Balm for the Broken

by caitfair24

Summary

Cheery young aide Elle Andersen has a natural propensity for care and comfort, making her an ideal compatriot for Captain America, Sergeant James "Bucky" Barnes, and the rest of the ineffable Howling Commandos. Rated M for language, violence. I do not own Marvel characters, situations, or dialogue.
She raised her hands at the oncoming blow. “Clear off, you stupid cow!” the soldier cried, his voice corded with a fear she couldn’t even begin to comprehend. “Clear off! You hear?” A chorus of agreement rose from the other beds, and she bolted.

Eleven weeks in, and things had yet to grow easier. Elle had assumed her role as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment would see her mopping sweaty brows, reading poetry to wounded men, offering comfort and calm in a world of chaos. She had even been prepared to change bedpans and clean up surgery floors -- she had steeled herself for those less-than-pleasant jobs, hoping to outweigh the gore with the balm. But she had now been a volunteer for nearly three months, and though her time in England, at a recovery hospital in Sussex, had been successful, life on the Italian front was proving to be vastly more taxing than she had ever dreamt.

“Andersen?”

Oh, ye gods. “Matron.” Elle snapped her spine to a straight line, fixing her eyes on the red cross of a nearby tent. “Yes, ma’am?”

Matron Agatha Barnett, she of steely Welsh gaze and sturdy bearing, looked down at the young London girl who had yet to impress anyone. Matron Agatha Barnett preferred being impressed. “Did I hear a ruckus coming from Recovery Ward D? Is that not your jurisdiction for this week?”

As Elle stammered out an explanation, the older woman sighed. She was not wholly without sympathy, but the girl had been under her charge for nearly two weeks with little sign of improvement. Patients either found her too cloying or too chatty; the other VAD girls complained that she focused too much on how the men were feeling emotionally, and was far too “moony” to actually make beds properly or roll bandages tightly enough. Nurses found her odd; a little daydreamy, still enraptured with romantic notions like a child, one who’d read far too many novels and penny-dreadfuls. To this end, Barnett had met with Principal Matron Clarke just last Thursday to discuss what should be done about Andersen: despite her inadequacies, Elle was an eager thing with some fairly capable medical training, and that enthusiasm, her matron felt, could and (indeed) should be channelled into something useful. But the Principal Matron has simply ordered that the girl be assigned to Ward D, populated by some of the more cantankerous patients, who had recently returned from a skirmish near Tramonti, several miles to the south, alongside some Canadian forces. The men, for officers, were abrasive and wildly upset at the losses they had suffered, and the Principal Matron had a difficult time keeping both nurses and aides in rotation.

“Perhaps it will toughen her up, eh?” Clarke said with a smile that didn’t reach her tired eyes, which were staunchly avoiding looking down at the black-and-white photograph of a nephew she hadn’t heard from in weeks, not since the news from Tunisia. “There’ll be some iron in her, somewhere, I suppose.”

Barnett was doubtful, but even she could understand that a semi-capable aide was better than the prospect of a strained rota. As the Italian campaign progressed through the autumn, she knew Elle’s medical training, however scant, would come to be of increasing necessity. The losses from Operation Avalanche just days before had been dismaying enough, and the continued battles and skirmishes along German blockades and posts throughout the countryside were resulting in a rapidly growing volume of incoming patients. Over four thousand men from Salerno alone were being
transported and distributed amongst the various mobile hospitals available. Already, Barnett had seen far too much, lost far too many men, and they were only three days out from the official end of the operation. The Allied invasion of the Italian peninsula had been a geographic success, but a damned human tragedy, if you asked her, which no one did.

This left matrons like Agatha Barnett to make tough decisions, to weigh the stakes. The triage and surgical wards at the camp were already pushing capacity, and the recovery tents would, God willing, be full within the matter of a few days. Though Andersen was a chatterbox with very little in the way of subtlety, and despite the accusations of her exasperated colleagues, she could indeed perform basic first aid tasks and had shown herself to be more than conscientious when it came to logistics-related tasks. She had come to Italy bearing glowing reports from her superiors at the English recovery hospital, and really, how could Barnett punish the girl for having a personality? It wasn’t as though there was a dismissal code for that.

That very morning, Barnett had watched Elle Andersen -- twenty-six, unmarried, orphan, state education, pre-war secretarial employment, according to her file -- march over to D with a determined smile on her face and good intentions in every step. It was the sort of attitude that the Matron had come to expect of her: can-do vigour complemented by repetitive failures. And now, just over two hours later, here she was, desperately trying to suppress unprofessional tears, leaning against an unopened stack of linen crates. The Matron’s heart briefly clenched, her face twitching into an expression dangerously close to empathy, and then she managed to smooth it over, the sight of the girl’s shining eyes doing nothing to shake her. Visibly, at least. “That Ward is your charge for the day, Andersen. You are not to leave until the end of your shift, when McTavish arrives to relieve you. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl nodded. “Sorry, ma’am.”

Barnett could admit this much: Elle Andersen was no complainer. Rolling her shoulders to ease her obvious tension, the girl strode back between the dun canvas flaps, not daring to look back or to her sids, focusing solely on the end of her shift and nothing else. The thing might be an ignorant little chit, dreamy and irresponsible, but damned if she wasn’t bloody determined to prove everyone wrong. And there had to be something said for that.

Indeed, there was a new mettle to her step, a new grit to her lips as she furtively adjusted the waistband of her white uniform, creasing dress and mouth to a tight line. An unbreachable line. One glance downwards at Corporal Lucas, however, and the latter softened to a firm smile, observing as the newspaper in his hands rustled slightly at the return of the stupid cow. He was abruptly penitent, realizing now that the aide reminded him somewhat of his younger sister, Marie -- this VAD girl had the same chestnut curls, tucked up under her cap; the same green eyes; the same gentle, quiet manner, the sort of woman who preferred books and tea to dances and film-stars. Dare he say it? Even her voice sounded like Marie’s, curling into his ear, the echo of childhood games. Marie always spoke with a giggle tripping at the edge of whatever she was saying, and this girl had it, too. He could hear it as she wished him a good day, as she took the paper from his hands. How was that possible?

“Here, Corporal,” she said, trading him the newspaper for a slim blue volume of poetry. “Why don’t you read this while I tidy up? A bit more enjoyable than old news.” It was code, he remembered, “tidying up.” Something the other aides and nurses would say right before they were about to draw the curtains and conduct a humiliating sponge bath. “Tidying up” meant that it was time for the others to look away, to close their ears to the sounds of a wounded man biting back whimpers and cries of embarrassment as an inexperienced girl took on a tender task previously performed only by a mother, and even then years in the past. And yet, as this girl straightened the iron-framed screens about his bed and turned to him with kind hands and a warm cloth, removing his pyjamas so deftly
and impassively, he could not help but find himself relaxing under her ministrations. She avoided the wounds on his legs, as she had been instructed; she paid careful attention to his hands, which pleased him. Corporal Lucas was only a moderately vain man, but he could not bear to see his fingernails so unkempt and rimmed with dirt.

She spoke to him intermittently, asking impersonal questions about the books on his nightstand; making observations about the weather and the general Italian temperature -- these niceties all worked together to foster a safe distance between them. The world outside quietened, softening the militaristic but frenzied orderliness of the camp beyond the canvas walls of this sanctuary she was weaving just for the two of them. In the cocoon of her voice and her care, he felt as a boy again, all sleepy limbs and new-washed skin.

He heard Marie in the turning of the pages; his father’s voice reading Tennyson aloud; his mother was there in the careful smoothing of the bedsheets and the tentative steps away from him, as the VAD girl prepared to move on to Bridges in the next bed over. Lucas hated to see her go, hated that he had been so awful to her, hated that whatever was festering away now in his mind, dancing to the beat of the guns he could not deafen -- hated that all that had reared its ugly head in her sweet direction. He raised a clean hand, grasped hers as gently as possible. “Thank you, miss -- though I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

The girl turned, and Lucas could see now that she did not, in fact, look all that much like Marie -- but that didn’t matter anymore. This girl was taller, her hair a far deeper brown, nearly black; her eyes an unromantic shade of hazel. She was gangly in her movements, and her smile, when it unfurled, was less endearing than mischievous. Yet her warmed to her all over again. “Elle, sir, Elle Andersen.”

The mobile hospital and the camp containing it was a veritable warren of mud and canvas, stretching across a tentative valley in the Neapolitan countryside, nestled within an unconfident cradle of a valley. Of considerable benefit was the river which snaked away several hundred yards from the main hub of the camp, providing the inhabitants with a ready source of fresh water, untainted by farm runoff here in the rural heart of southwestern Italy. As they were still relatively close to the coast, many locals here were involved in the fisheries, rather than farms, and those that did keep livestock or grow crops tended to operate in the old ways, eschewing the modern chemicals and inventions that would tend to rather muck up nearby bodies of water.

To the east lay a forest of foreboding proportions, rising up as it did on the other side of the turquoise ribbon which separated its encroaching edges from the camp. When the hospital had first been established there, General Williams had pointed out that the other side of the river might make for a more appealing location, but his advising council had argued against it, pointing out that the woods held far too much appeal for Nazi scouts. The further away the camp was situated, the more advantageous the British position, as they could set their own patrol guards to monitor and intervene prior to potential enemies having the opportunity to leave the cover of the forest, ford the river, and infiltrate the camp. Any anxieties that Williams expressed regarding the possibility of flooding was simply outweighed in the face of this grimmer arithmetic. HYDRA scouts were of additional concern -- these operatives representing the science and research division of the German forces liked to keep close tabs on Allied hospitals, hoping to sabotage recoveries and gather intelligence on numbers of wounded and dead.

Setting aside the functional temerity of life on a floodplain in the Mediterranean autumn, the camp and mobile hospital of the British Eighth Army operated like a well-oiled machine, as most army camps were wont to do in the latter months of 1943, those days following the Italian invasion, and the beginning of the peninsular campaign. Losses were heavy on all sides, but most of the boys there were well-seasoned after three years of war, and the officers of the makeshift base maintained a strict
code of ethics that extended down through every order, every rank, every operation. Surgeon-General Louis Belasis, alongside Matron-in-Chief Susan Musgrave, kept a firm grip on all medical procedures and staffing, and both had served in the Great War together years before, in France. Admittedly, the two had a bit of a reputation for bullying about the aides, and this was unfortunate, to be sure, but unsurprising: most of the aides were newly trained, simply inducted into service as quickly and painlessly as possible in order to ensure that the more menial hospital duties were lightened from nurses’ shoulders and that their skills were thus freed up for more intensive occupations.

Elle had yet to meet either Belasis or Musgrave, but she had heard horror stories aplenty: in the VAD quarters, section three of an evening, it was the only topic of conversation that strayed from sweethearts and film-stars. “She once sent a whole contingent of girls home in tears,” gossiped May, a strapping girl of nineteen with a conqueror’s temperament. “Just arrived, too!”

Rebecca was from York. “Belasis’ lost two of his sons already,” she whispered conspiratorially from her spot by the back of the tent, where she had furtively loosened enough of an overlapping portion of the canvas to allow a sort of provisional chimney, through which the smoke from her cigarette curled away into the night air. “His third boy’s somewhere north of here, I heard.” Another girl knew of his daughter, who was reportedly a passionate, pacifistic bohemian living in London. On and on the whispers went, throughout the brief evening respite they enjoyed before exhaustion claimed them. The ladies of section three -- a round dozen of them -- traded in secrets and sighs before lights out, tossing names onto the air in the hopes of catching their owners’ some good luck. Sweethearts, husbands, parents, sisters, brothers, friends -- boys and men and women and girls, strewn over the world’s chaotic, bloody stage, fighting and striving and bartering normalcy for a glimpse of peace.

Some of this talk left Elle out in the cold. She had no one at home, no one to write to, no one to pray for. There was the boy, of course, as she found herself thinking of him, but he somehow didn’t seem to count, not there under a Mediterranean moon, lulled to uneasy sleep by the discordant lullaby of faraway guns. The boy, with his overbearing father and kind mother; the boy who had simply just always been there. The boy who, it seemed, would make the most likely candidate for a husband, if she was so swayed. And yet, and yet -- she could not help but listen enviously to the adventures of May and Rebecca, Susie and Pat. They had love stories to tell, proper ones: kisses and dates and sickly sweet poems, letters from their beaus and memories to warm them on these cool autumn nights. Pat was actually married; her husband was with the Royal Air Force, and though she was just a year or two older than most of the other girls, she often took it upon herself to bestow various pearls of marital wisdom upon a rapt audience.

Infrequently, Elle thought about contacting the boy; reaching out across the great expanse of space that divided them during wartime. She did wonder what state he was in, since he so frequently fluctuated emotionally. Such moods were often difficult for her to keep pace with, try as she might to soothe him when he grew overwrought; her calm words and a healthy dose of logic doing absolutely nothing to ease his panic, his frustration, his misery, or even, on occasion, his manic joy. Her own anger tended to be swift and brief, all flashing eyes and sharp tongue, whereas his could rage for days, an endless storm.

And yet, and yet…

There would always be an “and yet” where it concerned the boy. She had no recourse: he had been shakily hers and she vaguely his for as long as they both could remember, and everyone they knew and held dear had always assumed marriage was just around the corner, always just around the corner.

And yet, and yet…
The finger on her left hand was bare, and he was nowhere near this evening -- in fact, he had not been for a long while. She had no such stories to tell the other girls, no billets-doux to pull out and blush over, no truly sweet kisses (there had been kisses, of course, but never of the sort that impinged themselves so firmly upon her memory) to recall -- unless you counted the way his lips had pressed against hers the day they parted, cold and hard and tinged with regret or relief, she had not been able to tell.

So Elle Andersen curled up on her cot in that well-oiled machine of a hospital camp, one night in September, lonely and defeated and endlessly tired, just as she had done each night for two weeks now. Back in Sussex, she had not felt so useless, so uncoordinated. Lucas’ earlier outburst and his subsequent show of contrition had levelled her somewhat, shattering the tentative inroads she had made over the past few days. Matron had praised her on Thursday, in fact, for her quick work in the storeroom; and just yesterday, Rebecca had offered her a smoke. Adjusting to this new camp would take time, she understood, but the cresting waves of self-assurance, followed by deep, pulling troughs of despair -- those she had not anticipated. Elle had left good friends behind in Sussex at the hospice, and patients who had responded so well to her care, focused as she was on the minutiae, on creature comforts. Here, she met bloody men for the first time, men with the wounds of war still gaping and raw. Here, she met nurses with no time for niceties, for gentle hands and small jokes. Here, even tucked into this valley, with the river running by and the forest standing lush beyond -- here, she was, for the first time, at war.

There was a purpose to her work here that was far clearer than it had been in England, and as the month drew on, many more within the Italian camp began to recognize it. Colonel Lucas, the following day, wrote up a formal commendation to Principal Matron Clarke, which was eventually passed on to Susan Musgrave herself. The letter praised Elle’s natural propensity for comfort and explaining how she had transformed the fraught situation between them in the matter of a few moments. There were still complaints, of course; many patients disliked her close, tender care, finding her far too familiar and presumptuous. “I don’t need to be read to,” grumbled one officer; another disparaged her quiet voice and gentle hands -- “She just needs to get on with it.”

For her part, Barnett simply kept reassigning the girl over the next week, as complaints bloomed from each ward. Elle got on well with the others and she was no shirker, possessing an eager mind. These were all valuable qualities in a volunteer aide, who could be called upon to perform an ample variety of diverse tasks. Whether or not some of the men found her too sweet or too “much” mattered little in the grand scheme of things. There was a war on, after all, and capable hands could not be turned away. Never. What a waste that would be.

And so Elle Andersen was routinely moved around to various posts throughout the camp. For every commendation she received, it seemed, two complaints often followed, though they were minor and tended to slip by unregistered or unresolved. “According to Captain Crawley, she treated him like a ‘pulign’ -- and here Mrs. Pat Hemming, Matron Barnett’s personal (if unofficial) assistant, squinted with suspicion at the word -- “infant,’ ma’am. And Major Falsworth found her too m-mawkish by far. He said she even offered to bring him a bouquet of wildflowers, ma’am, which he found highly irregular.”

Barnett pinched the bridge of her nose; she didn’t have time for this. The battle to the west had seen greater losses than had been anticipated, and the hospital was preparing for the arrival of the wounded and the untenable swelling of the populace, within just a few hours. The last thing she needed was another barrage of anti-Andersen sentiment. God, but wouldn’t it just be easier to send the chit home at this point? She shuffled a few papers around the surface of her desk, avoiding Hemming’s curious gaze. Crafting the illusion of productivity was a special gift of Barnett’s, and she tended to deploy it at the most apropos of moments. “Thank you, Hemming. Leave the reports here and please assure the Captain and the Major that their complaints are being handled.”
Brimming with self-importance, the girl scurried off, leaving Barnett alone once again, in what she understood to typically be only a temporary solitude, to think. In her opinion, Crawley did tend to behave like a puling infant, and as for the Major, well -- a few flowers in hospital never hurt anyone. It irked her no end that she was going to consciously have to break this girl down; complaints from commissioned officers needed to be handled far more firmly than those from enlisted men, as the former were more likely to follow up on those complaints and pursue some sort of consequence for the object of their displeasure. The Principal Matron had made this point as clear as mud the night before: “The girl will have to go, if I hear of one more complaint,” Clarke had crisply explained during the weekly debriefing, taking Barnett aside after hearing a few nurses gossiping about Colonel Lucas’ outburst last week. “It’s absolutely ridiculous that she’s been permitted to get away with this much foolishness for this long.”

Even Matron-in-Chief Musgrave had gotten involved, though she tried to infuse her interjection with more feigned sympathy than Clarke was capable of mustering. “I understand the conundrum, matron, I really do. The girl is an eager enough worker, and that cannot be undervalued. However, the consternation of the officers is simply unacceptable and must be rectified.” Steel-hued curls bobbing, Musgrave had waggled a condescending finger right in Barnett’s face for her last point: “One more complaint, as Matron-in-Chief has explained, and the girl will be released. With an adequate commendation, of course, enough to secure her some sort of office work to aid in the war effort. Is this understood?”

Yes , she’d said, though not without a little venom embedded in her respectful tone.

Agatha Barnett was a patriot, make no mistake, and she accorded her military superiors the dutiful obedience she had been long been conditioned to display, but the whole charade of this particular situation grieved her no end. First and foremost, she was a bloody nurse, and that meant she fully understood the true value of what Elle was trying to accomplish. Nursing went beyond medicine, it plumbed well the depths of an innate human craving for comfort, a reliance on care and touch. It was why, for example, her own voice softened when speaking to Lieutenant Graham, a young man shattered from within by the endless screams of his dying cohort; why she always took a second, informal nightly turn about the recovery ward assigned to her contingent that week. Surgeon-General Belasis, along with Musgrave and Clarke and the whole sub-army of doctors with their syringes, their diagnoses, those manly recommendations to “hold a chin up, soldier,” -- they could not even begin to understand what those men needed more than pain relief. A sister’s laugh, a mother’s touch; jokes between friends; memories of home to fortify them in their fight against a new enemy, in a new kind of war. Clean sheets always helped, too.

Care was Barnett’s primary function, and she was beginning to suspect that things were much the same for Elle. But where Barnett had sought out science and procedure, leaning into the firm embrace of structure and regulations, this girl found herself traipsing through fields in search of flowers to cheer a wounded soldier.

Which brought her back to the problem at hand: “One more complaint,” Musgrave had warned. One more complaint and the girl would have to go, sent away in humiliation and disappointment, back across a war-ravaged sea. Lucas’ recommendation from days before had been sent along up the chain of command, as had a few reports and notes from other officers who had, contrary to the opinions of a disgruntled few, enjoyed and benefited from Elle Andersen’s tender attentions: “An affable volunteer, much appreciated and commended; her care was prompt and sensitive; a neat worker; kind; I highly valued the care provided.”

Glowing reports, dimmed only by the bitter, formalized additions of Crawley and Falsworth, and four more besides.
Agatha checked her watch. It was nearly nine o’clock -- lights out for most of the officers in the recover wards as well as that of the day shift aides and nurses, but if she hurried she could catch a conversation with at least one of the men as part of her usual turndown service. She decided to head for Falsworth first, as she had had a few conversations with him in recent weeks and he seemed a decent, reasonable fellow. If either he or Crawley (though she hoped for both) could be convinced to switch sides and advocate even a smidgeon for Andersen, the girl stood a chance of staying. And Barnett -- as she wrapped a sweater around her uniform and headed out into the cool night air, that absurd little ache in her right knee acting up (meaning they could expect some rain) -- realized that, despite herself, despite her usual reluctance to get too chummy and kind with her underlings, she had grown to rather like this Elle Andersen, even with just a scant month under their belt together.

“Evening, Matron.” Major James Falsworth was handsome, frightfully so. His looks threatened to bring out something distinctly girlish in Agatha who, at forty-three, had long since packed away any notions of romance, even (or perhaps, especially) during the throes of war. And yet, and yet -- the way his green eyes twinkled by the light of his lamp; his musician’s fingertips playing about the spine of a battered novel; the warmth of his crisp voice as it curled out in welcome. If she’d possessed just an ounce less self-control, she would have promptly blushed. “Is anything the matter?”

The story came out over a cup of tea. As Agatha spoke, the Major’s face (abruptly contorting into a grimace at the first mention of Elle) gradually softened into something rather akin to regret. “I’ve not come to ask you to withdraw your complaint, sir,” she finished, sitting up a tad straighter in her chair, “but only to explain about the girl. She means well, Major; she just needs some more practice.”

Falsworth heaved a sigh, setting his mug down carefully on the nightstand. “To be honest, Matron, I was hoping to have a chance to do that very thing. I spoke in haste this morning.” He gave her a rueful smile, gesturing to a small glass of red flowers next to the tea. “They did cheer me up, you see.”

Three beds over, Captain Crawley was eavesdropping. “Not to be rude, Matron, but I quite agree. She rather grows on you. I-I should like to withdraw my complaint as well.” Agreement and reassurances began to sprout from every corner of the spacious canvas tent; grown men -- bandaged, wounded, weakened by a fear to which they refused to submit -- changing their tune to sing the praises of one Elle Andersen, a sweet girl who “meant well.”

With an uncharacteristic smile, Barnett reassured every single one of the men that any formal complaints could easily be retracted and replaced with brief commendations. After all, none of the criticisms had been overly serious in their nature, and so many of the officers were now clamouring to relate stories of how the girl had helped them, how calm she was, how endearing. Barnett promised to return in the morning with her assistant, with the intention of recording those testimonies.

But for now, she left them, those disgruntled men so swiftly soothed by the presence of one odd young volunteer without a trace of medical acuity beyond basic first aid. Stranger things, indeed.
presence on their wards.”

“Is unconventional, to be sure,” puffed Belasis, helping himself to another ginger biscuit, of which no offer had been extended to Elle. “We must remember, though, that these are officers. They know what they want.”

