no doubt going over the same things about the duel scenario that Mio concocted. The whole thing sounded pretty fair enough in Barkhorn’s mind, the two combatants would be armed with pistols, holding eight shots each. Rules were straightforward: If you were hit by a direct shot, you were down. If you fired all eight of your bullets and didn’t hit your opponent, you lost. Onlookers are allowed, but the combatants weren’t permitted to look up or use any form of communication whatsoever. No reloads or magic permitted, it was all about who had the best aim and tactics. “Here.” Erica mumbled with her mouth full, handing her overcoat to Gertrude. Barkhorn took it and Hartmann then double checked her gun, the light April breeze gusting through her blond hair and white t-shirt. Though she was preparing for the fight of her life, her attire made it look like she was getting ready for a particularly violent slumber party.

“You should keep you uniform on.” Gertrude suggested. “It one thing to beat him, it’s totally another trouncing him while looking good.”

“There will be quite a bit of light inside that compound.” Erica pointed out, looking down the iron sights of the Colt. “Whatever illumination there is will reflect off those buttons on my overcoat, giving away my position in addition to the shadow castings. As for my boots, no matter how I move through that place, those lead soles will make sound.”

Makes perfect sense. “Decent enough play, but Aaron will know that and adjust accordingly.” Gertrude deduced.

“There won’t be much that he can do.” Erica beamed. “He may have good hearing and know the inside of that exercise box that he constructed like the back of his hand, but he’s working at a major disadvantage. His eyes will glow like neon bullseyes no matter how hard he tries to hide it. I’ll know exactly where he is before he notices I’m there.”
“You honestly think you got this?” Gertrude inquired, folding her wingman’s overcoat and tucking it under her left arm.

“In the fucking bag.” Erica stated plainly. “He’s going to get what he deserves.”

“All combatants to their stations.” Mio announced from her seat. “Prepare to enter in thirty seconds.”

Barkhorn instinctively saluted her superior and then regarded her friend. “Good luck in there.” she said, offering her right hand.

“Thanks Trude.” Erica replied, taking the hand and shaking it firmly. With that done, Gertrude started to walk over to her seat, climbing the small side ladder to get to the top. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Perrine do the same. She closed her eyes and breathed in deep, concentrating on what she had to do, cocking the pistol and holding it with both hands. You need to go in and take care of business yet again Frau. This will not be easy to do because Aaron is battle hardened. Experience will carry the day, but I have the advantage here. While he may have the ground all under control, I have size and speed, both of which I have to use to the fullest.

“Countdown to entry in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, engage!” Mio barked out. By the time that the major’s mouth formed the second gee in engage, Erica kicked open the door to the compound and waltzed right in, the door hitting the side wall hard with a loud clunk. Hartmann didn’t hear anything from Aaron’s end and grew very cautious. Maybe he timed his entrance to mine, masking the sounds of his entry. Clever. She took stock of her immediate surroundings. Erica found herself in a short hallway with a gentle looping turn to the right. Quickly, she trotted to the near wall and followed the turn, never overstepping her position, giving herself a place where she could back off and get a reflex shot. His position on the other side of the compound would preclude him from being here, but better to be safe than sorry. Seeing a four corners come up, Erica placed her back to the wall and cautiously peered out. Hartmann’s blue eyes wandered over and along a fairly wide corridor that stretched about twenty feet down the way and featured three four corners, the noon day sun shining through the lattice roof, the long golden slants interspaced with black shadows that were broken up in sections by the tall spectator chairs that the rest of the squadron watched from. A light breeze whistled down, making her hair flit this way and that. Eyeing the triple four corners warily, she swallowed and ran her tongue through her dry mouth.

Three blinds spots, behind any of which may be our warlock friend. Suddenly, her nose caught the whiff of orange peel, a scent that she hadn’t smelled in a good while. Knowing what it was and where it came from, Erica couldn’t help but smile. The damned fool. He didn’t even bother to wash up after he got here. Such a rookie mistake. Putting one foot in front of the other, she carefully padded her way down, minding the right hand side and favoring her left over her right leg in terms of advance. Slowing her breathing, Erica concentrated heavily barely moving her eyes left or right. Don’t have to. Peripheral vision will be what gets the job done. That and reflexes. Look carefully for his eyes, they’ll be a dead give away.

Erica passed the first corner, doing the customary checks counter clockwise. Might keep him guessing where I’ll emerge from and miss a shot. Every step she took got here closer to the end, the spring air becoming ever more saturated with that perfume that Lucretia wore. Her body unconsciously tensed up, the tell tale heat of anticipation flowing through her veins, making her brow start to burn, yet she didn’t sweat for she’d been in worse situations. Just like the first flight I had. Keep those butterflies down and kill them. Hartmann readjusted the two handed grip on the pistol and thought about her next course of action. Before she could do so however, the sweet aroma of Aaron’s lover ceased emanating from wherever it was, not in an evaporating sense, but simply going from there to nonexistent. Erica stopped dead in her tracks for a brief moment and thought hard. It’s gone. It’s almost as if he led me here, which means that he’s- Knowing that finishing that train of thought would be her downfall, Hartmann whipped around and kicked her opposite foot out against the left hand wall, pushing herself away. Aiming down the iron sights, her eyes caught the target and
her fingers began to squeeze the trigger. However, when her brain began to register and render what she was seeing, it stayed her hands. Aaron was indeed behind her, wearing nothing but his pants, all the way back where she started from in fact, but inverted, as if he was cartwheeling off to the side. That wasn’t what caused her to freeze. Despite being totally in the open, there was not a single bit of glow from his eyes for they were both totally closed. He’s fighting me blind?! A shot rang out from Aaron’s Colt and Erica had enough sense remaining from her shock to turn her head off to the right. The .45 caliber bullet whizzed through the air, nearly grazing her cheek and buried itself into the wood behind her with an explosive impact, sending slivers into the air. Quickly, she backrolled towards the second four corners and looped around the edge, breathing hard.

Aaron landed on his two feet and placed his back towards the wall. Though silenced visually, he slowly went over what had happened in his mind. The breeze came up at the worst possible time. Would’ve had her if it weren’t for that. He also extended his right arm to the side, feeling the panels. He nodded to himself, knowing now how the rest of the compound was constructed. There are one hundred and sixty different ways Mio could’ve aligned the interior, but from the moment I walked in, I knew which one it was. I can use this to my advantage. He could hear Erica breathing some distance away and uttered, “Close shave eh?” Aaron got no reply and decided to move out, his feet and stride carrying off to the right towards what he knew would be a false dead end, a secret way out hidden by the second to last panel on the left. As Divale walked, his memories of Elijah came back to him. Got shot in the back while being in the southern rearguard with me fifty miles southwest while most of us fought at Munich, both wings blown off by a lucky beam. By the time I turned to see, he was already dropping from the sky like a stone. Landed on one of the spires of Neuschwanstein Castle, skewered all the way through. Rough way to go, but at least his death was relatively painless. Aaron shook his head clear of those days and concentrated. Furrowing his brow and shutting off all his other non important senses, he could tell that Erica was on the move towards him. That’s it Hartmann, fall further into my trap. Smiling, he came to a stop and wheeled around, crouching down and getting set for the maneuver that he was sure would net him a victory.