Elle could not explain precisely why the men were responding in the ways that they did -- why tension so thick it could be cut with a knife could dissipate with a bunch of wildflowers or a conversation about poetry or London restaurants. She was often forgetful of the most basic of tasks, and was constantly peppering her superiors with clarifying questions that made Nurse Jenkins in particular roll her eyes no end. Yes, she prided herself on being a fairly good worker, but she was by no means perfect in this regard -- Rebecca, for example, had a far better record when it came to medical aid, and Susie was a veritable machine where it concerned organization and distribution of supplies. Furthermore, she didn’t possess the charm or beauty of many of the other female nurses and volunteers - her hair had gone lank and she had never quite managed to master a winning smile. It was a mystery to her, but one she was grateful for. It meant she could stay. Elle strongly suspected that she had been on the cusp of a booting-out, and despite her struggles, she had found such a strong sense of purpose here, almost the hallowedness of a mission, actually, that the prospect of leaving made her feel physically ill.

As she stammered through a deferential response and found herself dismissed into the autumn air, a tiny flicker of pride sputtered to life within her. No matter if she could not quantify it; she was making a difference.

Her rounds that week involved Recovery Ward B, to which she strode with a twitching grin. Major Falsworth, in the days since the retraction of his vexation: his wit and vigour were making a rapid return, as was his general health. He had been shot while on a reconnaissance mission to the north several weeks before, after making a landing too close to a German blockade. He was the only one of the three parachuters on the team to survive -- though he never told her that. She’d heard it from Jenkins, who had had it from another officer on the ward. As Elle gave him sponge baths and brought him cups of tea he had taken to telling her stories of increasing daring, resplendent with finely wrought jokes and details that even she, with her relative lack of military knowhow, understood to be ludicrously false. But he never talked about the mission.

“Good morning, sir,” she said warmly upon entering the tent. Other officers were engaged in physical therapy, a few card games, or were preoccupied with polishing off their breakfasts. Ward B had been filled with patients nearly ready to return to the front; another week or two, she guessed, and the Major’s bed would be empty. The notion pained her. Her fellow volunteers were lovely, even though it seemed to be taking them a while to warm up to her fully, but the clever Brummie officer made far better company, in her opinion. She felt needed by him, appreciated. And she relished it.

He smiled at the sight of her, his sharp-boned composure softening into open pleasure. “Good morning, Miss Andersen. It’s lovely to see you.” Ordinarily, officers would not speak so familiarly with nurses or volunteers, but there was something so winsome and easy about Elle’s manner that regulations seemed to fade away when she entered the ward, and Elle, to be frank, preferred it that way, though it brought some colour to her cheeks. When he said “lovely,” it sounded as though he truly meant it. But too much formality tended to make her nervous, and it was difficult at times to navigate the strict and foreign rules that governed military life. It was indeed far lovelier to be friends.

As usual, she busied herself with the essential morning tasks necessary on the wards, consulting a list posted on the far side of the tent near the nurses’ station. Dunbar and Jameson needed help shaving, and some beds needed to be stripped and prepared for new patients. Simple enough.
Elle tended to hum as she worked. Parker, one of the newer officers, shuddered at the grating inaccuracy of this particular rendition of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” but as she drew closer to him and neatly set a cup of tea by his side, he felt himself sinking into her genuine smile, recalling how he and Muriel had danced to that song, once upon a time.

The hours slipped by peacefully, until Elle checked the list of tasks one last time, preparing for the end of her shift. “Oh.” Eyes downcast, she turned to her friend, who bore an apologetic smile.

“I hope it’s no bother,” Falsworth said lowly, creasing the newspaper in his hands distractedly, avoiding her eye. “I was just told yesterday.” He had been expecting the notification for some time now, actually; the wound in his arm had healed rather well, and just a few days ago he’d been capable of lifting a rather substantial crate of fresh linen into the tent, much to the flustered chagrin of a pretty nurse called Jenkins.

In truth, Falsworth was eager to return to the front. These past few weeks of recuperation had not been entirely unwelcome as a reprieve from the stress of active duty, particularly following the disaster near Cassino -- but he was a soldier, through and through, and sand there was a war on; bed was not the place for him these days. The girl, Andersen, had been a bit of a bright spot recently, following their awkward initial interactions, and to see her so gum at the prospect of his departure kindled a curious mixture of regret and pleasure inside him -- it was a pleasant thing, after all, to be missed.

Elle’s orders that day were to prepare his personal effects and then to draw the curtains about the space, affording him some privacy to dress. Afterwards, she would be required to strip his bed, once an orderly had come to escort him away to report to General Williams. She conducted the first of these tasks with a cool detachment, Falsworth noted, observing as she restacked the books on his nightstand and tugged the box of personal belongings from beneath the mattress -- all in complete, though not impolite, silence. It was, he realized, how she was supposed to act: the calm demeanour adopted by many nurses and other medical staff, to whom his was just another face, another body demanding care and orders and procedures. Many soldiers found it reassuring, and he dimly recalled a time when he had, too. When he had preferred a quiet nurse who got on with her duties as though they didn’t bother her in the slightest. But now, after spending time with Andersen, who hummed through her work and cracked innocent jokes and who swept onto the ward with an air of comfort and peace -- now, her reticence was off-putting, and he felt guilty for leaving.

Without thought, Falsworth shot out a hand to grasp her wrist, pausing her in the motion of folding down his blankets. Elle froze, fingers trapped and hovering scandalously over his right thigh, and he flushed as he realized the potential implications of this show of familiarity, if they were seen. It may be 1943, he reminded himself, releasing her warm skin, but this was an RAMC field hospital on the Italian front, and he was damned foolish if he thought Elle would get off scot-free at the slightest whiff of impropriety with a patient under her care.

“Apologies, Andersen.” He coughed; embarrassment did tend to catch in the throat. “I was just...concerned. You seem upset.”

Hazel eyes, rich and welcoming, blinked at his, the questions she couldn’t articulate clamouring at her tightly-pressed lips. Briefly, he wondered if she’d ever been kissed.

“I’m going to miss your stories, Major,” she said finally, a wry smile dashing the frosty veneer she had composed so neatly on her face. “They were so very entertaining. I’ll miss them terribly.”

He smiled, shrewd enough to read between the lines, grasp at what she was really trying to say, without getting the both of them in trouble. “Well,” he replied, eyes glinting, “perhaps I shall just have to write you some more.”
Later, after a rousing series of “goodbyes” from his erstwhile ward-mates, Major James Falsworth fell deep into thought. She wasn’t a pretty thing, Elle Andersen. He’d danced with far more beautiful women in his time, but never, ever had he felt such a warmth from them, such a care and sensitivity. She wore compassion like a fine perfume, clinging to her soul, dancing from her fingertips, and he could have happily luxuriated in her company for a hundred years.

But as he stepped out into the sunlight, back to purpose and work, back to striving for liberty and justice, her memory dimmed. Elle Andersen -- sweet girl, he thought. He would recall her name, recommend her services, write a kind letter in her favour. He would tell other soldiers about the endearing aide who had laughed at his tall tales; who had brought him a sense of comfort he had not thought to ever find within the confines of the British Army. For a man so steeped in the rich rites of military propriety and regulations, it was actually absurd to realize how much he had enjoyed that unconventional care. A pot of flowers, a song out of tune, and those warm hazel eyes, misting over at the prospect of his departure -- such simple things had done more for his healing than morphine and bandages alone ever could.
Late September that year was gorgeous, in a way autumn in southern Europe can tend to be, war or no: an opulent metamorphosis, in that lovely little corner of the calendar. Elle felt the change pull something out of her, a longing for newness, even as the threat of winter crept ever closer. Following Falsworth’s departure, the other volunteers noticed her growing more and more distracted, committed only to performing well the small tasks that coaxed brief smiles from the tired, scarred faces of wounded men. To everything else, she was indifferent, quiet: tossing and turning each night, caught in the throes of strange dreams. Her home on fire, the boy dead and gone, stars wheeling endlessly overhead.

This was not unusual; even the staunchest of nurses found themselves mired in a kind of walking grief as day in, day out, they bore witness to pain and melancholy; again and again they paid the price of war by proxy, watching as the lifeblood drained from a stolen son, brother, lover. And they simply did it one more time -- an endless series of “one more times, just once more,” as the broken body of another boy (they all became boys when they wept) came across their gurney, wracked with a pain those nurses could chip away it, but never completely fully dislodge. And in between those moments, there were dreams. Names and serial numbers and bright green eyes, or blue, or brown -- all of them closing and then blinking into a new reality, bearing a hard-bought lesson, old as the world.

And so when Elle began to drop things more frequently, when she developed a tendency to stare, for just a beat too long, at odd spots around the camp; and when she woke through the nights, with a teary “Mama” on her lips, the more seasoned nurses clucked their tongues in internal sympathy. She’d learn. She’d learn. They had.

Some of the other volunteers, however, were not so sensitive. For a girl with less than six months of service under her belt, who had yet to actually witness the death of a patient (she was largely assigned to recovery wards, for Heaven’s sake!) -- it all seemed a bit ludicrous. And that observation, so subtle, so faintly damning, began to fester and curdle, boiling over into something dangerously close to resentment.

Pat shoved her roughly awake one morning nine days after Major Falsworth had returned to the front. Elle had been rather down in the mouth since his departure; she had developed rather an attachment to the handsome officer, not that anyone blamed her. But the adulatory praise so often heaped upon the dreamy girl who possessed only a modicum of medical skill (she was nothing so wonderful as warranted all that damn praise) was beginning to rankle some of the other aides and not a few of the nurses, resulting in a rather charged environment when it came to their private quarters. Pat Hemming, in particular, resented the fact that Elle did hardly any real work (a few bandage changes and tidying store cupboards hardly counted), that she rarely went above and beyond, and yet was still the apple of Barnett’s eye and the recipient of copious amounts of commendations from officers. Officers! Officers whose nightstands she littered with half-dead weeds and shiny stones! Like a child.

“You’ve been assigned to help Jenkins in D,” Pat barked, sorely in need of one of the cigarettes she had recently begun smoking, after last week’s foreboding telegram. “She’s got an incoming patient. Worked up.”

Elle rubbed at sleep-ridden eyes, struggling to grasp at consciousness after another night of fiery
dreams. Up and down the length of the tent, Rebecca, Susie, and most of the others were still sound asleep, and a quick glance at her watch told Elle that it was not quite gone five. The night shift should be addressing this new patient; Elle and Jenkins wouldn’t be on for another hour. As she started to ease her stockings up her legs and search around for the rest of her uniform in the pinkish dawn light, she mentioned as much to Pat, who shot back a surprisingly cutting response that actually made Elle freeze in the middle of buttoning her dress. It wasn’t like Pat to be so cruel, was it? To volley that kind of a curse into the face of a fellow volunteer?

Perhaps though, Elle reasoned, saying nothing in reply and simply shoving her feet into those awful bloody shoes that pinched her so very much - perhaps Pat was just irritated at being wakened so early for someone else’s information. She must have been sitting up, though, or Jenkins (or whoever had delivered the message), would likely have gone to Elle’s bed themselves.

It had rained in the night, and the walk to D was wet and muddy. When Elle ducked into the entrance of the tent, things were already progressing, quite chaotically. Several officers were awake, and looked distinctly infuriated about it. Jenkins was flipping through a sheaf of papers on a clipboard near the nurses’ station, ignoring an audible undertone of curses as most attempted to go back to sleep. A goal that was being impeded by the loud and abrasive string of complaints issuing from a young, towheaded man in bed number four, wearing striped pyjamas that did not entirely conceal a considerable swathe of bandages covering his left shoulder.

“Faster in future, if you please, Andersen,” Jenkins snapped with a face like thunder, her eyes not leaving the pages before her. “Bed number four. Corporal Fredericks requires your assistance with his bedding. It is” -- and here her eyes flashed up to meet Elle’s, a matching of inquisitive hazel and furious green -- “inadequate.”

Elle glanced over; she’d remade and prepared bed number four just yesterday afternoon, stretching new white sheets crisply over the mattress, fluffing the Army-issued pillow into as comfortable a shape as she could manage. She’d even brought in a dozen small posies of flowers, each containing a generous few sprigs of lavender that she had collected from the forest’s edge. She hoped they would aid in good dreams for the weary new men on the ward. But there was Corporal Fredericks, sitting upright with a scowl on his face and venom in his eyes, a veritable snake ready to strike. With a sigh, Elle strode over to the store cupboard and slid out a neat stack of bedding, realizing that not only would her entire day be lengthened by one unpleasant hour, but her linen rotation had now been disrupted.

She eased Fredericks into a chair that Jenkins had pulled up at some point, perhaps to sit with the newcomer, as she sometimes did, particularly when they were overwrought. Entering the recovery wards tended to bring out just one of two responses in recuperating men: either they were happy to be away from the surgery and on the road to health; or the reality of their forthcoming return to the front struck such a deep fear into their hearts they could barely contain it.

This man, though, appeared neither relieved nor frightened, so much as thoroughly perturbed by just about everything surrounding him. “I’m not even properly wounded,” he groused, deliberately jerking away from a proffered cup of tea. Elle bit her lip; never a good sign when an Englishman turned down a cuppa. “A shot to the shoulder. Bollocks. If there were proper medics out there, they would have fixed me up then and there and put my gun back in my hands.”

Elle murmured a noncommittal acknowledgement as she focused on smoothing out the creases in his fresh sheets. Perhaps a clean -- well, cleaner -- bed would do him good, help him to relax. Nerves could do odd things to a troubled mind, so she simply listened as he continued in much the same vein, his tone rising and falling with equal parts dismay and frustration as he listed the general failings of the British Army he had thus far encountered. “And what kind of care do you call this,
then?” he snapped, as she reached a soft grip under his good arm, hoping to help him back into bed. He was gesturing to the small glass of flowers on the nightstand. “Idiot girls running about picking bloody daisies?” He glared at her, leaning back on the pillow she’d just unnecessarily changed and plumped, after waking up thirty minutes sooner than she’d needed to, after skipping breakfast and tea and all manner of personal time to race over to attend to him. If she’d been a shorter-tempered woman, she might’ve cursed at him.

But she couldn’t bring herself to do it, not once she’d met his eyes. A pale blue, washed out from tears -- there was pain there. Ancient and new and so, so raw. And it clenched at her heart and made her want to cry, to pull him into her and rail at the world for what they’d done to him. They’d broken him apart, wrenched him to pieces, leaving nothing but an angry shell behind. Another broken boy.

He spat out another criticism, but this one she did not hear. She pushed the mug closer to his wrist, offered him a smile that did only served to enrage him further. And as their first day together wore on, as his grumbles and complaints boiled over into a pure fury, as her hunger increased and her back ached and her spirits flagged -- as that day wore on, her heart broke a little more each moment. For that broken, golden-haired boy in bed number four.

Even Jenkins commented on Fredericks’ less-than ebullient personality: as she and Elle finished their shift and prepared to head to their respective quarters for a brief, midday break, the normally poised and proper senior nurse indulged in a spot of gossip. “He’s a bit of a...well, to be frank, he’s a bloody infant,” she said, scratching idly at her cap, her Yorkshire brogue blooming even as she lowered her voice. “Never stops moaning, not once -- to hear him talk, you’d think he lost every limb he has.”

The surprises continued as Jenkins apologized for calling Elle in so early that morning. “The night shift -- Bermondsey was supervising, you know, and she’s not the most diplomatic -- they had a hell of a time settling him.” Both women paused as a press of doctors, flanked by a few olive-clad officers whose eyes simply slipped past the two of them. Nurses might pose romantic prospects to new recruits, but by the time they were all the front together, the rosy notions of dates and courting had been mostly dashed. Occasionally, one might hear of an engagement on leave, or of a soldier getting caught helping his girl-in-white sneak out of her tent of an evening. Nurse Jenkins herself, of course, was above reproach; and Elle was growing quite self-conscious of the fact that her hair had lost its shine and her eyes were troublingly dull. Lack of sleep. Those blackberry stains beneath told the story.

Fredericks had them, too. Deep shadows traced underneath those blue eyes, cutting away on the precipices of sharp cheekbones. He had a hollow look about him, poor thing, and it made her think back on that visible rage simmering far too close to the surface; his broken heart so raw and so rampant that it was as though she could feel it, hear it, and it broke hers in turn. She said as much to Jenkins, who whirled about to face her, now that the gaggle of medics had moved on.

“You...you…” Jenkins -- once called Rosemary -- turned to face the younger girl. That stupid young girl. That infantile idiot who could not help but poeticize every man, every man who came under her care with their bleeding bodies and the deep wounds no nurse could stitch. They came to Rosemary broken, and she sent them back out into the world as fragile as they had come to her, the shattered lines of their tragedy slipped back together, milk on china shards. She needed a slap. She deserved it. “You.”

But there was nothing, nothing that Rosemary Jenkins could say, to this stupid little girl who looked across a path of mud and blood with such hope in her eyes -- the child of twenty-six who healed more men from the inside out than Jenkins could ever dream of doing. They needed her, just as much as they needed science and medicine and stitches and morphine. They needed a goddamn bouquet of flowers by their besides; they needed to remember music and books and the way a girl laughed at a
joke she knew she ought not to.

Before her, Elle was waiting, anticipating another lecture from one of her betters. She was used to them by now, and had all the composure of a kicked dog as her fingers played about the bottom edge of her apron, as she shifted to find purchase in the sodden ground. Barnett tried to shield her from the criticisms of the other nurses and volunteers, but she’d heard enough in the past few days to realize not everyone was appreciative of her methods.

Disappointment, though, was a surprise: “Good afternoon, Andersen,” Jenkins said tightly, flattening her lips against the bitter taste of common sense. “I expect I’ll be seeing you tomorrow.”

A second wash of rain began to fall as Jenkins stalked away, back ramrod straight and betraying no hint of the immense turnabout she had just experienced. Elle understood that something had changed in the space of a few minutes, but she could not for the life of her put her finger on what or why or how. She contented herself, then, with a quick shake of her head just before she dashed off back to her quarters. The morning shift, though swift and officially uneventful, had been a taxing one and she was ready to embrace a quiet respite. Her odds were on quarters three being empty, at least for the next fifteen minutes or so. Long enough to grasp at a shallow-enough sleep that no dreams could touch her.

Best laid plans and all that, it did not surprise her, in one way, to find Pat curled up on her cot, a fan of letters in one hand and a cigarette between her lips, fixing a cagey glare on Elle, who was sleepily trying to navigate the orderly rows of beds, making her way to her own. Not much had passed between the two of them for a while now, though they had enjoyed a tentative friendship in the spring, having arrived together from England on the St. Vincent -- but then, weeks of seasickness and patriotism do tend to bring ragtag souls together, even just for the duration.

The telegram that Elle did not know about had started it all, the animosity and the waspish behaviour. Pat lashed out against just about everything except the patients and Barnett, treating them to her last reserve of self-control. Her own nightmares had grown steadily bloodier, as she imagined all manner of cruel fates for her Mike -- the inevitable horrors blazing between those stark lines. Regret to inform. Regret to bloody inform.

They all knew, she thought, even that stupid little mare, Elle. What kind of a cheeky name was that, then? Elle from London, Miss Elle Andersen of Londontown, she with her posh accent and her out-of-place manners, who batted her eyelashes and had them all panting in her wake. And with what, Pat wondered? Brown hair and plain eyes, awkward limbs and chewed fingernails. There were career nurses here with prettier faces, but even most of them could not garner those dopey smiles on the faces of the men -- that peace and that calm. That joy.

Pat watched her slip into an uneasy doze, pondering the likelihood of some other motivation. Could it be? The girl was no raving beauty, and yet had more than half the hospital in love with her. At the unkind thought, shame clutched at her, tight as Mike’s arms. It wasn’t fair, it would never be fair, that she slaved away every day and received nothing in return but another cup of soup and feverish dreams of what had been and what could never be again -- blood on the uniform she’d pressed; their little house in Salford, shattered and hollow; every plan they had ever made aching and untended, floating adrift on the tide of a blank future. It raked at her, burned her from the inside out. Growing and growing, roiling and focusing its gaze on the girl four beds down, the girl everybody loved, the girl everybody cared about, the girl everybody would cry for -- while their eyes slid past the widow-to-be in their midst.

And a plan took shape.
“Fuck you!”

The bowl of water -- not too hot, not too cold -- was a porcelain whirling dervish in the air, and his curse a slap in the face that Elle could not help but shrink from. How could someone so ill, so weak, so thin be altogether so much? His anger was like a beast raging within him, untameable and sure, and she so longed to ease it, to coax it out and make it smile. If it could smile, then perhaps he could breathe, for the first time in too long.

Such an outburst had happened so many times before, you see. Twice a day, every day for the past seven, to be precise. Elle had been assigned to Fredericks’ care nearly exclusively, mostly because she was the only aide willing to work with him. Pat, Susie, and Rebecca, along with eight other volunteers from another contingent, had all tried and had all failed. In the end, Elle was responsible for a six hour shift with him beginning each morning, and another VAD, a resolute Scot called Jane, took him on until lights out. She had a habit of positively befuddling the young man with her Highland accent, tinged as it was from years in Manchester. Fredericks tended to just gawp at her as she bustled around his space and ordered him to do this and that. He could never quite seem to muster an expletive when Jane was about.

But Elle was a different story. Privately, Jenkins thought the fool rather enjoyed making the aide squirm, watching as her face turned red and her hands began to shake when he would spool up into an absolute state. Occasionally, a smile -- vindictive and cruel -- would flash across his face, chased away by a look of resolute venom.

The other soldiers on the ward would attempt to intervene for Elle’s sake, entreating the Corporal to calm himself, to have a care for the woman’s sensibilities. This, however, would only serve to infuriate him even more, and on and on it went. A bowl of porridge tossed to the floor; blankets kicked away; curses hurled from left and right. One fine Wednesday saw Elle actually dash from the ward, tears streaming, falling to knees in the grass beside the canvas of the tent, sobbing under the sun.

“That’s it,” Jenkins said brusquely, a shadow in her path. “I’m having you reassigned. This is nonsense.” She reached a not-ungentle hand down to grasp Elle’s shoulder, creasing the uniform and making her feel thoroughly childish as the nurse hauled her to her feet. “There are better ways for you to be spending your shifts.”

“No,” Elle argued, and Jenkins was surprised to see a new set to her chin, to hear a new resolution to her voice. “No. He needs me.”

Jenkins stared. “Fiddlesticks!” The girl was an idiot, clearly -- or, at the very least, a glutton for punishment. “Andersen, I am not having this. I’ll be speaking to Matron about this promptly. We’ve got plenty of witnesses. The Corporal’s behaviour is inappropriate and uncalled-for.” She exhaled sharply as she considered the potential ramifications here. Filing complaints against an officer, even a junior one, could be a tricky process. Loyalties ran deep and illogically. “You may be an aide,” she continued firmly, “but you should not have to be subjected to this...to this...” And here she sputtered, Rosemary Jenkins, who always knew what to say -- here she stumbled, giving Elle the perfect opportunity to supply the answer:

“Suffering.”

Ah, there it was. The one word Jenkins never liked to bring up on a shift, the one word she had, actually, cast from her mind the day she put on her uniform -- pushing it back deeper and deeper into the recesses of a subconscious cavern, a place where the nightmares go, where the guilt hides, where sorrows sleep. Those broken, weeping boys grasped so at her heart, each and every one. Motherless sons writhing in pain, aching for something she could not bear to give them -- because if she gave it
to all of them, there would be nothing left. A shell. An empty shell. Carved from pain and misplaced honour.

A good nurse was an effective nurse. A good nurse prioritized and compartmentalized and gave of herself in ways she could sustain over time. A good nurse cared, but never opened her heart too wide, lest ghosts crawl in. A good nurse loved, but a good nurse lost, too.

Elle Andersen would make a terrible nurse. She made for a moderately successful aide -- but she dirtied up recovery wards with wildflowers; she interrupted the orderly, chaotic flow of military life. She flouted rules with sweet smiles and she caught men off-guard with a charm only they could seem to understand. Belasis, Clarke, and Musgrave despised her, she’d heard. Fredericks would ruin her. And yet there she stood, all clenched fists and gritty smile, a sheen of sweat attesting to her troubles. She wasn’t sleeping, either, Jenkins guessed. And yet there she stood.

Determined. So bloody determined.

To ease their suffering. With flowers and songs, trinkets and jokes. And by God, the girl was actually doing it. While doctors and nurses and other aides healed their wounds -- stitched and sewed and sawed and scored -- this idiot girl was bringing back their souls, ferrying them back to what they had been before. She made them laugh. She brought them home.

“He needs me,” Elle said quietly, loosening her fists and picking at a loose thread on her apron. “He doesn’t know it, perhaps, but he needs me.”

Jenkins chewed on her bottom lip, trying to steady her voice before it emerged. “You’re being foolish, sentimental,” she replied, as evenly as she could manage. “There’s no room for that here, love.” It was a lesson she’d had to learn herself, a long time ago. Raised on cheap, claptrap novels pitching nurses as romantic figures, as a girl she had half expected herself to be promptly swept off her feet by the first dashing soldier she brought back to health -- but the first dashing one had died eleven years ago and the rest was ancient history. There was no room.

A light breeze picked up, threatening rain and playing about the hems of their uniforms -- Jenkins’ thoughts drifted to a dance hall in Blackpool, once upon a time, when a pretty blue dress had kicked up about her shins and no ghosts had clung to her wake. The wind picked up a hank of Elle’s hair, ever so slightly lifting it above her shoulders. Had she ever gone dancing, Jenkins wondered? “If there’s no room for sentiment,” the girl said, after a pause, “there’s no place for me. I’m a creature of it, nurse.”

How could Jenkins make her see? How could she shake this poor fool out of this absurd delusion? “You can’t fix him,” she insisted, softening her tone, hoping that might, at the very least, soothe the girl into reason. “He’s an injured man, and he’ll recover from that. But that anger…” She shook her head. “What if he hurts you?”

Elle gave her a wry smile. “Then I’ll recover from that. Surrounded by quality care.”

Misty rain began to fall; it was proving to be a damp autumn, and Jenkins acknowledged that the rather grey days the camp had been experiencing of late could have something to do not only with Fredericks’ irascibility, but could also easily account for Andersen’s stubbornness in this matter. There had been no reprieve; still in the grips of the nascent Italian campaign, the flow of the wounded from the front was constant and the numbers ever-increasing as the battles intensified. Medical staff, at every level, of the camp were hard-pressed to find time to sleep, let alone the opportunity to contend with the swiftly shifting emotions of life in a warzone.

It seemed to be the most likely option here, to explain why Elle was so staunchly refusing to obey
what amounted to an order (or at least, a decision handed down) from her superior. If Jenkins decided to truly push things, Elle could be brought to discipline for her insubordination. But the seasoned nurse, standing there foolishly in the first sprinklings of today’s shower -- she wanted to know more. In her time, she had never encountered this subtle sense of rebellion over so small an issue. Corporal Fredericks was being incorrigible and supremely unpleasant; there was nothing tragic there. He was alive; he could walk; he had lost no limbs; he still looked like himself. He would be back on the field with a gun in his hands in a few weeks.

And yet, and yet.

“I’ve got to report this,” Jenkins insisted, finally. “I’ve got to report this, actually. He can’t go on; he needs to be moved. Maybe an isolation ward for a day or two would see him right.”

“No.” Elle shook her head, still resolute. “You can’t. He’s alone in a roomful of men, he’s always alone. If you put him on that ward, he’ll wither away even faster than he is now. You tend his shoulder, Nurse Jenkins, and I’ll tend the rest of him.”

Jenkins’ ears perked up at that. “What does that mean?”

Hazel eyes drifted to the greying horizon as Elle replied: “I can’t stitch his wound back together, and I’m sorry about that. What you all do for these men is...remarkable. I envy it. But I...I can help him, I can work with those stitches and the medicine you give him. I can -- well, to be honest, I can’t really quite explain it. But if I can bring him back -- bring him back to…”

“To what?” Jenkins interjected angrily. “To who he was before he was shot? Before he watched good men gunned down? Andersen, you can’t ever do that. No one could.”

“But I could try. And maybe that would be enough.”

How many times had Jenkins heard nurses speak thus? Starry-eyed, fresh from training, ready to heal the wounds of the world in one benevolent swoop. And then, reality: a price to be paid, at dear cost. She sighed, once more taking in the sight of this wilful woman before her, standing her ground for a soldier too mired in self-pity to find a way out of his own misery -- which, though perhaps it wasn’t fair of her to dwell too much on this -- was far less severe than that of many, many others, both in front of and behind the lines.

But there was a pull there, a feeling that she ought to permit this, to allow for one more chance, because Elle wanted it so badly, and the girl rarely asked for anything. She still had some fire, some passion, and that could very well blaze into instinct, into true talent. “One more day,” Jenkins grumbled, hoping she somehow wouldn’t come to any blame because of this. “One more shift. Finish this, and if you can get through it without being struck or sworn at or having anything thrown at you, I won’t report it.”

Elle’s long arms wrapped themselves about Jenkins’ tired frame; the first embrace in far too long. For a moment, she allowed herself to melt into it, to enjoy the feeling of gratitude, the firm touch of happiness. And then Nurse Jenkins pushed away, perhaps a bit more forcefully than was strictly polite, because how utterly ridiculous for an aide to be hugging a nurse over such a trivial matter. The aide, however, didn’t seem to notice: “Thank you, ma’am,” she breathed, a smile bursting on her face, a sunrise in the midst of this burgeoning rainstorm.

“Listen to me well, girl,” Jenkins continued, as though the smile hadn’t warmed her from the inside out. “If one thing goes wrong, you won’t step foot in that bloody tent ‘til he’s gone. Understood?”

Elle nodded, watching as Jenkins strode back into the tent, pausing only to scrape muddy boots
against a sturdy tent peg near the entrance, and then the younger woman sighed. Deeply. The entire
deabacle had edged far too close to the confrontational for her comfort, and a moment ago, she’d
thought she had been about to lose it all. Truly, though, she could not quite account for this insistence
on helping Fredericks; after all, the man had been nothing but unpleasant to her for days now. But
that was why she was here, wasn’t it? To aid them, through thick and thin; to bring them up from
their very worst? Fredericks may have been more verbose than Falsworth or Lucas or any of the
others, but that didn’t mean he did not deserve her care -- perhaps he needed it more than her
previous charges. And in any event, that was her mission here, wasn’t it? To comfort and to care.
That boy in there, her age or younger, was suffering, and he needed her. They all had; desired or
needed something to ground them in their new reality, to tether them to who they had been, so that
they could ford ahead with grim new knowledge.

She recalled how Falsworth had lightened so much in the days before his departure, when the
awkwardness between them had faded away and only humour and goodwill remained. Colonel
Lucas she remembered with a faint smile, how she had read aloud to him a few afternoons a week --
long, dull tomes about eighteenth-century agricultural practices. And then there had been Parker,
who had enjoyed her off-key humming, and Dunville, who’d so liked a joke…

On and on she thumbed through the memories of what had worked, what had helped, trying to
suppress that little flutter of panic as she faced Corporal Fredericks again, this time sodden and not a
little nervous. For his part, the soldier was visibly chastened, appearing smaller and thinner in the
space of just ten minutes. Sunk back into his pillow, he picked idly at a scab on his right hand, the
hand she had intended to wash, before he’d so violently kicked away the bowl of water. Not that
they got too filthy while he was lying in bed all day, but it was Barnett’s opinion that the soldiers
benefited from that kind of self-care, that washing and shaving and trimming one’s fingernails could
remind them that they were worth that much, that they were real and human, in need of tending
beyond flesh wounds.

Fredericks’ eyes were a very precise shade of brown, Elle realized, taking a few chary steps closer.
A hint of sunlight -- a warm reprieve from the rain outside -- had Shafted down through the mesh
window above him, and the reflection of it caused some rich gold flecks to shimmer in his gaze, as
those treacle eyes snapped up to meet hers. Was there penitence there, she wondered? Or a still-
brewing rage, ready to engulf her once more?

It was surprise, though she didn’t realize it, that was blooming there in his eyes. Fredericks --
Corporal Peter Fredericks -- had assumed that he’d well and truly scared her off, that frightened little
rabbit of a woman, she whose gentle hands and lilting voice reminded him so much of his mother.
His mother who had sobbed as she’d seen him off, begged him not to go, dredging up four dead
brothers, lost in the mud of France; a husband, his father, who had never seen his son. She had torn
at him when he’d first joined up, coming home in his uniform with a smile splitting his face,
expecting tears of pride, not anger. She’d torn at his serge, trying to rip back the layers to find her
boy, buried as he was in bad memories and tempted fate. In the end, he had left, because it was his
duty. He was a good lad, made of strong stuff. A patriot. A bloody patriot.

A bloody patriot who had wept like a baby when the bullet went through his shoulder, when he
swore he could hear his father’s voice, his uncles’ wails. Banshees on the field.

And then she came. His greatest disappointment yet. They couldn’t even give him a pretty aide, a
dumb girl from London who just wanted to flirt and maybe have someone to write to when he
returned to the front. No, they gave him bloody Andersen. Who reminded him far too much of home.
Who made tears crowd his throat. Who made him so bloody, fucking homesick that he wanted to cry
out for his mother. Who made him so, so angry.
She was back.

“I apologize, Corporal, for leaving so abruptly. I needed air,” she said quietly, beginning her usual process of tidying up the space around him. Fredericks did not know it, but she always liked to begin with a few small tasks, to gradually invade their territory, so that when she did come at patients with washcloths or pincers or clippers, it did not feel like a full-scale assault. She made herself at home within his world, easing herself into his new reality.

Watching as the woman straightened the items on his nightstand, as her fingers trailed close to his blankets, as her face relaxed and then sporadically tightened with an expression very like agony -- he studied her, for the first time in their entire acquaintance suddenly gripped by a need to understand why she was the way that she was. There was something so motherly in her bearing at this moment; he’d never seen it in girls their age from home, who liked a laugh and a flirt and a good dance. Those girls he understood, but this?

In a silent study, he permitted her to wash his hands and face, to trim the encroaching stubble from his cheeks, to make him a cup of tea and ask if there was anything else he needed -- as though, just a few hours before, he hadn’t said such a vile thing to her, hadn’t tossed the bowl at her face. As though nothing unfortunate had ever occurred between them at all.

When she left him in McTavish’s capable (if bewildering) care, Elle looked back at him from the canvas flaps of the recovery ward tent, and the grin she gave him had no trace of the goddamned pity he both craved and despised. And it warmed him right up.

It was, in a word, a bloody success for approximately two days. Two whole shifts of quiet interactions, of Elle being able to complete all of her duties on the ward entirely unassailed. Fredericks was nearly silent, perhaps a tad ashamed by his previous campaign of discouragement and tyranny against the aide who, it had to be said, had been nothing but patient with and kind to him. He was as a humbled child, come before a sterner mother after a terrible tantrum -- nothing she couldn’t forgive, but something they both could not quite forget.

Though things were fine, Elle found herself one night soon after, troubled by those strange dreams. Her home aflame; the boy broken and dead in her arms. After three hours of restlessness, of gazing up at the ceiling of the tent and wishing away those awful images, she finally got up, once she’d reasoned that at half-five, it was close enough to the beginning of her shift that she should at least put this insomnia to good use.

The camp was still, nearly peaceful, early that morning before the frenzy of reveille and the medical shift change occurred. She passed by a few guards and other aides, none of whom looked at her curiously; sleepless nights were all too common. Her walk was actually calming, in a way; she could feel taut muscles stretching and pulling with the effort of her strides; as her breathing even and her thoughts gradually began to circle a nexus of sorts, as she realized where she was headed: recovery ward D. She took a right at the officers’ mess, and a left about ten yards after that. And then she heard it.

Low at first, rising as she drew closer to the soft canvas sides of the tent, nearly leaning her cheek against the fabric in an effort to confirm her suspicions. Sobs from what she suspected was bed number four.

Weeping in the camp was just as common as sleepless nights, but where some soldiers, nurses, and aides could bring themselves to talk vaguely about “bad dreams” or “tossing and turning,” the crying was rarely mentioned. Such discussion skirted far too closely to an unhealable pain, an agony with no possible reprieve. Nothing to diagnose; nothing to treat. And so it wasn’t discussed, lest someone
Elle had, despite herself, turned away from teary soldiers before -- her mandate was to comfort them, to provide them with whatever they required most of her in order to feel safe and respected. That was her job. At times, however, that meant she needed to turn away, to ignore their tears, to leave them with a cup of tea and find another job somewhere on the ward, allowing them their time to mourn or miss or rage. But this, this was different.

He was in her arms in a moment, his arms winding around her neck and his face pressing against her breast as he pulled her up and into his bed. Tangled together, he continued to weep -- fathomless, wracking sobs. He trembled under her hands, as she smoothed loving fingers down the expanse of his back, pyjamas plastered to his skin by a cold sweat; as she allowed him to pretend, to use her, to indulge in a comforting fantasy wherein this bed was a boy’s, those arms were his mother’s. “Hush now,” she murmured into his hair. “Hush now, darling, no need to cry.”

Oh, but there was. There was in that moment and there would be more to come. For as Fredericks’ sobs ceased, fading into the edge of sleep, as her hands continued their ministrations, as her lips pressed against the crown of his head, there came a sharp, resounding admonition from the entrance of the tent.

“Andersen!” barked Matron Barnett. “What is the meaning of this?”

Chapter End Notes

If you have time to provide some feedback, that would very much appreciated :)
The words, when they began, seemed foreign to her ears. As though Principal Matron Clarke were speaking a strange tongue, a language she had never been taught. And what a harsh dialect it was -- tinged with venom and dipped in fire, railing at her from within first, before branding her entire body with a tattoo of ignominy.

Matron Agatha Barnett watched as the young aide shrank a little more with each damning word flung across the table, as Clarke worked herself frighteningly close to a frenzy in her rancour.

“Dereliction of duty,” she spat, “as well as a disgusting display of loose morals. In bed with a soldier? A recovering one at that? How could you?”

It was seven o’clock in the morning; for the past forty-five minutes, Elle had borne the brunt of such extreme criticism, a volley of insults to her reputation and her standards, that Barnett was actually quite in awe of her composure. She had not uttered one word -- not having been provided with enough space to do so, for that matter. Clarke was furious that she had been found in Fredericks’ bed, but was more incensed that no one else had intervened. “What kind of hospital do you think we are operating here, Andersen?” she snapped now, slamming her hands down upon her desk so hard that exactly four pens jumped from the surface. “To allow aides time to canoodle in soldiers’ beds?”

_Here is your moment,_ Barnett wanted to say, feeling sick and shamed at her role in all of this. Truly, she hadn’t needed to shriek so back on the ward; hadn’t needed to coldly march the girl back to the nurses’ headquarters; really, she could have had a civil, quiet discussion in the privacy of her office, without alerting Clarke, without causing such a scene that the story would surely be all over the camp by now. But the girl hadn’t cried yet, and that surprised Barnett: she seemed such a sensitive person, emotions running too close to the surface. A personal tumult of this magnitude ought to have simply flayed her open.

And yet there she stood, truncated with obvious mortification, but still standing her ground. She choked on a reply, voice creaking open as though its hinges were unoiled. “Matron,” she said, eyes darting up to meet that steely glare, before flashing back down to her feet. Where they belonged. “Matron. I-I never meant for that…” She coughed. Changed tactics. “That wasn’t what...it wasn’t what it looked like.”

“You presume to tell me what it looked like? Do share, Andersen. What did it look like to Matron Barnett here when she walked in?”

Objectively, Elle could see how her embrace with Fredericks could very easily have been construed as inappropriate: their arms twined, her kiss against his hair, hands roving. But there had been nothing even remotely sexual about the situation, not even a little. If anything, it had felt _maternal?_ Was that really the word she wanted to use, though?

She took a deep, fortifying breath, as though that would be all it would take to get through this with as much dignity as possible. “I assume it looked highly inappropriate, Matron. I understand. I was in Corporal Fredericks’, er, bed, and we were...we were in close proximity, ma’am.” Elle glanced over to Barnett, who had fixed her eyes on a chair at the far side of the office and had made no movement or sound since bringing her here so long ago. At least a century ago, if not two. No allies there, then.

“I apologize, ma’am, for my lack of finesse. I should not have sat on the Corporal’s bed,” Elle continued, her voice wavering only slightly, tripping over a consonant or four. “But nothing truly untoward happened, I assure you. He needed comforting, ma’am. And that’s my job.”
Clarke went a startling shade of puce. “Do--not--pr-presume…”

“I don’t mean to,” Elle interjected, a cool politeness entering her voice as she grew in confidence, forming a startling contrast to the matron’s apoplectic fury. “Apologies, matron. My task as a volunteer aide is to serve both the medical staff and the patients under my care. I make them tea and I clean their beds; I read to them and help them write letters home. I do whatever small jobs around need doing, and I do this for the men. For their health, ma’am.”

Corporal Fredericks had been inconsolable, she explained. Sobbing and panicked after a terrible nightmare about losing his mother behind enemy lines. The dream had been vivid and he had struggled to escape the visions. When he had finally clawed his way back to consciousness, in the dark and the silence of a recovery ward in the middle of the night, the world had become far too heavy for him to bear on his own, and the deep, primal panic had consumed him like a tidal wave. And she had done what she could to ease his pain.

“Matron Clarke,” she finished evenly. “My role here is of utmost importance in my life; it may be the most important thing I ever do. I understand that what transpired between Corporal Fredericks and myself may be seen as irregular, but believe me when I say, I had the best and the purest of intentions.”

Oh, it was a pretty speech. Inspired. But Clarke was used to pretty speeches, could see right through them, and though she did it without relish, without pleasure, the next part of this makeshift trial had to come. And with it, Barnett’s utter shock and surprise. “Sit down, Andersen,” Clarke sighed, settling into her own chair, calmer now that she had had a chance to breathe, to pause and think for herself. Her rage had abated somewhat, eased by Elle’s abject calm. A funny trick of hers, that. But it would not be enough. Procedure trampled pretty speeches into the ground, every damn time.

Silently, Clarke directed Barnett to sit in the chair on the far side of the office, the one that the matron had been resolutely fixing her stare upon. Elle’s eyes flickered over to each woman in turn, curiosity written large within her gaze. This sudden absence of shouting and anger was jarring, perhaps more so than the dressing-down itself had been. What could possibly come next?

“This is your first major infraction, Andersen,” Clarke said heavily after a few moments. “Without considering this, the earliest complaints are minor enough, and you remedied most of them quickly. Since your arrival, you’ve demonstrated a strong work ethic and a willingness to adapt. We like that. However…”

It had started with another volunteer. Whoever it was (Clarke refused to identify the party) had arranged, just the day before, to meet privately with the Principal Matron to lodge a series of formal, grave complaints about the inappropriate conduct of Elle Andersen. Clarke had, to be honest, listened in disbelief to most of the claims: that Elle had indulged in embraces and kisses with a variety of men; that she wrote long, loving letters to Major Falsworth, despite his insistence that she cease doing so; that she offered all manner of inappropriate advances to “cheer” the recovering patients. Allegedly, it was these favours that had wrought such a drastic change in some of those early critics, brought round by her scandalous promises.

As the lurid accusations continued, Elle’s face fell, disappointment and fear shattering any resolve she had managed to muster during her previous declarations. Her expression was shared by those of Barnett and Clarke, the former of whom simply could not reconcile the nature of these claims with the past few weeks of association with the cautious, kind young woman before her. There had been no whiff of true impropriety before this morning’s incident, and the complaints of weeks past -- the ones Barnett herself had worked so hard to extinguish -- those had been entirely innocent in nature. Hadn’t they?
“Cloying,” they’d called her. “Overbearing,” and “touchy.” She had paid such careful attention to their physical needs, their emotions, able to read the ebb and flow of misery and pain and grief so thoroughly that at times, her skill seemed nearly magical. It had not taken much, Barnett recalled now, to sway Falsworth, Lucas, Parker, and so many of the other men who had so vehemently rejected her care, to simply forgive and forget, to accept her coddling, to accept her patience. At the time, Barnett had merely been relieved to not have to dismiss the girl, who she respected as a good worker. At the time, Barnett had been happy to help, happy to give her a second chance. Now she doubted that.

“M-matron,” Elle stammered, hands trembling in her lap. “I-I…” But she couldn’t find the words, couldn’t muster a defence. Guilt or shock, neither of those seasoned nurses could tell, and it did not matter. These things were easily confirmed. Brief, impersonal interviews with the officers in question could quickly clear the girl’s name, and truly, Barnett realized, as she watched a few tears tumble down Elle’s cheeks, these claims had to be false. They had to be.

“Andersen,” Clarke interjected, not unkindly. “These accusations are serious, and I fully intend to pursue them. If they are unfounded, that will quickly become clear. But first, both Matron Barnett and myself need to hear your response. How do you address these claims, Andersen?”

Worlds moved in the time it took Elle to answer; Barnett felt her heart break as she watched the girl struggle to form the words, to form the defence she needed. Give us fire, she urged silently. Show us your strength. Outrage, that would say far more than quiet tears. But such a thing, that brand of strength, took more than Elle had in her in those moments -- those moments of shock, disbelief -- and the tears continued to fall, her fingers struggling to find purchase in the grip of her uniform; her shoulders beginning to shake with the effort of holding back the tide. “I...they are not...I would never…”

Such a stumbling defence brooked no sympathy from Clarke, who glanced down and away from the girl’s pain, retrieving a rather official-looking piece of paper from an unseen drawer, placing it lightly in front of her. “Andersen, I require an official address from you. Then I will begin an inquiry with the officers in question, as well as the individual who brought this to my attention. I need something on paper from you.” She pushed the form across the desk, waiting for Elle to gather enough composure to actually reach forward to grasp the pen she held aloft -- not quite an olive branch, but a purpose; the sign of a first step in understanding what had transpired. “Matron,” the girl said quietly, wiping her eyes before nudging the chair forward to better reach the paper. “Matron, I would never. The men would never. They are good men.”