Hartmann did her best to muffle her footsteps, but she winced as the scratching of socks on wood echoed like a someone yelling, ‘Hello’ in a deep dank cave entrance. He’s going to know where I am. I just know it. They need to come off. Halting, Erica got on her rump and started taking off her socks with her left hand, keeping the pistol out and in front of her with her right. As she tossed the cotton hosiery to the side, an awful thought occurred to her. Maybe he know what I’m doing right now and adjusting accordingly. Might be time to switch up some tactics. Taking a huge risk, Erica went on her stomach and crawled further up the way towards a turn going right. After angling her body carefully, she slid into position, head facing the wall and cautiously took a gander. Her eyes beheld a dead end, with Aaron all crouched down like a jungle cat waiting to pounce, head gently moving back and forth. Hartmann was confused. Why would he be in a dead end? Does he know where he is? She looked again and saw that he was putting a lot of tension in his right leg, the foot aligned just so. The realization soon came to her. He’s going to bust through the wooden panel to somewhere where he can escape. As if he could hear her thoughts, Divale’s head stopped turned and his shuttered eyes locked with her open ones. It was the most uncanny and uneasy situation that Erica had ever found herself in, and it gave her pause. He knows I’m here. Damn he’s good. Looking down at her pistol, Hartmann came to grips with what she had to do. I need to fire at him in order to trigger what he has planned. Nothing else will do. With both hands, she aimed the Colt slightly to the right of Aaron’s position, hoping to catch him in the air when he leapt. Her right index finger squeezed the trigger and the round went off. Despite being undone, Aaron didn’t so much a move a muscle, not even when he heard the shot ring out or when it screamed past his skull. Instead, he moved a split second after Erica fired, allowing the bullet to sail past him and pushed himself forcefully into the secret entrance. The wood held for less than a second and gave like thin glass, his bulk smashing it into kindling as he lunged for freedom.
The whole thing was over in less time than it took to blink, but Erica quickly got up and jogged down, trying to catch up to him. No sooner had she got halfway than a tremendous cracking sound was heard from her left, slightly behind her. She barely had enough time to turn before two whole sections went from planks to toothpicks as Aaron, eyes fully open now, shoulder barged through, pistol primed and pointed right at her head. A small piece of wood hung in the air as it spun and Erica instinctively roundhouse kicked it right into Divale’s right hand just as he fired. Thankfully, she managed to get enough power behind the blow to affect his aim, the bullet missing her by an inch and knocking him backwards. Sensing the opportunity, Erica rode the kick, righting herself and unloading a pair of shots at the warlock. It should’ve ended the duel right then and there, but Aaron’s double jointed frame allowed him to twist and contort around the projectiles, all the while letting loose twice with his own gun. Not blessed with such advantages, Erica made a move to get away, but her feet slipped on the vast amount of broken wood pieces on the ground and she fell forwards. It ended up saving her life, as Divale’s shots went wide. She landed with a oomph and she whipped her Colt around to capitalize on his mistakes, yet Aaron was nowhere to be found, having made his escape deeper in the compound. Looking around carefully, she got up, checking herself for slivers, and sidestepped the worst of the debris. Three shots and no dice at all. Need to get the drop on him to even the odds, but how? Maybe I could-

“And end all the fun we’re having?” she uttered, walking through the hole that he made, “why do you fight with your eyes closed? You could’ve ended this duel quicker if they weren’t.”

“I think it’s because that you don’t want to get rattled when you see my pretty face.” Erica jested, jumping up to another row of seating.

“Maybe blindness has it’s benefits then.” Aaron shot back, the timber unchanged, but sounding much closer.

Erica hunkered down and stared at the exit, her hands firmly grasping the pistol. He’s up there. Might have to hide. Taking a chance, Hartmann got on all fours and crawled under the leftmost side of the seating. No sooner did she get comfortable and out of sight, then he ears picked up fleshy footsteps enter the room.

“Aaron looked over the scene, entering the chamber as if he were a Caesar of old being lead down to his personal viewing box. “This was a bad play on your part.” he said, peering at each and every single detail. “You’re too far away from either entrance or exit and there’s no cover.”