That they were.

Clarke sent for a volunteer aide called Susie to retrieve a weeping Elle. Drafting the denial had been too much for her, and even Barnett could see the results of her shaking hands in her hasty penmanship. I, Elle Andersen, refute the claims of inappropriate dalliances with aforementioned servicemen…

“It’s a terrible shame, if it’s true.” Clarke leaned forward on her elbows, rubbing her eyes swiftly. “A terrible shame.”

Barnett -- who had moved to the entrance of the tent to watch as Susie, a kindhearted woman from Leeds, led poor Elle across the muddy field, an arm around her shoulders, helping her to navigate the terrain of her shattered world -- weighed her response. “They seem rather...er…” What was the word, she wondered? “Ludicrous” didn’t seem to brush it nearly well enough; nor did “infuriating.” “Unjust” came closest.
“I know, Agatha, I know.” Barnett started; it was very unlike Clarke to use her first name. “But what am I to do? It was a very sudden turnaround a few weeks ago…men were complaining left, right, and centre, until they just…weren’t.”

“But that was because of me,” Barnett pointed out, sliding into the seat Elle had vacated. “I was the one who spoke to Falsworth and the rest. They withdrew their complaints after I spoke to them.”

It didn’t matter, Clarke explained. She would document it as part of the inquiry, take a statement from Barnett as Elle’s superior, but already things were being set in motion that even she, as Principal Matron, could not prevent. Allegations of this nature had to be pursued seriously; any hint of impropriety within the ranks of the RAMC or VAD reflected extremely poorly upon both organizations, and gossip tended to travel fast within camps and bases. Already, Barnett was sure, news that Elle had been found in Fredericks’ bed would be racing through the wards. Part of that, she realized, was down to her dramatic exit from recovery ward D, when she had practically dragged the girl from the tent, infuriated by the way the young Corporal’s arms had tightened at her advance, as though he couldn’t bear to let Elle go.

In retrospect, she reasoned, the embrace had not been all that romantic. The boy was crying in her arms, and Elle had been murmuring endearments in his ear, to be sure, but no sweet nothings, so far as Barnett could hear. “There, there,” she’d been saying. “Hush, darling.” And really, how stupid would the chit have to be to crawl in bed with a man ten minutes before a shift change? There were other orderlies on the ward, after all, and McTavish was still on shift -- tending to another patient further down the line. If she had intended to -- what was the phrase the informant had used? -- offer sexual favours in exchange for glowing testimonies, surely she would have been a bit more discreet about it than all that.

“Her denial will go some way, but this is bad, I’m afraid.” Clarke shuffled through some of the papers and forms she had been referencing throughout the interrogation.

A thought occurred to Barnett, then. A question she had not yet asked. “Who was it that reported her?”

“Patricia Hemming.”

“Really?” Hemming was a soft-spoken woman, absolutely indispensable as Barnett’s unofficial assistant. She did not have a reputation as a troublemaker, and had never been prone to unprofessional gossiping before now. “How does she know about all this?”

Pat had observed Elle’s “flirtatious” behaviour onboard the troop ship *St. Vincent* on the way to Italy, but had thought nothing of it at the time. “Many of the girls were giddy,” she’d informed Clarke solemnly, just the afternoon before. “Away from home for the first time, surrounded by brave men. Got a bit romantic and silly, so they did.” Upon their arrival at the camp, Pat had tried to keep a close eye on some of the younger girls in her quarters, hoping to keep them to the straight and narrow as they attended their duties. At first, Elle seemed slightly overbearing when it came to some of her tasks, particularly those that directly concerned interacting with the soldiers: “She liked a flirt, cheeky smiles, that sort of thing. But nothing so scandalous, not at first, ma’am.”

She noted that Elle was indeed a fairly capable aide, if a little daydreamy, but related back the stories of numerous complaints coming from multiple recovery wards. Some soldiers had even shouted at her in their frustration with her inability to get through simple tasks without fussing over them. And then, suddenly, those complaints had stopped. Pat had been impressed, she explained, with the dramatic turnaround, and on evening, had asked Elle how she had changed things for herself so quickly. The girl had batted her eyelashes and given her a sly smile: “Oh, there’s ways, Pat, there’s ways.”
She’d bragged about her conquests, Pat went on to say. Subtly, of course, but just the same. Elle had been particularly enamoured of Major Falsworth, but Corporal Lucas had been a particular friend as well. Pat did not want to get too detailed, but Clarke had pressed, she told Barnett, because of the severity of the accusations. “I don’t know if it’s pettiness or misunderstanding or bald-faced lies,” Clarke groaned. “Hemming seems a good sort; but so does Andersen.”

When she went on, Pat’s details were lurid. Kisses and wandering hands and sweet nothings. Extensive love letters sent to multiple former patients. Stringing them along. Exchanging those small favours for official praise. Clarke had pointed out that it made little sense for Elle to go to such lengths; Pat had said herself, she was a capable aide, more than capable enough to receive commendations based on her own merit. And Barnett had been very clear with her that she needed to focus more, evaluate the individual needs of each patient, since not every man wanted to be coddled. Elle had gotten better and better as time went on.

Clarke had accumulated Pat’s accusations and jotted them down, aiming to simply have a calm discussion with Barnett and Andersen to pursue the claims only moderately. Until this morning. Until she had been found in Fredericks’ bed. That discovery put an entirely different weight upon what Pat had said.

Barnett, though, just couldn’t reconcile these reports with the aide she’d gotten to know over these few weeks. Elle meant well; she was a good worker, handy with the linen rota, and Nurse Jenkins -- a tricky one to please -- had nothing but excellent things to say about her. She genuinely cared for the patients, taking keenly into consideration their emotional comfort as well as physical comfort. And as for Major Falsworth, well -- he was decidedly too much of a gentleman to have allowed Elle to reduce herself thus, to hands under blankets and cheap, hurried, bedside courtships.

There was no real judgement; the war was on, she supposed, and emotions tended to run high. Crushes very easily turned into sweeping romances, under such circumstances. But the furtiveness of these scenarios, that’s what bothered Barnett: the notion of an aide sneaking touches and favours, asking for those glowing reports. What was the point? The girl could, and indeed did, earn her own accolades by virtue of diligence and promptness. When Barnett brought this up to Clarke, however, the senior matron simply waved a hand, as though she meant to bat the logic away. “I thought the same, of course, until this morning.” She glanced down at the reports once more -- Pat’s accusations and Elle’s denials. Reputation, employment, and dignity were suspended between the two. And she was the deciding factor. “I’ve no choice but to simply verify these claims. Major Falsworth is the most, er, substantial of the lot of them, take a look.” Barnett’s eyes widened as she scanned the report, Pat’s detailed description of what had apparently transpired between the two was actually quite shocking. When would they have had the time, let alone the privacy, to conduct such an athletic affair, Barnett wondered?

She found herself offering to write to Falsworth herself, explaining the situation and asking for some sort of official acknowledgement or denial on his part. He had always seemed an utter gentleman to Barnett, and the bond she had watched grow between him and Elle had been nothing short of innocent -- sweet, even. His denial, which she was nearly wholly sure of, would go a long way in clearing Elle’s name.

Fredericks waited, his eyes finally dry now, for some sort of resolution to the incident of a few hours past. McTavish had left after the debacle with Andersen, and a replacement aide, a woman whose surname he had not paid attention to, had arrived to take over soon after the Matron had dragged the kind, gentle girl from his bed. He had refused breakfast, a shave, and the newspaper, so fraught with anxiety was he over what could possibly be happening to the friend who had done nothing but provide what he needed, there in the darkness of his worst moment yet.
He pressed his knuckles against tired eyes, still trying to dispel the evil visions from the night prior. His poor mother. His poor, poor mother. God, but she’d been frightened, as the faceless Nazi monsters had pulled her away into the forest, her screams winding through the black trees, over the river, bouncing this way and that, so that he could not possibly pinpoint her location. And he’d run, how he’d run -- sprinting through the thick embrace of the woods, never close enough, listening as her cries faded and faded until he was left, scrabbling back to the world as it was, when she was safe at home, far away from the clutches of those beasts.

Arms had been tight around him, in the world as it was; soft arms, firm and warm. There were hands on his back, rubbing up and down, careful loops of comfort that danced to the rhythm of sweet words, endearments his mother had once said. “Darling,” she’d whispered. “Hush, hush.” Lips on his forehead, pressing gentle kisses to his skin and to his hair, and he was a boy again, and it was just a nightmare, and everything would be fine, everything would be fine. There was no reason to be afraid.

And now he was alone again. Fredericks considered, once again, asking for the screens to be drawn around his bed; he could barely tolerate the stares from his ward-mates. Waking up sobbing was not an unknown occurrence, but the added chaos of having Elle dragged from his bed, that was more difficult to shrug off. Unasked questions squeezed at the air in the tent, making it hard for him to catch his breath. Between his mortification over crying for his mother, and his worry that Elle was suffering some dire consequences for trying to help him -- oh, God, but he had to do something.

“Corporal, please.” The new, nameless aide briskly shuffled over to his side. “You are to stay in bed until your physical therapy session at eleven.” She pushed him gently back into the pillow, ignoring his protests.

“I need to speak to someone, then,” he insisted. “Matron Barnett, or Nurse Jenkins. Shouldn’t she be in now?”

The aide shook her head as she rearranged the blankets more neatly about his legs. “Nurse Jenkins is occupied. And as I understand it, so is Matron Barnett.” Timidly, her eyes glanced up to meet his, fingers snatching away suddenly from his knees, as though the taint of earlier insinuations might be catching. “When Nurse Jenkins is free, I’ll let her know you were looking for her.”

It was the best he could hope for, under the circumstances. Exhaling sharply to indicate assent, he gripped the edges of the top sheet. Fredericks knew what they must think, knew what it had looked like -- a pretty enough girl in his arms, her sitting in his bed. But if he had been trying to angle her that way, he surely would not have done it on a slowly-waking ward, with orderlies and a nurse pacing between the beds. Why hadn’t McTavish or the nurse come over? Why had it not been them to drag Elle from their embrace?

Because, he reasoned -- they knew her actions to be innocent. Elle was far too kind a woman to take advantage of a patient in such a way, and he knew how keenly she valued her position here. She wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize it. He said as much to Matron Clarke, when she arrived just after ten o’clock, pen and clipboard in hand, to “hear his side of the story,” as she put it.

“I had a nightmare, and Andersen happened to be arriving early for her shift and heard me,” he said lowly, picking idly at a thread on the edge of his cuff, grateful for the privacy of the screens, even if they could not silence him. “She’s good with that sort of thing, you know.”

“You were not having an intimate relationship with Andersen?” The Matron peered down the length of her nose at him, fixing him with an iron stare. Fredericks endured a brief but troubling flashback to a stern headmaster he had had in primary school.
He started at that. “No, ma’am. Of course not.” How mad would he have to be, really, to play with fire that way? It was one thing for a healthy, active-duty soldier to pull a bird on leave, but a recovering patient and a VAD girl -- one, if not both of them, would certainly have to be bloody mad to even try.

“It was an innocent interaction?”

“Entirely.” The matron scribbled down this last response on the form, and then reached across for him to review and sign it. Fredericks scanned the details: everything was written as he had related it, including the particular emphasis he had placed on the fact that Elle’s actions had been wholly intended to comfort, not to titillate. Not his word, but he supposed it worked best.

Once he had added his neat signature to the bottom of the page, Matron Clarke gathered her things and prepared to leave, the awkwardness of their conversation suddenly taking up far too much space behind the screens surrounding bed number four. He watched, eyes heavy with lost sleep, as she pushed the wooden chair back into place near the side of his bed -- Elle’s chair, the one she often sat in to read to him or one of the other patients on the ward. She was a good reader, he remembered; her voice smooth and flowing, tumbling around the words expressively. Rubbish at reading poetry, though.

Not for the first time that day, guilt clenched in his stomach. “Matron?” he asked, knowing the answer by the coldness in her responding gaze. “Would you please tell Andersen...please tell her I’m very sorry for how things are, and I wish her the best of luck.”

With a nod, Clarke left.

Crying did not help, but it certainly passed the time. Susie had helped her back to quarters three, offered her a hanky and a few tutted words of encouragement, but then she had had to report to Ward E for her shift. Which left Elle entirely alone, crying in her bed.

She’d never liked weeping; tears made her face feel starched and swollen; turned the rims of her eyes a bright, painful red. The boy had had hated it, too, even though he was frequently the cause of her tears. Elle had wanted so much more for him than he allowed himself to achieve, and his frustration with her domineering motivation. Perhaps that was to blame for the current situation in which she found herself. After all, she knew very well that she had never once overstepped the limits of propriety when it came to her patients. She never would.

Elle’s position as a volunteer aide was more than just an act of duty; more than just something to show she was doing her bit. Being with the patients, the soldiers -- performing the small tasks of comfort that helped to bring them back to themselves -- that was her vocation. Her mission. Her mandate. The acts brought her a deep, plentiful joy and a keen sense of purpose. Lavender beneath their pillows, to bring them gentler dreams; old stories read aloud, to remind them of school days; innocent gossip about which officer had indulged in an extra serving of cottage pudding; jokes and tall tales and amusing anecdotes to tease out smiles and chuckles and help them to lighten the infernal load the world had placed upon their brave shoulders.

To see that all so...so... besmirched by these awful accusations -- it was far, far too much. And so she cried. Wept for the temerity of her position now, the threat of her vocation being taken away. If she could not do this, then what could she possibly do? Who would she be? She dreaded the thought of heading home under a cloud like this -- no references, a stain upon her records. No factory or office would hire her if they discovered she had been accused of such things. And the boy -- what of the boy? He was no angel himself, she knew that, but even he had standards, and his parents certainly would not allow him to continue to keep company with a girl like that, a girl banished from the war
effort for being a little tart.

That was likely the most polite word she’d earn.

Rolling over to face the ceiling of the tent, Elle had a sudden desire to talk to him, the boy. She wished he could be right there with here, for her to rail at, to pile her injustices upon. Maybe he would not turn away; maybe he would share this sadness, this raging grief.

No, she thought, an impish smile tugging at her lips, despite her tears. He would be bloody furious. She imagined his face -- pale and sharp -- twisted in anger, raging on her behalf. Protecting her, defending her, as he so often had. Childhood bullies had never stood a chance against him, not when he was in the mood for valiance. If he were here with her now, this entire mess would have been sorted out in a matter of moments. He had always been better than her at explaining things. His swift lies and cool demeanour had gotten them out of plenty of scrapes as children. She wished he were here now. Dare she say it? She missed him.

On the third day, Barnett received the telegram. She pressed a hand to her lips, holding back a cry of grief that did not belong to her.

His smile. Oh, his handsome smile. Those musician’s fingers.

“I’ve spoken to every man that Hemming included in her list,” Clarke explained, not even glancing up as Barnett entered the office. The Principal Matron had been expecting her; this ended today, for good or ill. “Every single one has denied it, but then, they would, wouldn’t they? Their own reputations are on the line here as well.” She flung her pen across the desk with a muttered, unprofessional curse. “God, I’ve had enough of this. Did you ever hear back from Falsworth?”

The Major’s testimony, both matrons had felt, held the most weight in the matter. Everything that had happened on Ward D with Corporal Fredericks had been, thankfully, tidied up somewhat. Combined with the refusals she’d received from the other patients, as well as Falsworth’s potential denial, Clarke felt confident she could write this whole fiasco off as a momentary indiscretion, a poor choice made by a sensitive, inexperienced aide. She would assign Andersen to light duties off the wards for a few weeks, and then would gradually reintegrate her back into her shifts. The reprieve would give the rumours (which had been steadily increasing around camp, growing in boldness with each retelling) a chance to die down, and things could hopefully return to normal.

Hopefully.

“Well?” Clarke looked up, realizing that Barnett had not spoken since entering the office. “Did you receive word?” It was likely far too early for a full letter to have arrived from wherever the Major was stationed, but she did see the brown corner of a telegram peeping out from Barnett’s apron pocket; even if he had sent a brief denial with letter to follow, that would help immensely. “Matron?”

With shaking hands, Barnett removed the telegram from her pocket, holding it front of her like a snake. As though it could strike at any moment. Judging by the shine of her eyes, though, it already had.

Regret to inform Major J.M. Falsworth of HRM 3rd Indep. Parachute Brigade officially declared Missing In Action on or about 2 October 1943. Presumed POW.

“Did you hear?” the whispers went, round and round the camp. Vile words traded in the dark; questions increased in licentiousness until the quiet, well-liked aide became a wanton minx capable
of fooling about with any willing man who stayed still long enough.

“Did you hear?” they said, muttering between shifts, before bed, over breakfast, and behind screens. A major, a lieutenant, a captain, and a corporal, too -- young and handsome, all hopelessly in love with her. The major, it seemed, had proposed before heading back to the front, but then she was also stringing along the Corporal, dangling her hand in front of him, climbing into bed with him in the early hours of the morning.

“Did you hear?” one aide gossiped to another. “She was in bed with him all night. Used to do it all the time. She’d pull the screens ‘round them until morning.” Ridiculous, really -- night shift aides and nurses patrolled the floors of the recovery wards, checking vitals throughout the wee hours. If any of the patients had welcomed an unauthorized companion into their beds, they would have been discovered immediately.

But logic seldom improves gossip.

“Did you hear? She’s expecting.” Oh, the scandal! The deliciousness of it was almost too much. The tale would make for a jolly good novel. The plain, unassuming nurse falling in love with the dashing Major, keeping his child secret while she continued to slave away on the wards, putting on a brave face. And then! To fall in love with another man. Tsk, tsk.

“Did you hear?” Around and around, over and over again, those furtive whispers and the eyes that slid towards quarters three where, it was said, she slept for hours on end, waking only to weep and cry out for her misery. Elle may not have heard them, but she could feel them -- an oppressive speculation that weighed on her from outside the safety of the tent; it was there in the eyes of her roommates, who looked on her briefly at the end and beginning of their shifts, never lingering too long, lest she become convinced there was something other than sympathy in their gaze.

One member of VAD quarters three in particular felt herself guarding her eyes more than the others, for there was far more in them to hide. Guilt had made an unhappy bedmate for Pat for some time now, ever since the first conversation with Principal Matron Clarke, when she had felt all her anger and grief converge into a storm she could not contain, lashing out at the contented, peaceful girl who had nothing to lose, nothing to fight for. Once she had begun speaking, it was as though she could not stop: the words tumbling from her mouth even as her brain willed her to shut up, to stop lying. The half-truths became grand falsehoods; those small kindnesses at which Elle was so adept at were twisted into dark, unhappy things. She could hear Mike in her ear, telling her it wasn’t worth it, that it wasn’t necessary, that her cruelty would no go any way to help him and she ought to cease, right then and there, in trying to make a woman who owed her nothing pay for everything.

For two nights, Pat listened to her tears; on the third, she woke at midnight within the clutches of a nightmare wherein Elle was so vilified that she was sent back to England and her ship torpedoed en route. That morning, she resolved, she would go and speak to Matron Barnett, or possibly Clarke. The pain of knowing she had initiated this campaign of humiliation was proving far too unpleasant a burden, and for love of her husband, who would want her to do better, she had to come clean. What kind of trouble she could be in for making up the stories in the first place, Pat did not know, but at this point, going home -- back to be with her mother-in-law and Mike’s dozy dog -- was preferable to suffering here, alone in Italian mud.

When she woke, the morning of that third day, it was with considerable surprise to see that Elle’s bed was empty, though Susie was kneeling there, pulling the footlocker out from underneath the mattress. Elle’s initials were stamped neatly on the top. “What’s going on?” Pat asked hoarsely, stomach sinking.

The younger nurse, still clad in pyjamas and with her red hair in a loose braid about her shoulders,
turned with teary eyes. “Didn’t you hear?” Susie whispered. “She’s going home. Tomorrow.”

The reports had been clear cut, emphatic. Nurse Rosemary Jenkins supplied an exemplary character reference, and every single one of the patients in question that were able to be interviewed had declared that their appreciation for Elle Andersen had absolutely nothing to do with any sexual favours granted. Never, not once, had she even intimated that such a thing might be possible, to any of them.

It was not a perfect situation, Clarke reflected later that day, the offending telegram sitting before on the desk. The accusations were still there, suspended now in the general business of the camp, and there was the matter of Patricia Hemming to be dealt with, of course. If she had been mistaken, then she was far too quick to rush to judgement; if she had lied, then discipline would have to be pursued in her case next. The whole mess reflected poorly on Clarke’s management, and she was already dreading her follow-up interview with Belasis and Musgrave, who had watched the chaos unfold from a safe distance -- poised to swoop in for the dramatic final moments, she supposed.

Of course, the possibility still existed that the patients were lying to protect themselves as much as the girl. Some of the soldiers she was accused of dallying with were married, some were officers -- all were courting trouble if the claims went any further than Clarke’s desk. But in light of the grim news Barnett had brought to her yesterday (that Major James Falsworth had been officially declared MIA, with all likely evidence pointing to his capture by enemy forces), Clarke was willing to simply let this die. Once and for all.

Only one task remained: to inform Andersen of what had befallen Falsworth, and to reassign her to light duties for a few weeks, keeping her away from the main bustle of the camp, and thus affording her an opportunity to rest and reevaluate. Clarke also thought it best for the girl to be removed from quarters three, to ease any potential arguments or furthering of this tension between Andersen and Hemming. Just one more task, and then she could put her final signature to the report and snap the file closed.

“Matron?” Clarke looked up to see Barnett standing in the entrance of the tent, a red-eyed Andersen by her side. Poor thing looked as though she’d been crying for days. And, she reasoned, ushering them to sit with a waving of her hand -- the poor thing probably had been.

Two chairs had been arranged before her desk, and Clarke levelled as steely a gaze as she could manage at Andersen as she eased into the one to the left. She didn’t want to frighten the girl, not when these past few days had been so (hopefully, unnecessarily) difficult for her, and not when she was about to receive more bad news. She and Falsworth had gotten quite chummy before his release. Barnett was taking the news quite hard, and even Clarke had shed a few anxious tears, despite herself. Falsworth was likeable enough, and ever since her own letter from Tunisia regarding her favourite nephew, each loss of a soldier was hitching itself to her soul a little more firmly. It was worse to imagine him as a prisoner -- horrific rumours abounded about how the Nazis treated their POWs.

"No, don’t think of that. Not now."

"Andersen," she said, summoning every ounce of composure she possessed. “As you know, Matron Barnett here and I have been spending our time these past few days gathering information and accounts regarding the allegations laid against you, those of inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour, particularly as concerns the granting of sexual favours to enlisted servicemen under our medical care.”

Elle closed her eyes, visibly flinching at the sound of each word. Civilian instinct told Barnett to
grasp her hand, to pull her close, to protect her against the oncoming tide of pain. But Barnett was not a civilian; nor was Elle, and they would both have to bear this like warriors. “We have collected interviews and reassurances from nearly every patient whose name was provided to us as the subject of these...claims.” Clarke flipped through a few pages in the file, resolutely avoiding looking at the girl. “Every man we spoke to vehemently denied them, and there were no possible documented incidents, apart from the one involving Corporal Fredericks, which he also explained and emphasized was not sexual in nature.

“Nurse Jenkins and Miss McTavish have also provided statements attesting to your professional decorum. As a result, it is my decision that these allegations be formally dismissed and that you resume normal duties within two weeks.”

Finally, the Principal Matron glanced up, to meet the beaming gaze of a very relieved volunteer aide; hope lit her from within; utter relief danced in her eyes. *Everything would be fine now*, Elle thought, and it was plain on her face, in the slight trembling of her interlocked fingers. *Things could go back to normal.*

“Th-thank you, Matron,” she breathed, leaning forward in her chair as though to reach for an embrace neither woman could provide. “Thank you so much.”

Across the broad expanse of the desk and terrible shared knowledge, Clarke and Barnett shared a look. They had not discussed who would be the one to tell her about Falsworth. But she needed to know, didn’t she? Rumours would soon reach her ears, and better to be told in the confines of this office, wherein she could make a fuss if need be and not have to worry about falling to pieces in front of the entire camp. Both matrons felt confident they could efficiently sort out any upset. The only difficulty was, though -- who should break the news first?

Barnett blinked at the silence, the gnawing silence. “Andersen,” she began, turning slightly in her chair and grasping the girl’s hands in her own -- regulations be damned. “Andersen, we have some news for you, and it is not pleasant, so you…” She trailed off, glancing back to see the flaps of the tent rustling with someone’s entrance. When she realized who it was, all three women stood in an instant.

“Principal Matron, Matron,” Musgrave said coolly, observing the scene before her. “Andersen.”

The Matron-in-Chief had heard something of the trouble with Elle, and was decidedly not impressed with the entire debacle. If there was one thing Susan Musgrave could not tolerate, it was loose morals, and the slightest whiff of impropriety among her aides -- let alone her nurses -- was tantamount to civil disobedience and she would not permit it. That Clarke and Barnett had chosen to conduct the “investigation” in such a casual manner thus far was infuriating, but even she had had to agree that the issue was not yet a matter for a senior matron. Not yet.

Musgrave took in Elle’s bright, if faltering expression, recalled how her hands had been intertwined with Barnett’s only seconds before. “Has this been resolved, then?”

Clearing her throat, Clarke replied that it had. “We were just about to” -- her eyes flickered over to Elle, who was looking back and forth between Clarke and Musgrave, and then over to Barnett, questions blooming in her eyes -- “to tell...to inform...”

“Is this about Major Falsworth?”

Clarke and Barnett, both usually so well-spoken, tripped over their words, stumbling through a mutual explanation that, quite frankly, was only causing Musgrave’s perpetual headache to intensify. She gathered that, in fact, that had not yet informed the girl of the Major’s capture, and despite
realizing that Andersen had no real need to know this, not officially, Musgrave decided to tell her herself. Holding up a single, bony hand to silence the dithering of the matrons, she locked her eyes upon the confused, rather gangly girl in front of her. “Andersen, I am given to understand that this news may cause you some distress, but I urge you to remember yourself and your tenuous position here, and to seek composure.” Fear flashed in the girl’s eyes. “You see, unfortunately, Major Falsworth was captured by German special forces just a few days ago, and has been officially reported as a prisoner of war.”

The scream, when it came, cut through them all. High and keening, it tore at Barnett, who herself would like to scream, to shriek aloud all day long for the good men she had sent to their deaths, for the men falling from the skies, for the men burning where they stood. This war, this terrible fucking travesty, it ate away at her, a noisome beast, and with the girl’s scream, she finally felt as though it had some root in the world. Some tether. Someone who felt it, too.

Oh, his kind smile. His musician’s fingers.

Clarke flew from around her desk, wrapping her arms about Elle as she headed for the floor, knees giving out at the same time. They curled together, and the girl’s body was searing, her skin was aflame, if that was possible -- she was embracing a comet. A vengeful, grief-stricken comet, and oh, God, it burned her, too. “Enough, enough,” she murmured, and then cried, cried with her, because was it not awful? Was it not wrong? How many soldiers had she healed and stitched and fed and bathed only to read their names on another bloody telegram, another *Regret to inform* written by some stranger who had never seen their tears or heard them laugh? In Elle’s weeping, in her rage and her storm and her pure, pure mourning, there on the floor of her office, there in the pretty valley they called a martial home -- there Clarke found, as Barnett had, the tangible presence of that inner pain. And she revelled in it, just as she feared it.

It was a scene: Barnett standing above it all, hands clutching at her mouth, tears coursing down her face; Clarke and Andersen entangled in a maudlin display upon the floor. Musgrave watched it all unfold in the space of less than a minute, bore witness to the complete undermining of the propriety she demanded and enforced among her staff. That this idiot girl had unravelled it all so quickly was absolutely unacceptable. And her display went a long way to explain precisely what *had* been going on between her and Falsworth. No one wept so for a friend or favourite patient.

“Silence!” Musgrave bellowed, shocking the three women into something very like it, save a few intermittent sniffles and a cough or two. “Andersen, you forget yourself! Principal Matron Clarke, stand up. Have some dignity. This- will-cease--at--once!” Chastened, Clarke helped Elle to her feet, though the girl fairly leaned her entire weight against the matron, slumped with shock.

Outrageous, the whole thing, Musgrave went on. To indulge in such a display of crazed sentimentality was beneath the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, as well as the Volunteer Aid Detachment. Falsworth’s capture was regrettable, even she could concede that -- he was a fine soldier and a good man -- but decorum had to be maintained, regardless of bad news. “If anything,” she said coldly, fixing that unyielding glare upon Elle, was was still silently weeping, “this confirms to me that the nature of your relationship with Major Falsworth was excessive. You, Andersen, obviously do not possess the fortitude for this position, and I am removing you from your post.”

Elle’s mouth was a desert, her heart a crashing finale: “From the wards? I won’t be on the wards?” *Oh, please no*, she wanted to beg. *My mission. My mandate. My men.*

“No, Andersen.” Musgrave’s voice softened, but there was no comfort in it, only deadly calm. Resolution. Vicious resolution. “You are to be removed from this camp. From the front.”
And she screamed again.

Afterwards, in the calm of the next morning, Elle returned to quarters three under a mingled cloud of suspicion and pity. Susie had gotten her packing started, hoping to have everything put away so that Elle would not even have to step foot in the tent, but Pat was quietly glad things had turned out this way. Such an opportunity for a public confession could not be passed up.

The girl had been crying for ages, every other aide could tell, as they shuffled past her en route to breakfast and their shifts, knowing she would be heading for a silent afternoon of waiting, waiting for her trip home to begin the next day. A contingent of other volunteers were to be ferried back to England, passing a new batch on the way out the valley. It was only a coincidence (or perhaps a key component of Musgrave’s final decision) that the relief group was arriving that week; any other time, and Elle would have had to wait about for a week or two, suffering in a stunned silence that she had adopted in the aftermath of that horrible...horrible...

“Elle, do you have a moment?” Dull, red-rimmed eyes slid over to meet Pat’s tentative gaze. Between them, Susie busied herself with folding a nightgown, shuffling a few books from the bedside table. Packing up the few weeks of Elle’s life here, the place she’d thought to fulfill her purpose, to do her best. And all that ruined, utterly tarnished by a ten minute conversation between Pat and Clarke. Ten minutes.

Remarkably, Elle tried to muster a smile for her former colleague. “Pat, I’ve nothing but free moments,” she sighed, resignedly. “Oh, sorry, Susie -- that one belongs to Rebecca.” She pointed to a rather hefty novel near the edge of her table.

“I’ll return it,” Susie replied warmly, gently sidestepping Pat with a curious look. “And then I’m off to G.” Elle thanked her effusively for all of her help, but the woman just waved her off. “No trouble, love. No trouble.”

Pat waited, glancing around to ensure they were alone. Susie hurried out the main entrance with a sympathetic look back at Elle; two other aides pointedly ignored them as they passed, late for breakfast. She required privacy for this next part, for her inevitable, welcome punishment.

She watched as Elle nestled herself on the bed, patting the spot beside her. “I know it’s awful to say, but I’m so tired,” she said softly, licking her chapped lips, as though her constant tears had sapped all the moisture from her. “I just...I just...”

There was nothing to say. Not a damn thing. Pat had rehearsed this moment in her head for nearly an hour now, waiting for her to come back from wherever it was she had been kept the night before, waiting for her to walk through the entrance of the tent with that warmth she always carried, that kind smile that Pat had been turning away from more and more. The girl with nothing to lose, she’d once thought, and Pat had made her lose everything.

Rumour had it she was being turned out with no references, Musgrave was so furious with the gossip, the accusations, and, apparently, an almighty outburst the night before in Clarke’s office. Elle would be sent back to England with her time as a member of the VAD all but completely scrubbed out. Pat knew there were plenty of jobs going, perhaps even the Women’s Land Army would take her. With no real documentation of any affairs, Musgrave could not possibly include anything directly scandalous in Elle’s file, and that would help her to move on, Pat suspected. This way, she would have options, with none of the official shame.

But there was no real sense of triumph or relief in this, not for either party, though Elle did not yet know it. She was actually quite surprised Pat had sought her out this way, having been so distant
these past few weeks and not a little snappish and cool. Elle had assumed that any rumblings of camaraderie between the two had been firmly quashed. It touched her now, to be spoken to so gently and offered even a brief moment together -- like a small, safe harbour against this relentless storm.

Because she had not initiated this conversation, Elle was unsure where to go from there, from sitting on her bed and bidding Pat sit, too. Awkward, she stared down at her footlocker, nearly full thanks to Susie’s kindness. Her only plan for the day, though, had been to pack; now she was at a loss for how to fill the coming hours.

“Elle.” Pat said it firmly, as though establishing boundaries. “I have something...I really m-must…”

And the story was told. Haltingly, oscillating between whispers and sobs: the telegram about Mike, how it had burned and burned her; Pat’s jealousy of Elle’s calm, her peace; how a dark, furtive thought had taken root in her mind, poisonous to its core. Everything had come so simply to Elle, the benevolent care and expressions, the way the soldiers responded so warmly to her ministrations. Pat had always striven so hard for recognition, even taking on menial administrative duties for Barnett with no change in the civil sense of detachment the matron had always shown to her; while Elle had somehow managed to bring round angry patients with a smile or a book or a posy of flowers.

The pettiness of it all stunned her anew, as Pat related the sad tale of how she had come to accuse Elle of those fantasies, those clandestine little affairs that had made her out to be manipulative, secretive -- the guilt of it hurt. The regret hurt.

For her part, Elle remained silent throughout this purging, staring down at her footlocker, hands still in her lap. She did not stiffen, did not jerk away; nor did she shriek or grow visibly affected in any way by the sad truths slipping from Pat’s mouth. Rather, when everything had been told, when that hush descended upon the space, when Pat had exhausted her reserve of composure and begun to weep into her own hands -- then, only then, Elle moved. Gently, slowly, with that sort of grace she was wont to adopt by the bedsides of her most overwrought charges -- in that way she wound her arms around Pat, murmuring absolution into her ear.

Half past eleven that night, a figure tripped through the moonlight, pulling her jumper more firmly over the uniform she really ought not to have been wearing anymore. She had written the note, her goodbye to a young man still aching with a culpability that did not belong to him, left that behind for another nurse to bring to him in the morning. But she had one more gift to give, one last small act of comfort to bring, and it lay across the river, nestled on the edge of the forest.

The walk she took that night would have earned her a terrible course of discipline but, as she thought with a brief grin, there really wasn’t anything more they could do to her, not at this point. “Andersen,” she fancied Musgrave, imperious as ever, aiming that stone-cold glare at her. “Out of bed? Outrageous. A display of a complete lack of decorum. How dare you?”

No, there was nothing anyone could do now.

Quiet as she was, and given that she had covered the most of the white of her skirt with the length of the man’s jumper she had bought in London, she was able to creep past the first layer of guards and out towards the river’s edge entirely undetected. Her aim was the small copse of lavender bushes she’d discovered some time before, around the time of Fredericks’ arrival, and Falsworth’s departure. Her heart clenched at the memory, but on she pressed. The pretty purple blooms, miraculously still growing in the fading autumn, would be a boon to her patients, the men she could not bear to leave behind. Dried and secreted in sachets beneath their pillows, she hoped they would bring sweeter dreams. These instructions she had given to Pat, her accuser and now her friend, who so desired a tangible chance at redemption for her part in the whole mess.
Not that Elle blamed her. War did odd things to men and women -- it coaxed out the best and baited the worst within each of them, and it was not her place to judge. She was not perfect, never would be, and the bitter gall of her disappointment at leaving and being forced to abandon her cause here was likely to sting her for some time. But it was over. It was done. At least she could perform this last, signature task -- she, the creature of comfort.

Until the splash, until the breath spurted from her lungs and fear streaked up her spine -- that last kindness was her only thought. And then came the cold, the cold and the dark.
“Spion,” they called her first, once the German had tumbled from between her own lips. She knew the word, weighed it in the palm of her hand as she was bundled into the back of the lorry, as the harsh sounds of their darkening plans beat at her ears.

The blond, who had fished her from the rush of the river and then yanked the jumper over her head, exposing her to the chill of the night in just her uniform -- he was the most gentle, the most sensitive to her comfort. He found a blanket somewhere in the depths of the vehicle and reached over to wrap it around her shoulders. Terror made a mute, biddable child of her, and she allowed her body to be warmed by the action. He didn’t, she thought, look like a monster -- although his language, the uniform, the foreboding insignia on his breast and shoulder, and his very presence in the little valley she had called home these past weeks all pointed to the inevitable opposition that must exist between them. She was English; he was German. She was VAD; he was HYDRA.

As the lorry lumbered on, further away from the camp, she pressed herself tighter to the wooden crate he had settled her against, willing herself to somehow transcend the situation and miraculously appear back in her bed -- before bad decisions, before foolish sentiment had taken over. Conversation rose and fell around her, and her eyes closed with the fear of it all. “Schwester,” he called her now, shaking her arm slightly. Sister. Nurse. They thought she was a nurse and a spy and God knew what else, but that indecision could be keeping her alive, and she had to be grateful for it. She opened her eyes and hazel met blue; there was no malice in his gaze, only faint concern. “Schlafe nicht. Du hast dir deinen Kopf schwer verletzt.”

Ah, she remembered now. Those slippery planks beneath her feet, the makeshift bridge used by patrol guards when the river proved too unruly to ford with just their boots alone. The waterway wasn’t too wide, nor too deep -- in fact, “river” was a generous term; it was more of an overconfident brook, really. But the wet autumn months had swelled its ego even more, and as she had approached the water, aiming to traverse the divide between the outskirts of the camp and the forest beyond (where lay the meagre supply of lavender she’d hoped to harvest), she had decided to shift those planks from their hiding place under a copse of reeds. She laid them out, in the dark, heaving their weight across the two metre width of the river until she felt solid earth on the other side. Four steps, that’s all she’d managed, before her right foot slipped and she went careening into the icy water.

When she had first arrived at the camp, Rebecca, Pat, and Susie had taken to walking by the river’s edge during their breaks. On their fourth day, she had been invited. Oh, it had been lovely -- something like home, the rush of water in her ears and the cool breeze rolling from its surface. Back then, the river had been a welcome sight, a place to submerge aching feet and share some good-natured banter. But that night, as she had slid into the frigid depths and felt the fingers of ice wind themselves a little too firmly about her neck, as her temple had made abrupt contact with a rather large stone -- that night, all she could think was, What a bloody unpleasant way to die.

Blood had dried on her forehead, and at the soldier’s reminder, she scraped a jagged fingernail along her hairline, watching as red flakes fluttered into her lap. Do not sleep. He did not want her to sleep after a potentially substantial head injury. He wanted her to live, not slip away into endless dreams. Why did he care, though? Why did he not want her to die, when she could prove to be much more trouble than she was worth while alive? In the fairytales, did not the monsters always kill the stupid girls first, quickly and without too much thought?
Or did they play with them, their quarry and their sport?

“Ich glaube nicht, dass sie ein Spion ist,” grumbled the green-eyed man, he of the sharp jawline and twitching veins. He adjusted the gun in his hands, glanced over at his other companion, the oldest of the lot: with greying hair at his temples, his presence surprised her. Surely the Nazis were not sending grandfathers to the front?

She shifted slightly, pulling the blanket with her as she adjusted her recline against the crate. “Ich bin nicht,” she replied. Of course she was not a spy; how could they think such a thing? Green-eyes was correct in his thinking; a spy would not be secreted at a field hospital, she would be deployed to offices, to Allied communication centres, to French, Italian, or Dutch towns. A spy would blend in: she would have a simple but deep history; she would smile at the right moments and she would be gaunt and tired, because her ability to self-camouflage was her only chance at survival. A spy would not balk at a gun pointed to her head, let alone cry because she had knocked it against a river stone.

No, she was no spy. Nor was she a nurse, but she did yet not have the courage to correct them on that point. Odds were, they had plans for her -- else they could have left her in the river or finished her off in the grass. The fact that she spoke and understood German well likely had something to do with it; her English accent curved around the foreign words subtly, and the uniform she wore clearly said she was no true Fräulein. That must have piqued their interest.

She could kick herself now for allowing the German to slip out. It was her father’s fault, truly -- he had possessed an innate gift for tongues and it had worn off on her over the years. The knock on the head hadn’t helped with her self-control, either. As she’d lain there on the grass, Blond’s hands wiping the sodden strands of her hair from her face, he’d spoken his worries aloud in panicked tones: “Is she dead? Oh, God, she’s just a girl. Wake! Wake! Please, please.”

“I’m fine,” she’d sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of river water before struggling to turn over, to find purchase in the mud and the reeds. “I’m fine.”

Green-eyes, Blond, and Grandfather were frozen, staring at the English nurse who had just replied in perfect, crisp German. Blond’s hands were still gripping her shoulders; Grandfather held a torch aloft, illuminating in full the baffling situation before all of them. How could she have been so stupid?

She knew what HYDRA was, what her capture meant. Early on in her posting at the hospital camp, Surgeon-General Belasis had conducted a seminar of sorts for the volunteers, detailing the risks posed by their position. “HYDRA is the scientific and research branch of the SS,” he’d boomed, reading mechanically from a stack of papers provided to him by Matron Barnett. “They conduct experiments and the organization’s goal is to support the endeavours of the Schutzstaffel, creating advanced weapons and the like.”

Belasis had gone on to explain that there were thorough reports of HYDRA scouts being spotted throughout the Italian countryside, and that the group possessed a particular affinity for Allied hospitals. “Reconnaissance on hospitals gives the SS a better idea of our numbers,” he added. “Wounded, killed, and so on.”

Allied field hospitals in France and Holland had already encountered difficulties with HYDRA attempting to gain entrance, numbers, and even prisoners from their operations. They had a nasty habit of blending right in as locals or volunteers; there were even a few reports of some agents having gained actual access to the hospitals and their records.

At first, she had been chilled by Belasis’ lecture -- but then, everything in those early days of arriving in Italy had sent shivers of fear down her spine. Once she had settled into her work and found her
place in the day-to-day life of the camp, those fears had necessarily been pushed firmly into the back of her mind. After all, she’d made it alive through the battered Atlantic, where U-boats lurked like so many sharks beneath the surface. The risks she had taken to actually volunteer and arrive at the front had already been so daunting, it simply would not do to shrink away from these new ones. Knowing that, however, did not prevent the dread from creeping up her bones, gripping her brain and heart in such a sluggish fury that it was nearly impossible for her to assess the current level of danger.

“Schwester.” Blond had knelt beside her again, this time bringing another blanket. “You are a nurse, yes?” His German was perfect, she realized; elegant and formal. A memory of her father burst behind her eyes: reciting an ancient poem with the fluidity of one born and raised in the nation, gesticulating broadly and with passion. He had so loved the German poetic canon; it would devastate him to learn how that beauty was being twisted now, into something so dark, so repulsive, so cruel.

“How could she possibly be useful? An injured, half-drowned aide discovered on the outskirts of the camp? How could she possibly pose any purpose for these men, for HYDRA? Belasis had said the organization was interested in numbers, in logistics, in intel. She knew none of that. Were they interested in how certain soldiers took their tea, or how many ginger biscuits were left in the tin on Clarke’s desk, or the number of P.G. Wodehouse devotees on Recovery Ward D -- those tidbits of intelligence, those she could provide. Everything else, though, was out of her purview. Volunteers at her level were not to know the type of information these HYDRA scouts would want to learn.

And when they realized that, she would be killed.

Horror crowded her throat, squeezing out the last bit of hope she’d been holding onto -- inspired by Blond’s gentle tone and actions -- as she realized the true depth of what she had stumbled into here. Surely, she tried to reason, if they wanted her dead, they could have just let her drown in the river. That she was with them now meant they were going to pump her for as much information as they could get, and when they did indeed come to learn that she knew nothing beyond the finer details of soldiers’ creature comforts, she would be shot anyway. Isn’t that what they did? Interrogation, torture, and then finally, anonymous death against a stone, cold wall, far away from home. Her body would be tossed in a canal or an unmarked grave, or left to rot where they left her and she would…

“Sh, Fräulein, sh.” Blond gripped her shoulder. “No need to cry. You are safe for now, and if you are quiet and agreeable, there is no reason for you to be hurt. If you are willing to be useful to the Reich and to HYDRA, there is no need for fear.” But oh, how she wept: great, violent, silent sobs that tore at the vestiges of empathy that had not been crushed by his training, and Blond thought of another blonde, his pretty wife at home, who had wept so at their parting months before. He bit his lip and turned his back more fully on his companions; it was likely he would be reported for this demonstration, but some deep, humane instinct within him encouraged him to keep speaking, to soothe this poor, overwhelmed woman before him. “Sh, Fräulein. Nun, sag mir, wie heißt du?”
She blinked, catching a sob mid-stream and wiping a hand childishly under her dripping nose. Her gaze -- cagey, guarded -- clearly said she had not expected this normalcy, this courtesy, not here in the back of an enemy vehicle, in the dark of what surely must be the worst night of her young life.

“Elle. Elle Andersen.”