“Same could be said for you.” Erica stated. Divale looked in the general direction where the voice came from and focused on three rows of seating on the left, the ones furthest away from him. Though the light filtering in from above wasn’t the best, he could pick out a small footprint of sweat that was left behind by Erica right on the middle row. Without hesitation, he aimed his Colt and fired a shot. It blasted a quarter sized hole in the wood and he frowned. Should’ve heard the chime of shields of the fleshy impact. Where is she then? He then used his long stride to navigate down, panning to and fro with his eyes, but not his right hand that held the gun. “Coming at me again? I thought you’d be tired!” she suddenly quipped. Though the sound was as close to silent as possible, Aaron knew what a squeezed trigger sounded like and the greased sliding of metal on metal caused him to dive all the way down to the lowest level. The bullet sped forth from the barrel and missed his left knee by an inch, sailing past him and into the far right wall. As he descended, he looked left and
saw Erica, eyes wide at what she was seeing. *Got you bitch.* Landing hard on the ground, Aaron shoulder rolled forwards and whipped his head around. His eyes picked up the tiny form of Hartmann, jumping for her life up the rows of seating. Smiling, he aimed for her rump, but just as he was about to squeeze the trigger, something moved from up above the latticed ceiling, and the sunlight streamed into his eyes. Grimacing at his temporary blindness caused him to pull hard on the trigger.

“Fucking hell.” he hissed, turning away and advancing at the quick time up the formerly dead end corridor. Divale didn’t stick around to confirm if he did hit her because he knew the shot was a miss. *Bitch probably got some help, bit no matter. I’m ending this duel now.* He rounded the corner and saw a small niche that he powerslid into. Reviewing his options, Aaron thought about what he could do. *Five to four in her favor. Need to even the-* A shot rang out and Aaron instantly dove head first to the floor, feeling the splinters of wood fall on the back of his head and neck. He slowly turned around and saw, stuck in the wood, the tip of a .45 caliber bullet sticking out where his head used to be. Exhaling softly, he started to get up, all the while hearing someones bare feet shift around a corner down the hall, north of his position.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.” Erica mused in a singsong way. She knew that there was a niche and accurately predicted where Aaron was going to be when she fired, but was quite dismayed that the wood was thick than what she had anticipated. *I’ve got him. He’s trapped and I’ve got the advantage of position.*

“Will I get a treat if I do?” Aaron asked playfully.

“Only if you beg for it.” Hartmann replied, lining up her next shot.

“Okay then, may I pretty please-” Divale began, but instead of finishing his sentence, he fired a shot, impacting the bullet that Erica just fired. The force of impact split the round in half, both projectiles now coming straight at Erica. The German witch, turned to her side, making her less of a target, and crouch walked like a crab further down. In retaliation, she fired a shot of her own back at the niche, aiming slightly up. However, almost immediately after her trigger finger passed the point of no return, Aaron flew out from the hiding place and bounced off the wall, his pistol out and ready. Realizing her error, Erica rode the recoil and fired on instinct just as the warlock pulled the trigger. Both bullets screamed through the air and struck the metal undersides of both Colts, knocking them out of their hands and sending them clattering behind them. Both combatants froze as they stared at each other, not wanting to cede the advantage to the other by looking to see where their guns were. Aaron was the first to break the silence. “Only one shot left.” he pointed out almost matter of factly.

“I only need one.” Erica coolly replied, slowly putting her right foot behind her. Aaron matched her movements and again they peered deep into each others eyes. Then, in an awkward series of events, the two matched one another, stride by stride, as they backtracked away from each other. Tension reigned supreme from the pair and those who watched silently from above. Time seemed to stretch until each passing second looked like a day in comparison. Each took four steps backwards and stopped dead in their tracks. Aaron could see in his peripheral vision his pistol lying on the floor and noted that Erica located hers as well. He blinked only once as he gazed at her, regarding her stance and hand placement. *Dominant hand is loose and hangs slightly away from the body. Knees bent a tad.* Divale then started to crouch down, keeping his hands away from his body and watching Erica like a hawk as he did so. Not to be outdone or outsmarted, Hartmann copied the moves, hunkering down and swallowing deep. Aaron’s breathing slowed down, yet his heart still pumped hard, so much so that one could see the carotid pulsate.

Then something snapped the tension, triggering Erica and Aaron to snatch at their weapons without looking away from one another. He felt the grip run flush in his hand and closed his fingers around
it, the right index finding the trigger with practiced ease. Raising it up, he could plainly see that Erica took up her pistol at the same time as him. Deep down in the back of his mind, Divale knew that there would be no dodging. *I'm flatfooted and my only routes can be telegraphed easily. My only shot is to hit her before she hits me.* A split second goes by and Hartmann’s body took up the entirety of his iron sights and if he could transpose his sight into Erica, he would see the exact same situation on the other end. Index fingers curl and squeeze the respective triggers and the firing pins enter the rounds simultaneously, igniting the powder. Two bullets fly through the air, but neither one of them saw either as their eyes remained riveted to each other, looking for a sign that their shot hit the mark. The sound of discharge echoed within the compound for a good few seconds, no one so much as moving a muscle until confusion got the better of them. Erica cocked her eyebrow and shook her head, silently stating that she wasn’t hit. Aaron patted himself down quickly, yet found no trace of pain or ripped clothing. Shaking his head in the negative, Hartmann then stood up to her full height, looked up at the rest of the squadron who stared right back at them in apparent disbelief and asked, “Where the hell did the bullets go. He was right in my sights.”

“And she was definitely in mine.” Aaron concurred, also standing up straight.

“They’re right over there.” Mio answered, pointing to the side of the right hand wall that was roughly between the two of them at the time of firing. Both Erica and Aaron looked down and were shocked to see that two bullets, both front ends neatly squished into each other, before dissolving into nothing as the magic within the painballs dissipated.

“I’ll be God damned.” Erica breathed. She looked up at Aaron and asked, “Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“Never.” Aaron replied. “The chances of this happening are almost a billion to one.”

The wondrous spectacle quickly wore off for Hartmann as she looked back up at the major and asked, “Who fired first?”

A long second went by before Major Sakamoto answered, “You both fired at the same time. No one lost and no one won. By right, both of you must carry out what the other demanded.”

Aaron rolled his eyes and muttered, “Motherf-”

“Face it Aaron,” Erica cackled with glee, pointing right at his face with her right hand, “you lost and it’s time to pucker up bitch.” She kept on chuckling under her breath as she retracted her steps back towards the exit. Aaron looked through the slits and saw Perrine descend from her chair and give him a bemused shrug as she turned to face him. Divale looked away and followed the laughter emanating from Hartmann’s lips as he navigated through the plywood maze of destruction that they caused. *Won’t take too long to repair though. Just a few boards here a bit of filler there and it will be like that it never happened.* It didn’t take him long to exit the compound and emerge out into the midday sun, surrounded in a semicircle by his squadron members with Erica standing off to the side with a sly grin to her face, the kind that made him sick to his stomach. Everyone looked at him with a little bit of sympathy and trepidation as they awaited his judgment. “So,” Erica stated, waltzing right in front of him and gesturing with her hands in a way that reminded him of some salesmen showing off his wares, “who’s it going to be Aaron? Come on now, don’t be shy.”

Divale then put his left arm across his chest and placed his right hand underneath his chin, stroking away at his chin in deep thought. His bronze eyes wandered over all the women arrayed in front of him in silence for a good few seconds before announcing, “I choose-” Here, he raised his right arm high in the air and held it for what seemed like forever before letting it come to rest at a one Erica Hartmann. “You.”
Erica’s world went upside down as the word ‘you’ echoed in her mind. She stood perfectly still, shocked rigid at such an announcement. _He did not say what I thought he just said did he?_ “W-What did you say?” she stammered out.

Now it was Aaron’s turn to smile in triumph as he reiterated carefully, “You heard me lieutenant. You said that I had to choose someone within the hanger to be the recipient of my kiss and you were also in the hanger with the rest of us, so I figured that it would only be proper to select you for the honor.” He took one step towards her with that look that he gave her, Lucchini, and Eila at the beach not too long ago and pressed, “You think you can handle it?”