Hours passed in peaceful, succulent sleep. Blond gave her a small vial of liquid that slid down Elle’s throat like honey and bloomed in her weary, beleaguered mind as a happy memory she had not yet made. In the dawn, she became vaguely aware of being moved, of cool air rushing over her skin, of strident German voices barking orders and questions that did not, somehow, concern her. More hours passed -- these ones in swift, smooth travel, in the chill darkness of a train car. Blond disappeared; Green-eyes and Grandfather too, but she scarcely registered her solitude. The sweet, feathery depths that Blond’s treatment had plunged her into were far more preferable to the underscoring awareness that she was moving further and further away from safety, and ever closer to an unknowable doom.

In dreams, she walked with the boy. He whispered heated nothings into her ear, and she blushed with the merriness of it all. He meant no harm. She loved him so. Her boy, her darling, her lovely, lovely wolf-eyed boy. Were he with her now, she would have nothing to fear. He would protect her. And what a wonderful thing, she thought sleepily, to be protected, to be cared for, to have no worries, none at all.

“Leg sie auf ihre Füße!” But oh, they ached -- her poor, battered, frozen feet could not hold her, could not bear her weight into the frigid night. “Schnell! Schnell!”

Hands slipped beneath her armpits, hauling her up to her feet, and she blinked into bewildered consciousness, eyes darting wildly to and fro. The air was thinner up there, and it slipped through her lungs like gossamer; she choked on its absence. Where were her blankets, she wondered dully? She was so cold, so very, very cold.

The landscape rose like a nightmare before her: peaks of white-capped peril, as far as she could see, marching sturdily in every direction under an ironclad sky. Flakes of snow swirled about her, but there was nothing delicate or festive to be found in the scene. Ironically, Elle had found herself once again situated in a valley of sorts, with a forest to the east -- dense and foreboding. A dark fairytale of a forest. She continued to stare, to gaze out and around at her new surroundings, reconciling the memory of a damp, autumnal Italy with this new wintry wasteland. “Nach vorne,” a man snapped, and she turned slightly to see a HYDRA agent -- helmet shadowing his face -- approaching with a hand outstretched. She cringed away from the blow, but he managed to catch her on the shoulder just the same, and the force of his fist drew her down to her knees.

“Nach vorne. Schnell!” Forward, they wanted her to move forward, as fast as she could. But to what? Through the October squall, to her left, she could make out the shadowy angles of a building that seemed to grow larger and larger as they approached -- the guard’s tight grip on her upper arm a significant motivator in picking up the pace. As the snow lightened, spotlights glowed bright and warm, unwelcome beacons, and the sharp rise of aeroplanes startled her every several hundred feet. They were monstrous beasts, those aircraft, nothing like the affable metallic curves of Allied Lockheeds and Douglases, and the incongruity -- the modernness -- of their appearance chilled her more than the frigid air.

She turned away.

Her original captors were nowhere to be found; another faceless guard joined their small group as she was led through a narrow steel door, past a large, paved lot filled with a variety of lorries and
motorbikes. Oil tanged the air, so heady she felt ill, and couldn’t help but be slightly relieved when they had finally ducked through the doorway and down a series of corridors that gradually grew more and more polished. Framed landscape paintings lined the walls -- generic, soulless vistas of meadows and mountains, farmsteads and beaches. Battlefields now, she thought darkly. Each and every one.

They had walked for at least ten minutes when, finally, the first HYDRA agent stopped abruptly before a gleaming mahogany door. He knocked twice, and then rapped out an order for his compatriot to remain there with Elle. The second agent seemed to bristle at the instruction, but obeyed just the same, pointing to the far wall and ordering her to face it. Level with her forehead, the sea opened up, a silent rush of frozen waves; a lonely tracing of sand dunes, lighted by delicate, green grasses. If this was to be her last glimpse of the world, then it gladdened her to know it was one of natural beauty. Despite herself, she smiled. It was a private thing, just for her.

Elle knew she was going to die. It was a thought she had never quite managed to fully entertain, not even as the St. Vincent had departed and not when she had arrived at the field hospital. Death was all around them, and the war had been going on for three full years at this point, nearly four, and the abject travesty of the loss of life was devastating and relentless. And yet, not even when she had cowered under the whistle of bombs back in London -- not even then had she wondered what it would be like to die. To cease. To cease.

She was facing that threat now, and it was a bitter reveille. Twenty-six years, was that to be it? Sometimes she felt much, much older than that, but still -- twenty-six years was not nearly enough time. And the boy? What would the boy do? How would he learn of her death? Would he ever know what had happened to her? Would he mourn? What would it do to him, her poor love?

The daunting aspect of her own imminent obliteration was not, as she had anticipated, a fear of pain - - but just the end. The terrible finality of a life unfinished. HYDRA would put a bullet between her eyes, and her name would become nothing more than a footnote, an amendment, a statistic. She would not die a hero; she was about to die alone, cowering against a wall. No one would know.

Elle closed her eyes against fate, holding the image of the sea in her mind and vowing not to open her gaze ever again, so that a peaceful beach would be the last thing she saw and her death would be painted in soft blue and pale green. She would tell them nothing. She would not betray her cause, her people. She would die on the beach -- like a soldier.

Death was not timely, and the world moved in increments of pain. She was brought before a doctor, a man who brought her neither healing nor comfort. She trembled before him, stammered out her name and answered his brief, clipped questions as composedly as she could. Upon his return, the HYDRA agent had ordered her to open her eyes as she was brought in to Doctor Zola’s office, but Elle held the sea, the gorgeous sea, in her mind and her memory, and no matter what they did, they would never be able to take it away from her.

Zola was a surprise: a short, stout man with an owlish look, who appraised her arrival with a surprising amount of interest. “Wo hast du Deutsch gelernt?” he asked, inviting her to sit down across from his desk. The agents flanked the door behind her; she felt their judgement, their stifled rage, simmering at her back. They hated her. And they were confused.

“I learned from my father,” she replied hoarsely, fiddling at a loose thread in her skirt. “Er hatte ein Ohr für Sprachen.” And he had: an innate ability to pick up new languages easily, to learn the peculiarities and rules inherent in each. A single conversation with a traveller tended to to launch him on intense journeys of linguistic scholarship, and many of these had been then handed down to her. She could speak French, too, quite well, as well as Norwegian, Romanian, and Spanish. She loved
the way the words danced on her tongue, unlocking new worlds and stories and experiences. That the pure joy she had once known from reciting German poetry and fables had now been usurped, tainted by her capture, caused her an aching, raw pain deep in her soul.

Elle gazed across the expanse of Zola’s desk, watching a smile slither across his face. “Your father taught you well, then, Mädchen, and you should be grateful to him.” He rose, gesturing to the guards behind her, and she heard the click of a lock before she was roughly handled once more. “It is because of him that you are still alive. Take her to Lohmer.”

Pain.

Pain of such insistence, such unremitting severity. Enveloping her. Consuming her. Eating her whole.

The monster painted her skin with punishment.

On and on it all went, but she had nothing to give.

And when he was done, when he had left her battered and bloody in the cold dark lonesomeness of that anonymous cell -- only then did she allow herself to cry.

Tapping away the last remnants of ash from his cigarette, Colonel Lohmer offered his final verdict with a cruel, twisted smile: “She’s useless, sir.”

Useless. The word held dark potential. From where he sat in the far corner, banished to the outskirts of this meeting like an errant child, Zola weighed the likelihood of the girl surviving to the dawn. Lieutenant-General Johann Schmidt had arrived that afternoon from an inspection in Czechoslovakia; he was visibly tired, and though he liked and respected Lohmer and the work he was accomplishing at the alpine facility, he was not enjoying this report. “Why did they bring her here in the first place?” Schmidt asked, drumming his fingers on the elegant desk, avoiding the nearby stack of papers, which promised hours of dull, detailed production reports. Progress had brought him up this snowy incline; progress for the cause, for HYDRA, and the news of a scared young Englishwoman being secreted somewhere inside the factory did little to encourage him.

Lohmer shrugged -- a brave move for a man of his position, Zola thought with a secret smirk. “Fischer said she spoke German like she was born to it, and at the time, that made him suspect her of being a spy. Apparently, Sommer all but fell in love with her then and there, and would not be parted.” His tone was amused, sardonic, but it did nothing to lighten the mood.

Schmidt’s lips thinned into a tight line of clear displeasure. “How indecorous of him.” He glanced over to Zola, who had attempted to make himself appear occupied with a logistics report from Prague, lest he be removed from the office. “Doctor, I wonder, do you have any need for her?”

“S-sir?”

Lohmer chortled at Zola’s obvious discomfort. “It seems to me, Herr Schmidt, that the good doctor would not know what to do with the woman.”

A dry chuckle from Schmidt broke the awkward silence, and Zola looked askance at the accusation. He’d only had a brief glimpse of the girl, and though she was comely enough, terror made an unflattering accessory on any pretty face. He felt no temptation in that regard, whatever Lohmer chose to insinuate. “She might make a good secretary,” Schmidt mused, reaching for his cup of tea. “Her German is excellent. Her fear will make her a fine worker, I am sure.” Delicately, the seasoned
Elle Andersen served as Doctor Arnim Zola’s personal secretary for precisely six hours, fourteen minutes, and one black eye. She arrived in his laboratory wearing that same bloodsoaked uniform and bearing a motley barrage of bruising from Lohmer’s interrogation. He could see the pale, battered flesh of her legs through torn stockings and her hair was wild, as though she had run through the hills to come to him, rather than be escorted down the length of the hallway.

Fischer brought her. An older gentleman from Cologne, Fischer had volunteered for HYDRA two years ago, after the noble sacrifice of his only son. Lohmer had a bit of a soft spot for him, though Zola found him to be rather sanctimonious at times. “Doctor Zola.” Fischer did not even rap upon the door to announce his entrance, and this rankled the doctor. Surely he was due some amount of respect? Herr Schmidt certainly seemed to think so -- even the appointment of this frowsy-haired girl from Italy constituted near enough an acknowledgement of his workload that Zola could not help but preen a little under the compliment. He did need a secretary. Someone to field visitors, at the very least.

Fischer shoved the woman forward slightly, and Zola registered a twitchy wince cross her face at the action. He found her face rather painful to look upon: the brighter lights of the laboratory cast her cuts and bruises into much sharper relief than had the softer glow of Lohmer’s office. An unpleasant greenish hue traced down her left cheekbone; a vivid scrape could be seen at her jaw, a lover’s kiss she had not wanted. And her eyes. Her eyes. Her eyes made Zola’s stomach clench.

Once hazel, once rich -- Elle’s eyes had paled, retreated in chary distrust and anxiety, casting this way and that about the new space, assessing the room for threats. The colour had gone, washed away with the tears she had not been able to staunch these past twelve hours. She had a hollow look about her -- not emaciation, no, nor starvation. The girl was haunted. Tailed by bad memories and dashed hopes. Scraped raw by deep, agonizing loss.

Zola had seen that look before; once upon a time, he supposed he had worn it himself. But there was no pity in him now, not for this husk of a woman. Schmidt had ordered him to take her on as a secretary, and that he would do, though he had little enough need for scheduling appointments or fielding correspondence. The doctor had more of an idea to turn her into a menial right hand for his laboratory assistants; the Valkyrie was coming along nicely (the new contingent of workers from Italy had made for a sizeable boost in productivity), but Schmidt had requested an additional shipment of assault rifles. High-powered and deadly, the guns were in high demand among HYDRA’s forces. Besides the Valkyrie, they were Zola’s pride and joy at the moment.

He asked Bergmann to explain her initial tasks, which included filing some paperwork recording the previous week’s output, the rates at which the new workers were performing, and his own requisition for a few very specific pieces of lab equipment. Zola had plans to revisit an older series of experiments, this time aided by the exciting developments brought to him by Schmidt just a few months before. Once he had selected the ideal candidate, his schedule would be even more full, thus further necessitating some thorough training for this sad-eyed girl.

She moved through the lab as though she was familiar with the place, following Bergmann and his terse instructions, sitting gingerly down upon a stool next to Zola’s desk in the far corner. Ideally, the doctor mused, watching as she bent her bruised head to her task -- ideally, she would not be in the lab at all. Once he had her conditioned to her work and his orders -- once she was broken in -- then she could be trusted on her own for spells at a time in his private office just down the hall. It would not do to have so much of his paperwork and personal items being attended to in this unpredictable
As they tended to do when he was immersed in his work, the hours passed by rapidly. Zola left the lab briefly to check on the production line; Lohmer was observing the floor from the catwalk, his meeting with Schmidt evidently concluded, and had just a few complaints to report about some American soldiers getting a bit smart with their supervisors. “They are bold, these men,” he observed over the curl of smoke from another cigarette. Zola bit back an insubordinate instinct to point out the dangers of smoking so close to the assembly line, to the birthing room of the Valkyrie, as the Colonel continued: “Nothing we cannot remedy, though, eh, Doctor?”

He ate a light lunch in his office, reading over some papers Schmidt had brought detailing the recent brouhaha in New York City. When he returned to the lab, he noticed that the girl had left his desk and was being raked over the coals by Bergmann and another assistant. As Zola secreted the papers in a bottom drawer, he picked up the gist that Elle had been moving carelessly through the laboratory, nearly knocking over a stack of handwritten calculations.

Bergmann was a tall man, hulking and rigid; the doctor himself could confess to feeling intimidated by his looming frame and fiery eyes. And yet, despite the spitting vehemence in his tone, the girl stood unflinching before him. Dull resignation, however, rather than courage, accounted for this show of stoicism, Zola could see that clearly. Her pale gaze was fixed upon a clock on the far wall, as verbal blow after blow assaulted her honour and last vestiges of self-possession. “Blödel!” Bergmann snapped. “Watch where you walk from now on, understood?”

Her nod was subtle, almost imperceptible, but Bergmann seemed satisfied. After barking out another order, this time for her to return -- carefully -- to Zola’s desk and see to the personnel reports, he turned on his heel and headed back to his station. The doctor moved away from his desk as the girl approached, torn between wanting to commend her for that show of composure in the face of Bergmann’s barrage of criticism and understanding that such a display would be highly inappropriate. Impressive or not, the girl was an enemy of HYDRA -- albeit a conquered one. Add to that, he thought again, she had not borne the brunt of that dressing-down out of bravery. Nothing so warm as that.

Why was she so fascinating? Zola had never before found himself so acutely focused on a person he had just met -- except for Schmidt, and that was down more to fear than interest. No, this girl, this battered and weary English aide, she was compelling. Not overly attractive (her eyes were a too deep-set for his liking, and she was tall; Zola did not like tall women), but memorable just the same. Perhaps it was simply that he had not seen a woman in several weeks; all of the workers at this particular research facility were male, given that most were prisoners of war. All of his lab assistants were male as well, and it had been three or so months since he had last visited Berlin.

Yes. That was it. That was all. Elle’s arrival marked the first time in months that he had encountered a woman, pretty or not, and that he had been forced to work in close quarters with her now -- that was why his eyes kept drifting over, why she occupied his thoughts. Why he felt something too close to pity for his liking bubble up inside of him as he counted the marks on her face, on her arms. He shook his head now, recalling that he had hoped to check in with the small group he had designated to help him prepare for the upcoming experiment. There were a few things he needed to finalize before moving on to the next stage.

He couldn’t wait.

To cope, Elle allowed herself to slip into memory. Her father had taken her to the river one afternoon, years and years ago, intent on finishing a poem that had been causing him some trouble. She had splashed in the shallows while Papa searched the sky for the perfect adjective.
My honey. He had always called her that, her Papa had. My honey.

There was no honey in HYDRA’s world. Her entire body ached from the beating, from the shock and the horror of the past few days. That she was now sitting behind a desk, sorting papers and fetching mugs of tea and coffee for the scientists at work here -- she could not reconcile these moments of relative calm (apart from the explosive anger of that tow-headed giant) with those hours of pain and darkness. At any moment, she expected the peace to be broken, as his outburst had confirmed.

If nothing else, though, the lab was fairly quiet; an industrious silence had befallen the technicians as Doctor Zola had returned and the giant had finished with her. The silence helped soothe her pounding head, and she stole a brief moment of rest to rub her temples. Hunger was a gnawing monster in her gut, insistent and unfulfilled. She had managed to slurp down a bit of water while making coffee earlier, so dehydration should not be an issue, but Elle had no idea if she was to be fed today, or who she should approach to ask. She did not even know how long she was expected to work in the lab, or what her tasks would entail beyond the sorting and filing.

Survival was a surprise so far, and Elle had decided that she would simply have to live her life one moment at a time from now on. The interrogation had ended with a promotion, a few hours of safety, but she could not count on anything beyond that. Keeping her head down and her hands innocently busy, that could help. Plotting escape could come later, once she had recovered and built up her strength.

She hoped. She hoped.

As Elle shifted in the unyielding wooden chair, her right knee hit the exposed lip of a slightly opened drawer. Puzzled, she leaned down to adjust it, realizing she had not done so in the first few hours of her work. She assumed, then, that someone had opened in the interval, either when she had gone to put the kettle on or while the giant had been shrieking at her. Curiosity got the better of her, and after ensuring that all the scientists in the lab were occupied and that no one was paying attention to the prisoner-cum-secretary in the corner, she slid the drawer fully open, enough to see that a new manila folder had been placed atop a series of loose papers.

There was nothing remotely strange about a manila folder being placed atop a series of loose papers in the bottom drawer of a scientist’s desk. There was nothing strange about neglecting to close the drawer all the way in a hurry to go somewhere else. What was acutely odd about the folder in the drawer, however -- and this was a detail that made Elle’s breath catch audibly in her throat -- was that the label was written in English and the stamp on the front of the folder declared it the property of the United States Army and more specifically, the Strategic Scientific Reserve.

Elle did not know much about the American forces, and as an Englishwoman with no connections overseas, the sight of such an insignia should not necessarily fill her with a rush of homesickness, but it did. She glanced upwards, hoping that her gasp had not caught anyone’s attention. Zola was preoccupied at the far end of the lab, huddled with a knot of scientists around one of the benches; the giant was nowhere to be seen, and everyone else was, as they had been for most of the day, engrossed in their work at the various tables and workstations scattered about the huge space.

Delicately, she flipped over the front of the folder, scanning the first page of typed, uncensored text in search of familiar words or details. *Project Rebirth*, the title of the page read. She could make out a series of names -- Steven G. Rogers; Howard Stark; Agent M.E. Carter -- and a few recent dates, back in the early summer of that year. On the whole, the names really meant nothing to her, though the first of the list did tend to stick oddly in her memory. Had she met someone with a similar name, back in London?
The file consisted of about thirty or forty pages, all typed and annotated in a spiky black-inked hand, so far as she could tell from her gentle thumbing-through. The annotations had been made in German, perhaps made by Zola himself. She knew he could speak English rather well; he’d delivered some of his first orders to her in the language, though nearly every HYDRA representative she’d met so far had known she understood German well.

She paused on one page in particular, if only for the peculiar layout she observed. A chart, titled Rogers, compared the measurements of what she assumed must be two separate men, so disparate were the statistics:

- 95 pounds, 5 feet, 4 inches
- 240 pounds, 6 feet, 2 inches

Though she did not have time to calculate a precise conversion to metric units for the clarity of her own perspective, the difference between the two sets of measurements were enough to paint a fairly detailed picture. Could Rogers refer to one man, perhaps that Steven G. whose name seemed familiar? If so, he had made a substantial transition.

No, Elle reasoned, shuffling a few pages past the chart -- it was far more likely that the measurements were comparing two individuals, and that the title was a code word of sorts, some sort of reference known only to those who were meant to have the folder. How had HYDRA come in possession of it, she wondered? It was not a German composite -- it was the genuine article. Just weeks before, she thought, this very folder had likely been sitting on an American desk. An Allied desk.

She could not make much sense of the contents, but that was to be expected: her martial purview revolved around creature comforts and bedside chats, not reports and secret projects and codenames. And yet, she kept turning pages, hoping for an epiphany. So engrossed was she that the shadow falling across the desk never registered, nor did the soft but audible approach of footsteps. Zola’s hand on her shoulder, though -- that she was aware of.

"Was glauben Sie, was Sie da tun?" he bellowed, and she dropped the folder, swivelled around in his grip. The man was a good foot and a half shorter than her, and was smart enough to keep her seated in the chair. "What do you think you are doing?" he repeated, spittle flying from his lips in his sudden fury.

What was she doing? Shame and self-hatred flew down like shutters on her heart, as she realized what those few moments of stolen curiosity had bought her. She would be killed for this, surely. Having so narrowly escaped death at the hands of that Colonel, after surviving that interrogation, now she would be shot for reading.

A fitting end for her, personally, she supposed. Every martyr needs something to burn for.

Zola’s bony grip tightened, a vise, on her shoulder, and he had managed to place three of his fingers in the precise hollow where she had been struck upon her arrival at the facility, out on the tarmac. A dull, throbbing burn erupted where his hand met her pain and she could not help but cry out as he twisted her right and left, hoping to shake the truth out of her, evidently. "Tell me," he snapped. "Tell me now."

Another hand appeared, this one far broader and far stronger. The blond giant had returned, and pushed the doctor out of the way. His hand made its way around her throat. "Answer him, you bitch," he spat. His thumb pressed up against the underside of her jaw, and stars burst in her eyes. How the bloody hell did he expect her to reply while being throttled?

"Six hours. She wanted to laugh out loud, but her windpipe was dangerously close to being crushed and she was being all but lifted by the neck. Six hours. Just six hours. That was all she had lasted. What a rubbish spy she would have made.

"Nothing, sir, nothing," she choked. The giant’s free hand smacked her across the face. "Nothing, I
promise. The folder. I was simply rearranging it to close the drawer properly. I read nothing.”

The doctor shook at the giant’s arm, levelling an uncharacteristically steely glare in his direction, until he’d released Elle, allowing to rub at her neck and look for possible escape routes. If she was going to die for this, she would rather die running. “Enough, Bergmann,” Zola groused. “We will let Colonel Lohmer handle her again. Schweiss?” A thin young man with a tremor in his hands appeared at Zola’s side, summoned as though by magic. The doctor looked up at Elle with a smile as he continued: “Fetch the Colonel, please, Schweiss. Tell him it is...urgent.”

He struck her before they made it out into the corridor. Square in the eye, the left eye, and the stars disappeared as she howled with pain, clutching at the socket with tender, uncertain fingers. “Idiot girl,” Lohmer snapped, wrapping his hand into her mass of matted curls, appropriating her hair as a leash to drag her down the length of the hallway. She lost her footing four times before they had reached the elevator, but he simply pulled her back up.

Elle watched as he punched the button for the elevator, terror pooling and roiling in her stomach. She did not want to go back to that awful, horrid room, that cell, that torture chamber. God only knew what he had planned for her next. The elevator rose smoothly, silently, opening up before them within seconds of his request. But the Colonel made no move to enter; rather, he turned abruptly left, heading for a door maybe two or three metres further along the wall. Beyond, a narrow metal staircase wound up and down; here and there, the intervalled lights caught the sheen of the metal and sent up a glimmer. A glimmer that felt, somehow, menacing.

Lohmer made sure to pull her roughly down those seven flights, so roughly that she only managed to touch the first few steps with feet -- the rest she made contact with via her face and body. She was pounded and dragged over the length of them, and once, her right ankle got wedged between two -- her sharp scream bought her only a moment to disentangle herself, and then Lohmer regained his furious pace. She wept freely, tears streaming down her cheeks and agony twisting her soul-deep, as she realized her last moments in this world would be ones of pain and humiliation. She tried to find the image of that painted beach in her mind once more: soft dunes and pretty blue water. She would die there. She would die there. She would die there.

When the steps ended, she opened her eyes again, this time to the shadowy lengths of a new space, this one lit intermittently by the faint pinkish glow of an autumn sunset. A pair of guards held open both metal doors, allowing Lohmer to stride through, his prisoner bumping along mutely behind him.

The room was vast, the size of a warehouse, and situated throughout, in neat columns before her, there were a series of cages -- tall, cylindrical cages, stretching up to a platform above. There were at least fifty of them, and as Lohmer paused before one of the ones closest to the doors, Elle was given a moment to breathe, to collect herself, and to observe the slowly-approaching crush of prisoners.

Oh, no . Her heart broke to see them, so weary and tattered -- a sea of olive-green ghosts, bloody and beaten. Pale faces, sharpened by hunger and lost hope, looked briefly at the girl in the torn aide’s uniform, knees scraped scarlet and face swelling with one thrashing too many. They could not extend her more than a quick glance, though -- their lives depended upon filing neatly and speedily into their cells. Half of them thought she might be a figment of their exhausted brains, a spectre drummed up by hours of back-breaking work.

Elle struggled to her feet; to her surprise, Lohmer allowed this, though he kept a firm grip on her hair. She watched as the men silently approached the opening of their cells, each one flanked by two guards. In groups of about a dozen, they filled the cages, sliding down against the bars to rest, and
she thought about how cold they must be, how little comfort they must find. There were no beds, no safe corners. They were horribly, horribly exposed.

“Kommen Sie,” the Colonel barked, tugging her forward. He approached the third cell down, in the first column, a smile dawning on his face. "Herren!"

The gentlemen in question looked up, and she closed her eyes against their stares, against their pinched, hungry faces. Against their bruises. “This is Miss Elle Andersen,” Lohmer continued, this time in clipped English. “Formerly of London. She has come to keep you company, soldiers, now -- won’t that be nice?” He shoved her forward, eyes still closed, so that she felt the cool kiss of the metal bars against her skin. Instinctively, she anchored herself to it, gripping the bars tight.

“She is not yet fully attired, though, I’m afraid. She is just missing one...little...thing.”

Curls in hand, he pulled her head back sharply, and then slammed it back into a bar. She shrieked, hands slipping on the bars as she hit the ground with her knees. A goose egg was blooming on her forehead, and she opened her eyes, half-expecting to be blind when she did, the pain was so great. Instead, she was met with a pair of brown eyes and a chorus of American curses. Tears welled in her vision. “Please,” she whispered. “Bitte. Nicht mehr.” Her pleas were meant for Lohmer, but she could not bear to break away from those kind, warm brown eyes.

The Colonel laughed, gesturing to the nearby guard to open the cell door again. “Ah, Miss Andersen,” he crowed. “It has been a pleasure getting to know you. I only hope my friends here enjoy your company just as much.” A yank on her hair pulled her back to her feet; a blunt jab between her shoulders pushed her into the cell. She hit her knees again, hands scrabbling on concrete, as the metallic clang of the cell door sounded behind her. “Good night, gentlemen...lady.”

She sobbed, curling into herself, a comma of self-preservation, bowed and finally, mercifully, done. She surrendered herself to the pain, to the immense vulnerability of explicit imprisonment, and she sobbed. Sobbed until a pair of hands pulled her up, a pair of hands graced with elegant, long, musician’s fingers.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for any mistakes in the German dialogue. I was relying on a combination of murky memories from first-year university and the aid and intervention of Google Translate. Not the most reliable sources ;)

They called it *Krautsuppe*, but “soup” was far too generous a term for the leafy water the guards provided in tin mugs. Elle drank it gratefully all the same. She hadn’t eaten since her first day at the facility, and then she had been provided only with a hard, dark brown biscuit. Major Falsworth accepted a cup for her, and tipped it to her lips as though she was a child. “Drink up, Miss Andersen,” he murmured. “If nothing else, it’s warm.”

The cabbage made for a sour meal, and his gentle hands on her shoulders, brushing the hair from her face -- that comforted her more. She kept looking at him, watching his intentional movements, relishing the rich, *living* familiar timbre of his voice as it enveloped her, as he introduced her. “This is Private Jones,” he said gently, setting the cup down and pointing across to the kind-eyed black man she had locked gazes with just a few minutes before, after Lohmer had battered her face against the bars. He was young, perhaps just her age or a few years her junior.

Elle tried to muster a smile, though the arc of it cut her face like a knife. “H-hello, Private Jones.”

“Gabe,” he corrected with a grin. “Pleased to meet you, miss.”

After Gabe, she met a boisterous, ruddy-faced sergeant who introduced himself to her as Dum-Dum Dugan, and she laughed in spite of herself. That relaxed the rest of the men, who had been staring at the girl in mingled disbelief and pity since her arrival. Most of them were American, she gathered, with a few Brits, and they were all welcoming, despite their grim surroundings. A sense of chivalry overcame several, and they tripped over themselves to offer her the use of their overcoats and jumpers, all of which she refused. All except for one.

Dugan possessed both an overcoat and a woollen jumper; the latter was warm from being worn so close to his body for hours that day, and though the odor of sweat and oil rose thickly from it, she accepted the gift gratefully, allowing Falsworth to ease her arms into the sleeves, to pull her hair back over her shoulders. Sinking back into the cold embrace of the iron bars, surveying her new companions, Elle’s mind cast back to the feeling of camaraderie she had experienced, so long ago, it seemed now, in her days at the hospital in Sussex. There were soft bodies on either side of her, though the men tried to keep a respectful distance, and she felt encompassed by mutual affliction and thus, inevitably, morale: they must all endure this together. In that unity, there was a strength no HYDRA punishment or humiliation could ever extinguish, try as they might.

Of course, things are rarely ever so simple, and the massive, pounding pain in her head was likely to blame for such rosy, bolstering thoughts, tethered to no real facts besides that of wishful thinking.

As the evening and all of its attending excitement waned, the soldiers began to gradually claim various spaces within the round cell, pooling the thin, scratchy blankets provided by the guards to create meagre beds. “G’night, missy,” Dugan said with a wink, and her cheeks reddened at the attention. How strange, she thought -- just a few days without a bed, without companions, and already the experiences seemed foreign and unusual. She whispered her reply to him and to several of the others, offering tentative smiles here and there. They seemed nice, honourable men -- browbeaten and weary, but who could blame them?

Silence fell in the surrounding cages, too, interrupted here and there by snores or coughs, shifting of blankets and the occasional muttered curse as a soldier kicked a bedmate or passed gas. Elle couldn’t
bring herself to fall asleep, not just yet; she remained sitting, leaning back against the bars and watching as Gabe, Dugan, and the others gave into their obvious exhaustion. Falsworth was still awake by her side. “Miss Andersen?” She turned, his familiar face coming into view by degrees in the moonlight: his green eyes; that stylish mustache; chiselled cheekbones. He was a handsome man, she thought sleepily. And so very kind. “Miss Andersen, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to stay awake for as long as possible,” he whispered regretfully, nudging her chin slightly; her head had begun to droop, perhaps drawn down by the weight of her deep yawns.

She had endured a tremendous blow to the head, the Major reminded her, and until he was convinced she had not sustained a concussion from Lohmer’s rough treatment, he would prefer it if she tried to stay awake. “If they want you out on the floor tomorrow, you’ll be tired, and I’m sorry for that, but I would much rather that than lose you tonight.” His tenderness sent a kind of thrill through her, and reminded her of the blond HYDRA agent who had pulled her from the river, begging her to be alive, pleading with her not to sleep, lest she slip away in dreams. Things would have been much easier if she had, she thought now, leaning against Falsworth, the breadth of propriety long gone between them. If she had just fallen asleep, the pain from the rock casting her away into the sweet confines of anonymous, accidental death -- everything with Lohmer could have been avoided. Now, she had joined a plane of tenuous existence hitherto reserved only for the most valiant.

Falsworth’s embrace was not warming, but the past few days had been populated by blows and strikes, a near-constant stream of abuse, and the fact that his hands were so kind and so gentle was almost overwhelming in its comfort, and she was tempted to just slip dreamily into the…

“Miss Andersen.” The Major’s tone was sharp, but not cruel, nothing like Lohmer’s or Zola’s. She woke with a start, shifting her head from his shoulder. “Please, do try and stay awake,” he entreated, stretching out his long legs before the two of them, narrowly avoiding kicking poor Gabe Jones in the head. He was sleeping fitfully just a few feet away from the Major and Elle, eyes racing at unseen horrors behind closed lids; hands jerking every now and then at his side. Elle longed to reach out to him, perhaps offer some small comfort, some caring. Loneliness shared is loneliness eased, she supposed, and even sitting there, the cold metal at her back and her injuries aching, watching a man suffer from nightmares right at her feet -- even all that reminded her that at least she was no longer alone.

The soft white glow of the moon illuminated her new world in shards, so that she could glance around and register the presence of those massive cylindrical cages; piles upon piles of sleeping soldiers. Prisoners. The word caught on her heart, a barb and a keen all in one.

She was one now, too. Or, at least, she was one of them.

Around them, her new compatriots slept and tried to forget; Elle could not even begin to envision the dreadful things they had endured -- likely putting her own trials to petty shame. Dark things were afoot in this HYDRA hellhole, she knew that well enough.

The Major tried to keep her conscious by asking questions about the hospital and camp. He inquired after a few patients; asked about the nurses. But as the weary, battered woman beside him grew increasingly tight-lipped, chipping out only monosyllabic replies, Falsworth realized he was treading too close to the pleasant dreams of her past reality, forcing them to sit uncomfortably between them in this new, nightmarish space. And he was far too much of a gentleman to permit this to happen.

He talked to her of sweeter things, then -- Hyde Park in the spring; candy floss and the precise scent of an unread book; the heady young days of peacetime, when everything had been more innocent. And as he spoke, he felt her relax against him, her poor head dropping to his shoulder more
comfortably this time, her fingers winding into the embrace of his own, so that they sat like friends, old friends, together there in the cell. And it was at this moment a new thought occurred to him, a fleeting epiphany that made him want to laugh aloud, though he didn’t dare.

“You ought to call me James, Miss Andersen.” After all, hadn’t she helped to nurse him back to help? Hadn’t she eased his soul back into his bones? Hadn’t she dashed away the bad dreams, ushered in respite and grace and self-absolution? All that, and she should be calling him by his Christian name, that was for sure and certain.

He felt her smile more than saw it; knew the small happiness that burbled up inside her, spilling over into a simple invitation: “Then you must call me Elle, sir.”

The next day broke angry and dark; they were up before the sun. Elle was jostled awake by Dugan, who helped her to her feet and readjusted his jumper about her shoulders. “Keep your eyes down, missy, and don’t talk to any guards,” the burly Yank advised, his blue eyes bright with worry. “They’ll assign you somewhere on the line, and no matter who you’re with, they’ll help you out. Just do whatever an ally says and you’ll be just fine.”

She nodded, but his words meant nothing. The few hours of sleep she had managed to snatch at infrequent moments during the long night were not going to be enough to sustain her through the walk to the factory floor, let alone the work that inevitably awaited her there. Elle had been woken throughout her uneasy sleep (when the Major -- when James had finally decided to allow her to rest) by cries and howls of pain emanating from several other cells. Her heart had broken anew with each fresh keening, and she’d shifted in James’ arms until the sounding of the bitter reveille from the HYDRA guards who came to unlock their cells and file them out. Now, he was standing in line before her; Dugan behind her, and Gabe behind him.

With a series of barked instructions -- some in English, most in German -- the HYDRA soldiers began to order the Allied prisoners to march forward, leading them out of their cells in long, snaking queues. Elle kept her eyes focused on James’ back, aware of Dugan’s hulking form following reassuringly behind her, buoyed once again by the striking knowledge that she was no longer alone, she was among friends, and even in this wretched that simple fact counted for something.

The facility, she realized now, was far more massive than she had ever suspected. Concrete halls seemed to stretch on forever, though the ones they were led through featured a much grimmer aspect than the polished corridors leading to the offices of the higher-ranking HYDRA functionaries. Elle shivered with more than the cold as she tried to refocus her gaze on James’ back, the olive-green of his coveralls, glancing upwards to the cheery red beret that belied their bleak surroundings. Colour seemed to be a distant memory to her tortured mind: she’d once owned a yellow dress, bought a bouquet of crimson flowers for her bedside table. Now, her world was painted in dreary shades of green and black and grey. But in that brief slash of grimy scarlet, to which her eyes were repeatedly drawn, Elle found another safe harbour of refuge, and she languished in the possibilities it posed: out there somewhere, future or past, there was still colour, still a reason to hope and dresses to dance in.

“Halt.” A HYDRA guard grasped her wrist and pulled her from her reverie and the line in one swift movement. Dugan, Gabe, and James began to protest, but a guttural reprimand from another guard silenced them at once. Elle’s eyes met Gabe’s, and there was a plea in there, a plea not to hitch any blood to her hands, to keep his peace and let this play out. He nodded.

The guard tugged the girl along, away from the line of soldiers and across to a table filled with a series of sheet metal plates and bolts. “You speak German, yes?” he asked sharply, shoving her onto a stool.
“Jawhol,” she replied, adjusting herself slightly where her skirt and stockings had caused her to slide on the metal top.

“Gut.” The soldier pointed to the implements before her: hammers and nails, a dish of shiny screws; rubber-handled screwdrivers and some menacing-looking scissors. He explained her task in strident German: she was to attach two lengths of the sheet metal to each other in reinforced, uniform plates, and then send those results down the table to the next man. “Since it is your first day, Fräulein, I will be generous and only expect two hundred such plates,” he finished with a cold smile, chucking her under the chin in a way that made her cell-mates, still watching from the queue, stiffen and shift on their feet. “You understand your task, yes?”

She did. It was a simple job, and she was good with her hands, but Elle had never before been required to wield any sort of tool beyond kitchen implements or pens. She had no idea how to anchor the sheet metal beneath her grip, or how she was expected to drive those screws into it. And what, she desperately wanted to ask, was this structure to become?

But the HYDRA guard in charge of her orientation was not interested in these questions, and had moved on further down the table before she could even open her mouth. He led her cell-mates away; James looked back at her with concern, earning himself a strike upside the head for his trouble. Around her, prisoners from other cells began to settle at the table, offering her subtle smiles and stunned indifference in equal measure. A tall, thin man, perhaps in his late thirties or forties, sat directly next to her; in soft, lilting southern tones he explained that once she had secured her two pieces of metal together, she was to pass them on to him. He would then secure them to two more, and shift the larger piece further down the line. “But how am I to do it? I was given no measurements,” she whispered, tears she did not want to shed crowding her voice.

The man reached across, pulling a piece of paper from underneath the pile of tools; in her anxiety, she had neglected to spot it. “Here, ma’am,” he said, pointing to the diagram traced there. “Just follow this picture, and the measurements for spacing are right over here.” Elle scanned the sheet: everything did seem to be there, written in a decent English approximation. Each unit of work would require six screws, evenly spaced, about three inches apart across the middle of what was to become a double-plated sheet. Her neighbour, who quietly introduced himself as Sergeant Peter McBride, formerly of Georgia, asked permission of a guard to show her how to secure the pieces beneath her elbow and manipulate the screwdriver to greatest effect. Once he had offered her a quick demonstration, the HYDRA soldier who had assigned her to the table had returned, and ordered them to commence their work properly.

Hunger and thirst gnawed within her as she worked, but Elle didn’t dare look up. All about the huge factory space, where catwalks scraped the faraway ceiling and iron shelves and structures reigned supreme, the Allied prisoners of the Austrian Alps worked diligently and silently, contributing to the construction of an evil miscellany of weapons and tools. Elle was working on contributing to the birthing of the Valkyrie, though she did not yet know it; that hulking brainchild of Zola and Schmidt. This section was the largest, but here and there throughout the factory floor, Allied prisoners were also being set to work on machine guns, rifles, and other curiously advanced HYDRA technology. Most of them were unaware of how these pieces would work together; they were assigned only segments of equipment, and were constantly supervised by guards and officers. Lohmer paced above on the catwalk, surveying it all.

As the hours wore on, Elle found a rhythm to her work; by hour seven, the halfway point of their shift, she had developed a sense of intuition for the measurements. The sheets were of standard size, already cut by someone further up the table. She could visually gauge where each of the screws should be affixed, with little need for the measuring tape or ruler she had been provided with. Sergeant McBride provided silent reassurances throughout the day -- quick nods or shrugs
exchanged between the two as he turned for his next supply and she slid them down the two feet of space that separated them.

Every two hours, they were provided with a drink of tepid water. An Englishman, by the look of his uniform, with one eye missing and several fingers gone as well, strode up and down the work table dipping a tin cup into a bucket of the stuff, reminding them in a dull, hoarse voice that they were only permitted a three second drink. The hydration did little to satisfy her stomach, and served only to pose a new problem. “Sergeant?” she murmured, protected by the guise of sliding over her latest creation. “Are we able to…that is…” Elle blushed and stumbled over her words. All that she had endured these past few days, and the prospect of asking a man where the toilet was could have her flushed beet red. “I-I’ve had a lot of water and I…”

McBride nodded sympathetically. “You’ll have to wait, ma’am. They let us take a trip to an indoor latrine area after our shift. Your group will be leaving first, though, I suspect; they usually do.”

Elle managed to finish a further eighteen plates by the time the last call for the shift sounded. Each work unit stood stock-still throughout the factory floor, keeping watch while the workers were summoned to line up in order of their cells, by number. Panicked, she glanced wildly around for a familiar face, realizing that she had no idea what the number of their shared cell was -- luckily, Gabe was nearby, about ten yards away, and he was able to hold up three fingers on the pretence of scratching at a spot on his face. Cell three. They were in cell three.

The prisoners were offered a brief respite, cell by cell, in a large, dirt-floored room off the warehouse. Elle entered it with her cell-mates, James and Gabe crowding her protectively as she gagged from the horrendous odor. Together, the two of them, along with Dugan and a few other cellmates -- those men strategically placed themselves in something of a blockade around her, so that she could crouch by the farthest wall, only slightly less mortified than had they not been stood there at all. At least, she comforted herself, turning up the dirt in this makeshift latrine -- at least she had not been required to do it in full view of everyone.

Back in the confines of their cell, she settled in between James and Gabe, sipping at her cup of Krautsuppe even more appreciatively than she had the night before. Things were quiet; the fourteen hour shift had left them all exhausted and sore, and a stinging ache was beginning to curl its way up her back, so that she could not help but wiggle away slightly from the icy bars. James noticed her discomfort, offering to create some padding for her with his overcoat, but she demurred. “My backache is no reason for you to freeze, Major,” she chided, handing off her cup to Baker, who had been instructed to collect them. “It comes from the stool, I suppose, so I shouldn’t complain. I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t,” Gabe pointed out with a wan smile. ‘Complaining, I mean.”

Soft chitchat rose and fell around her, as she watched the shafts of moonlight lengthen and brighten the darkening cellblock. There were no stories of home, of sweethearts and wives and dear friends, as there had been amongst the VAD girls back in Italy, but that, Elle reasoned, made sense. Here was cruelty and death; what poor husbands and fathers and sons they would be if they invited the sweet memories of home and those best loved into that darkness? So she listened as some discussed baseball, others the frigid cold of these October alpine days. Sleep would come easier tonight, she thought, leaning her head against James’ shoulder, watching as his hand crept over to grasp hers. It wasn’t a lovers’ grip, not by any means -- not a whiff of impropriety to be found there between them -- but it was a kind one, a careful one, and she felt safe within it.

Boots woke her from early dreams -- or rather, the cessation of a strident, booted tread. Just outside their cell. Blinking, Elle realized that she was being tugged to her feet, and looked up to see that
James had gripped one arm and Gabe the other, and that the other inmates had also stood, staring out at the glint-eyed smiling face of Colonel Lohmer.

She’d known he was there today, up on the catwalk. The other officers and supervisory agents had been discussing his presence, tossing his name around like a threat to any workers they suspected of slacking off. But she had not dared glance up, lest she meet his cold gaze once again. Now, though, in a state of drowsy confusion, she could not help but face him. And he looked more than pleased to see her. “Guten Abend, Fräulein Andersen,” he said with a low chuckle, observing the tension rippling through her cellmates. He continued in German; she suspected this had more to do with frightening her friends (how could they help her if they had no idea what was transpiring before them?) than it did with efficiency of communication: “I have had a good report from your supervisors, my dear. You were charged with creating two hundred metal plates, is this correct?”

Elle’s hand stole to Gabe’s side, gripping the edges of his overcoat as though it were a shield. “Jawhol. Zweihundert.” She’d stopped counting at 176, a number she’d reached just after the halfway point of her shift. There was no way she could not have reached her quota, but if Lohmer was not there to punish her, than why had he come?

The Colonel smiled even more widely; it creased his lined face with an uncharacteristic mirth that made her nauseous. “Wonderful, just wonderful. You have been most impressive, Miss Andersen, and after just one day.” He snapped his fingers, and a younger HYDRA agent marched to his side, handing over a soft brown package. Lohmer weighed the item in his left hand for a moment, eyes sliding up to meet hers with that familiar coldness, shining with the promise of pain. Pain. Pain of such insistence, such unremitting severity. Enveloping her. Consuming her. Eating her whole.

The monster handed the item through the bars of the cell, adjusting it vertically. Dugan took a step forward, meaning to take it for her, but Lohmer snapped out an order for him to stand back, and he did. Reluctantly. “You completed a total of two hundred eighty seven sheets, my dear Miss Andersen,” Lohmer said softly, as she took a few steps forward, close enough to press her fingers into the soft material, but still far enough that he could not grip her again, could not slam her back into those bars. “HYDRA thanks you. Heil HYDRA.”

“Heil HYDRA.” The salute echoed throughout the cellblock, and for a moment, her heart stopped short in her chest, thinking she would have to say it, too -- but the Colonel merely inclined his head in a show of icy civility, and left, striding off into the dark, his assistant hot on his heels.