Hartmann still stood like a statue in stunned silence, his gaze making her feel a tad giddy inside. That silence was hastily broken by Francesca who started to chant, ‘Kiss’ over and over again. A few more voices tentatively joined in and soon it was a roaring paean, one that made her shake her head in annoyed anger. “Alright, shut up!” she cried, turning her head towards them, making the chanting stop. She looked at Aaron and walked right up to him, getting within head butt reach of his stomach. _Can’t back out of this, a bet is a bet._ Breathing in deep, Erica shut her eyes and puckered her lips, looking like a fish. Aaron broke out into peals of laughter that made her open her eyes once more and temporarily blush with embarrassment. “What’s so funny?” she demanded.

Divale stopped guffawing and explained, “You’re going about this all wrong Erica.” He then reached out and clapped both his massive hands on her shoulders. “Here are four tips: Breath in and out a few times to relax.” Erica did so, her chest expanding and deflating rhythmically. After three such breaths, Aaron then continued. “Next, don’t be stiff like a dead body. Be loose like water. Let the tension flow out of your body.” He watched her like a professor gauging his students as she visibly relaxed her body. “Now take my hand.” Aaron suggested, offering Hartmann his right hand. Erica placed her tiny palm within his and as quick as a flash, he raised it up and twirled his arm around, making the German lieutenant spin in place with a surprised ‘Eeep.’ However, Aaron wasn’t done with her yet. The maneuver not only made her off balance, but the revolution was so fast and smooth that it got her legs crossed and she started to fall backwards. He arrested the motion by quickly repositioning his body so that his knee cradled her lower back and moving his arm away from her side and more towards the front, effectively holding her in place. He leaned in slowly, seductively almost before whispering softly in her left ear, “Hold on to something.” Erica didn’t have the mind to move as Aaron moved right in and kissed her full on the lips to the sounds of applause and wolf whistles.

Mio watched this so called spectacle play out for several seconds before looking at her watch. “You’ve been lip locked long enough you two. Get a move on or get a room.” she ordered. Acquiescing to the wishes of his superior, Aaron broke the kiss and gently pulled her back up from her reclining position. Erica rose back up and stumbled around as if drunk, her eyes wild and cheeks rosy red.

“Was it worth it?” Aaron playfully asked.

Hartmann looked right at him with her blue eyes and uttered, “Wow…” before regaining her composure by adding, “I mean, ah whatever, an old man with no teeth could do better then that.” Aaron merely shrugged in response as she walked away and pointed at the improvised wind sock. “Now get my panties down from there this instant!” she demanded.

“Your wish is my command.” Aaron replied, snapping his fingers. Suddenly, the panties that still flew in the breeze disappeared in a small rain shower of yellow sparks.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Erica shouted, confused and not at all amused. “What’s you’re game Aaron?!”
“I never had your panties to begin with.” Aaron simply countered.

“I actually have them.” Lucchini piped up, reaching into the pockets of her white coat. Erica watched spellbound as she pulled out all the panties that should’ve been up on that wind sock and held them out. Slowly, she looked back at Aaron and pondered out loud, “You mean you never went into my room in the first place?”

“Hell no.” Divale answered truthfully. “Why would I go into your room? I will never condone what you did before I got back to the castle today, but I’ll always respect your privacy and the code. At least I would if the prank war could continue after this.”

Erica shook her head and smiled at the sheer ingenuity of the whole scheme. “You got me good Aaron. Well done.” she congratulated. Regarding Lucchini, she said, “I know it’s a little late Francesca, but I really am sorry about what happened.”

“I forgive you.” Lucchini answered. “But don’t ever do that again.”

“I won’t.” Erica promised. She then looked at Aaron and extended her right hand. “It was good while it lasted. Makes me sad that it came to an end like that.” she mentioned.

“Me too.” Aaron replied, taking her hand into his right and giving it a civil shake. “Don’t mind being friends despite it all?”

Erica pulled hard on Aaron’s arm and catapulted herself right into his chest, giving him a half hug with her free hand. After physically replying in the affirmative, she whispered, “Yes we can, but if you kissed me a bit longer, they would’ve had to pry me off of you with a crowbar.”

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