Then she allowed herself to breathe, a great gasping exhale that nearly knocked her backwards into James’ arms. “It’s alright, Elle,” he murmured, easing her back down to the floor. “It’s alright now, everything is fine.” But it wasn’t, couldn’t he see that? The acid truth of it all pooled in her stomach: she had helped HYDRA. She had aided the enemy. Whatever she had assembled with those two hundred eighty seven sheets, whatever she had contributed to, she had emboldened and empowered the cruel monsters who wanted to vanquish anything good in the world; to destroy her allies, her countrymen. There was blood on her hands now, and she shook with the shock of it.

Gabe’s voice was soft in her ear, his hands gentle as he took the bundle from her lap. “What did he give you?” he asked, unfolding the material again and again, ‘til it spread out before her, a pair of trousers, belonging to a dead man, she knew. But they were warm and welcome and she slipped her trembling legs into them just the same, deciding she would walk in memory and anonymous grief until she herself died, for victories were far and few between in this frigid pit of raw despair.

Elle’s new trousers brightened her outlook marginally; she was able to tuck the skirt of her uniform within them, pull Dugan’s jumper down more securely about her hips, and the extra layers made the days on the factory floor a little more bearable. Her quota was increased to three hundred plates the
next day; she swept them down the line with a detached efficiency, but she received no more bonuses since that first shift. McBride still offered kind words and encouragement; there was something almost paternal in his manners, an easiness to their interactions which made her long for her own father.

The days marched on in a crushing uniformity, marked by infrequent moments of reprieve: sleep, soup, and the single latrine break. Her world was populated by an intense masculine energy she had never before known – even her time at the recovery hospital or the Italian camp could not compare. Most men were kind to her, but some were angry at the sight of her, angry that HYDRA had captured her and brought her here. Angry that she had left her home and risked her life this way, perhaps. When a soldier from cell eight called her a stupid chit, Gabe had tucked his arm around her shoulders and suggested that perhaps she reminded the soldier of a sister, a daughter, or a sweetheart back home. Elle’s presence made manifest a real sense of homesickness, a reminder that the civilian world still rolled on, beyond the numerous theatres of war.

But within the confines of cell three, Elle had found a kind of haven. James, Gabe, Dugan, and the others -- Elliot, from Arkansas; Sampson, from Bristol; Kierney, from Ontario, and on and on, a list of friendly faces and names who carved out a safe space for the surprising addition of a shy, frightened aide from the Italian front. Her world was small now, and lined with bars and threats, but it was a world, and she could live in it. One day at a time, that was how she endured it -- how they all did. One day at a time, moment by moment, alive in the breadth of a minute. Alive for a minute. That was all she could hope for.

The days stretched into a week, and by the end, she and McBride were producing over four hundred plates a shift. Her wounds had begun to heal, bruises fading into softer colours, and the calluses which bloomed on her fingers and palms served to protect her somewhat from the sharp edges of metal; the keen bite of her own betrayal. At times, she considered the possibility of not securing the screws fully on a few plates, sending them further down the line with less integrity than HYDRA desired. Perhaps, in this way, she could earn a small sense of victory, knowing she had supplied them with something broken -- but then she would envision the piece falling apart at the end of the table, and the supervisor blaming another prisoner for the flaw.

Elle screwed each in a little more tightly.

At night, she surrendered herself to a dreamless sleep, leaning against James or sometimes Gabe, whose shoulder was bonier but whose breathing was more even. She would tuck her arms inside the jumper, her nose no longer cringing from the sour scent of her own body odor, and wrap them about herself, falling asleep in her own embrace. In the mornings, she shuffled along to the factory floor, nestled safe between her new friends, and the fourteen hours would slip by, and memories of her own actions during those hours would slide from her mind, lost in the mire of willed amnesia.

And for nearly eight days, her life was thus: a tenuous, uniform existence. No changes, no interruptions. Until the new arrivals came.

Elle was finishing her cabbage soup when vivid, glaring lights were flicked on in the cellblock, and the irregularity of this froze her, icy shards of doubt and panic snaking through her veins, and it took all the strength she had not to burst into tears and drop the mug. James brought an arm around her, and together they watched as a stream of battered soldiers -- pale and sharp in hunger and wretchedness -- marched through the main doors at the far end, the doors they never went through, the doors that led to the outside world. To freedom.

From their uniforms, Elle could ascertain that most of them, if not all, were British; she could see a few RAMC insignias here and there, but no familiar faces. There were at least fifteen of them, maybe
a few more. HYDRA preferred to keep the numbers of prisoners per cell to around a dozen, meaning there would need to be some shifting around to make it work. Cell five, just across the way from Elle’s, housed just six prisoners; a virulent cough had gone through a few weeks before, James had told her, and had hit that cell particularly hard. She was not surprised, therefore, when several guards approached this cell and ordered the prisoners within to stand and exit. In clipped English, they redistributed those six men to various other cells, and then permitted the new prisoners to enter cell five.

Their new cellmate arrived last, having slowly unfolded himself from a sleepy posture within the confines of his erstwhile home. His escort prodded him forward with the butt of a machine gun, and Elle’s heart leapt into her throat at the risk tempted by his leisurely pace. “Schnell,” the guard barked, jabbing the man in the back one more time. “Schnell!”

With one final blow, the man came tumbling forward -- Gabe lurched to pull him to the side slightly, so that his weakened body hit Gabe and Elle, rather than the unforgiving concrete of the cell’s floor. “Jesus,” the man coughed, rolling over so that his head was cradled just below Elle’s knees. “Not the way I usually meet dames, but it’ll have to do. How are you, sweetheart?” He winked and grinned up at her.

She blinked down at the man in her lap; once upon a time, the cheeky smile beaming across his handsome face would have brought a blush to her own cheeks, but not today. Not in this world. He seemed to catch the hint and pick up on her discomfort, and shifted to a sitting position with Gabe’s help. He mumbled an apology as he crossed his legs and settled himself in the middle of the cell. The glaring lights were shut off, now that all prisoners were back inside their cells, and they were once again plunged into darkness.

“Bucky goddamn Barnes,” Dugan said quietly, and by this point, Elle knew him well enough to imagine the smile blooming on his face. “How the hell are ya?”

As their eyes readjusted to the darkness, handshakes and claps on the back were exchanged. Gabe, Dugan, and Bucky had all served together in the American 107th Infantry Regiment, Gabe explained to her; they had been taken prisoner together weeks before. “Bucky here is one of the bravest sonuvabitches I’ve ever met,” Dugan laughed. “And the dumbest.”

“Hey,” Barnes countered, jokingly. “Dumb luck doesn’t make you dumb.”

In the weeks since their capture, the friends had not seen each other, save for infrequent sightings on the factory floor, where the prisoners tended to keep their heads down and their hands busy. There was no time for socialization or niceties there. As such, their conversation on the evening of their reunion extended late into the night, with jokes and a bit of dark humour crowding the cell even more. Elle struggled to grasp at sleep, stiffening and shifting against James’ shoulder. Ever the gentleman, the Major tried his best to express their shared discontent through soft tuts and polite clearings of his throat, until finally, after nearly three hours of Barnes holding noisily forth with his old friends, James set civility aside. “Will you kindly shut up?” he snapped, and in his embrace, Elle reddened. Of course they wanted to chat; of course they were happy to be back together. She should have spoken up earlier; she could have put the request much more gently. “Elle here is trying to sleep,” he added, softer this time.

Dugan, Gabe, and a few of the others murmured sincere apologies, and she felt a flash of frustration streak through her, aimed at James. They needn’t be so penitent, and he needn’t treat her like a sleepy, ineffectual child, incapable of making such requests for herself. A rebellious little quarter of her mind wanted to correct him, to tell the others to continue chatting -- after all, they were old friends, and already she had been able to hear something brighter in Gabe’s voice, which had been
faltering over the past few days, leaving him at odd moments.

Barnes, the newcomer, remained silent, turning his bright blue eyes on Elle, who -- even though it was dark, and she could scarcely make out the features of his unfamiliar face -- looked away, a shame she did not truly own bringing hot tears to her own eyes. “Sorry, miss,” he said quietly, genuinely.

That night, once silence had crept in the scant spaces between the prisoners, she dreamed an uneasy vision of those blue eyes, felt the warmth of his head in her lap -- she sank into the memory of another bright-eyed boy, a boy so far away, who’d once read to her with his head in her lap. She woke the next morning with the tang of sorrow upon her tongue.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're enjoying the story. If you are able to provide some feedback, that would be so appreciated!
She moved through the world with the logic of a child in a nightmare, pacing herself so that the monsters could not follow; could not predict her movements; could not see her thoughts. And in this way, she survived, hour by hour, day by day.

Elle began to experience the world in sensations, rather than thought, so that she understood morning as the shifting of James’ body beneath her; work as the stinging kiss of the metal plates against her fingertips; rest as the cool bars of the cell, the contrast between her sweat-sodden jumper and her feverish skin. Night was absence, when she could slip away to somewhere brighter, softer, purer.

Those days passed: shifting, stinging, searing. She ached with the passage of them.

And then the monsters spoke, their voices breaking the dream-state, the nightmare-world, and she woke with a clattering of steel and an uncharacteristic curse from McBride’s lips: “Shit, darlin’, you okay?” He pressed his hands over hers, but there was no blood, no open wound. Nothing to cry over. So she didn’t.

The prisoners were ordered to stand at attention in their workspaces, to face Colonel Lohmer and Lieutenant-General Schmidt up high on the catwalk above them, surveying the huge expanse of subjugated productivity: the great, hulking mass of the Valkyrie, now beginning to take shape as a piece of martial technology more advanced than most of the engineers who had helped to design it had ever thought possible; rows upon rows of firearms, in various stages of assembly; stacks of crates, promising bloodshed within, which were ready to be shipped out by the end of that day’s shift; and faces, a sea of faces.

She stood next to McBride, leaning her left hip just slightly against the worktable, and the cold press of it grounded her, kept her in the moment. Even as she felt the earth tremble beneath her, as the monsters spoke again.

“See what you have wrought with us, dear Allies?” Lohmer spat, venom trickling through to pool within the last word. “Here is destruction and death; here is transformation. And you” -- he swept a hand across the width of the factory floor below him -- “all of you are a part of that. A victory for HYDRA, that is what you are building here.”

They were too far away for Elle to make out the details of their expressions, but she could just imagine the look on Lohmer’s face: all cold smugness; cruel satisfaction. She looked away, down at her feet, anywhere but at the monsters.

On and on it went; an endless diatribe glorifying the wonders HYDRA would bring to the world -- bought with their sweat and their blood -- and the divine secrets at work within the heart of the force. Throughout Lohmer’s rather theatrical speech, Schmidt remained silent, still and looming at his side. Beside her, McBride stirred, noting her discomfort. If James were with her, or Gabe, she would have felt more than comfortable reaching for their hand. But though they had spent dozens upon dozens of
hours together already, she did not feel that McBride was the type of man used to having his hand forcibly grasped by an emotional colleague; if he wanted to comfort her, she decided, he would have to make the first move.

Lohmer continued in this same vein for what felt like hours, and despite themselves, the prisoners began to shift and murmur where they stood. Their supervisors were far too preoccupied with paying rapt attention to the Colonel themselves that they could not possibly intervene at every outburst of distraction, and so here and there, Elle noted little isolated storms of disdain. Subtly, with eyes as downcast as she could manage while still striving to actually see, she scanned her own work area. McBride had taken a step or two backwards, so that they were arranged laterally, situating himself on her right. Across the table, she could see Gabe and Dugan exchanging dismayed looks. And over her left shoulder, slightly behind and about twenty or so yards away, she caught a glimpse of a pair of bright, blue eyes.

One winked.

Elle looked away; Barnes had been nothing but polite since his arrival -- deferential even. But he’d kept his distance, and for that she was grateful. Pain stroked at the edges of his easy smile, and she was beginning to feel smothered from the care and comforting required in this den of horrors. It was far, far too much.

“Thank you, Colonel, for those inspiring words.” She watched as Schmidt took a step forward, leaning both hands against the railing. New tension rippled through the crowd: Lohmer was intensely disliked, but Schmidt was feared. Leader of the Third Reich Army’s science and research division, he was known to be a close confident of the Führer himself -- so much so that he had not only been given sole command of HYDRA, but was able, it was claimed, to conduct all sorts of strange experiments, all in pursuit of glorifying the Reich and crushing the Allied forces. She had never met Schmidt; he had not been so directly involved in her induction to the facility, but she’d heard the whispers. And the whispers were more than enough.

Schmidt surveyed his audience; a chill curled down her spine. There was something far too steady about his gaze, his bearing -- something inhumanly static. “You may think that because you are here against your will that this makes you prisoners,” he said coldly. “This is an illogical conclusion, for you have never been more free.”

He went on to explain that their imprisonment was, in truth, the most liberated they would ever become. “Liberty is a responsibility from which you have indeed been freed,” he roared. “The choices posed to you by your own agency were far too weighty for small human minds.” Their imprisonment was their enlightenment; in their servitude, they had been transformed. “You have come before HYDRA as young supplicants to the old gods.” Schmidt finally smiled down at them, but it was a cold thing, a distant thing; a faraway rift in the galaxy. “Be grateful.”

Grateful. Be grateful. Protest bloomed behind Elle’s lips, but self-preservation kept her silent. McBride was shuffling from one foot to the other, suddenly more restless than she had ever seen the quiet man.

On and on it went, this endless, self-aggrandizing soliloquy. Elle began to chafe under the ludicrous ideology being laid out like a divine law: supplicants before the old gods? She wanted to laugh aloud -- as though any gods, any higher beings capable of understanding basal truths -- as though they would turn away from the broken and elevate the breakers.

She knew the stories. Her father had told them to her. Odin and Thor; Bragi the poet; Baldr the Beautiful. She had known them well. Those names had been corrupted now, those tales tainted. The Führer had taken them for his own, twisted them into what they were not, and it pained her anew that
now, now Schmidt was deploying them, an unaware cavalry into a fray not of their design or purpose.

Elle was not the only one bothered by the speech. McBride had gone ramrod straight, thrumming as a tuning fork. She glanced over, hoping to provide some reassurance, some small look of, *It’ll be over soon. He will shut up soon*, but the Sergeant wouldn’t catch her eye. His fists were clenched at his side, she could see; purpose danced along the tangible fault-lines of his composure.

And Schmidt was still talking.

“*The birth of the Valkyrie* will herald a great victory for HYDRA, a victory that you will be a part of.” He smirked. “Rejoice.”

“Never!”

Sensations again: panic, copper on her lips; the sturdy presence of the worktable; a khaki uniform between her fingers. *No. No. No.*

McBride took a step forward, gently easing her grip from his side. Other prisoners parted as he moved ahead, seemingly oblivious to the HYDRA guards preparing to flank him from either side. Even when they’d wrapped their arms about his chest, pulling him back into their press, he stood tall and impenetrable -- a steel grey gaze fixed on Lohmer and Schmidt, who were appraising him curiously. Insubordination was not common, not once the soldiers had been put on the factory floor. “*You’ll never win,*” McBride spat, that southern American accident curling out, honey in her ears. “*People won’t stand for this, you bastards. You’ll lose. Good wins in the end. Virtue wins in the end. And all you’ve got is some damn fairytales.*”

It happened in seconds, seconds that passed as years. Elle was forced to bear witness as those guards brought their fists into McBride’s gut, again and again and again; as the man crumpled to the floor, protest and patriotism dying just a moment before he did; as blood spattered and painted the concrete floor; as a scream of terror, a fear of being next, an attempt to fill the aching absence of him -- as that erupted from her, and new arms, softer arms, came about her and she was pressed against a firm, cotton-clad chest.

His blood was on her wrist. She stared down at it, listening to the groans of the dying man, wondering if the Lady MacBeth stain would ever scrub away. A sob tumbled from between her lips, and she breathed deep instead the sour, pinched smell of sweat and desperation, not yet understanding who held her, who was dragging her back and away from McBride’s body, from the HYDRA guards still resolutely kicking and striking. Not until the new man spoke did she recognize his voice, match it to the memory of bright blue eyes: “*Sh, doll, sh, sh. Don’t draw attention to yourself, come on, with me.*”

Together, they moved through the nightmare world, him still pressing her into his chest, and the intimacy of the moment was not lost on her. *If Susan Musgrave could see me now,* she thought dully as she was gently pushed backwards, trusting him to guide her steps. Her tears soaked his shirt, but she did not dare apologize. To speak would be to open the floodgates, and she could not afford that.

Around them, howls of incensed rage rose and fell, as the prisoners cried out against this injustice. Curses -- in English and French, in thick southern accents and twirled Irish brogues -- seared against her skin; German orders were issued left and right, even as the chaos grew. She became aware of a wall behind her, unforgiving concrete. Barnes’ grip slipped down her arms, and he wiped away at the blood on her wrist, holding her hand between them. She looked up; his eyes crinkled at the edges with the cut of his tight smile: “*It’s alright, sweetheart. It’s gonna be just fine.*”
But behind him, the nightmare was roiling, and when the warning shots began firing, she closed her eyes and groaned. “Shit,” he said, and whirled around, reaching his left arm behind to anchor her to him, though he needn’t have bothered: in her panic and her grief, she had decided to latch on to Barnes, to his living presence, to the sensation of his breath as she settled a shaking hand against his shoulder blades. Elle hated feeling so helpless, so adrift, but the shock of McBride’s hot blood against her skin and the knowledge that he had just died, right in front of her, and she hadn’t been able to do anything…

Screams burst; men fell. Still Barnes remained in front of her, shielding her from the riot. “Name’s Bucky, by the way. Don’t know if you caught that,” he said over his shoulder, taking a step back as a French soldier went sprinting past, crowbar in hand. “You’re Ellie, right?”

“She,” she corrected quietly, squeezing the edge of his shirt a little more tightly. “My name is Elle.”

But what did it matter, really? In removing her from the nexus of the danger, this man had saved her life, and he could jolly well call her whatever he liked.

Peering over his other shoulder, Elle could see that HYDRA was slowly beginning to regain their control over the populace. The prisoners were angry and emboldened by the unnecessary execution of one of their own, but they were also hungry and exhausted. A full-scale riot was far too daunting a task for most, and as the guards began to multiply -- emerging from around the tall warehouse shelving units, and from behind thick, steel-plated doors -- they used their menacing machine guns to quell the upset, brandishing them aloft now without firing, for the most part. Until a huge, black-haired man stepped forward, shoving a few young soldiers away from the muzzle of one HYDRA gun. He stood perhaps twenty yards away from where Barnes and Elle cowered against the wall; she felt her guardian tense back against her as the black-haired man took another step forward, ignoring the guard’s orders to stand back. “Nazi scum,” the man hissed, lobbing a ball of saliva towards the guard. In slow motion, Elle watched the HYDRA agent’s gloved fingers curl around the trigger -- a flash of blue light emanated from the tip of the gun, and the black-haired man was gone. Save for a shadow of ash on the floor.

Silence descended. Elle started to heave, to gag, but nothing would come up. Barnes turned again, took her in his arms, angling her head so that if she were to vomit, it would not be on him. He murmured soft, comforting words in her ear, his lips hovering dangerously close to her skin but she didn’t care, she could not care, scandal did not matter when a man could be vaporized right in front of her.

“What...what was that?” she choked, gripping the arm across her chest. “What happened?” Elle had seen bullet wounds; she’d helped to treat men riddled with them. The weapons of war were familiar to her from their results, and she knew what a gun of that size could do to a human body. But there was no firearm in existence, so far as she understood, capable of simply disintegrating its target.

Barnes tightened his grip. “Don’t worry about that now.” He shifted, turning them slightly. “We need to find the others. Get in our line.” The black-haired man’s death had shocked most of the prisoners into obedience; on the factory floor, soldiers were milling about quietly, looking for their cell-mates. Suffice it to say, production would be halted for the remainder of the day.

She allowed herself to be tugged along behind him this time, a little more steady on her feet. His hand was rough around hers, but it brought her comfort just the same, and she felt -- from the way his shoulders had relaxed; the way he withdrew his teeth from his bottom lip -- that he was helped by her touch, too. When the familiar crumbles away, thrusting one into profound disarray, small human touches are a balm to the soul. And so while an academic part of her brain analyzed her hand in his as socially inopportune (in any other context), given that they were unmarried, that they were virtual
strangers, that they were living in a POW factory -- the fact that she was unsure if “Bucky” was even his actual name -- she let him lead her on regardless. Propriety be damned; his grip was reassuring.

Most of their other cellmates had formed a line near the main exit doors, ranged silently before a helmeted guard with one of those awful guns. James turned at their approach and pulled her forward; she did not even have a chance to thank Barnes for his aid. “Are you hurt?” James asked, but she could not explain: physically, she was sound -- never better. Not a bloody scratch on her, thanks to Barnes. But deep in her soul, she had been wounded. Shot through with a new, dark knowledge she did not want to possess. HYDRA was no ordinary organization. That blue light -- that quick death -- that obliteration. Those were not the workings of ordinary men, nor any science she knew. And it chilled her, brought her back to the nightmare plane, to realize that this war was being fought on one side with heart and justice; on the other with something closer to evil magic than technological design.

In the confines of their cell for the rest of the day, as the afternoon light slanted and shifted, the prisoners of the facility sat in a stunned quiet, exchanging no questions, offering no speculation. They were not fed. Elle resumed her place between Gabe and James, but could not help but glance over at Barnes, who sat with his hands dangling between his knees, those bright eyes of his cast down in contemplation. She gave herself time to examine him now, properly: he looked younger in here; out there, on the floor, in the heat of those chaotic moments, Elle had thought him much older than she, a seasoned soldier. But he was a young man, a slight man, and not a little handsome. There was something distinctly Mediterranean or even Balkan about his looks -- blue eyes and dark hair, angled cheekbones and sharp jaw.

She wanted to thank him for what he had done for her that day, but was loath to break the silence of the cellblock. Out there, in cell eight, a group of men were likely grieving for Peter McBride, and the strange hollowness thumping in her chest reminded her that she had lost a friend today, too. For the black-haired man, she was sure, the silence was a vigil kept by the population of one of the cages, and perhaps that group of young privates he’d defended.

Elle shook her head slightly, batting away the memories.

Disentangling herself gently from James’ embrace, and quashing a sense of embarrassment at the awareness of how close she had been to two separate men in the space of just a few hours -- Elle managed to scoot her way over to the other side of the cage. She apologized to Sampson as she jostled him awake, where he had curled up around the middle of the circle, but he just waved off her “sorry” with a faint smile. A smile that did not reach his eyes.

Barnes looked up when she’d arranged herself gingerly in front of him, still unused to the luxury of being able to sit cross-legged in trousers. He flashed her a quick grin at the sight, and she felt abruptly uncomfortable, as though she had been too forward, and perhaps indeed she had, but those were the standards of another time, another place -- not this nightmare world. “How you doin’, doll?” he asked, tilting his head as a smile bloomed across his face.

Elle cleared her throat. How did one go about thanking someone for saving their life? It seemed a terribly formal task, and one that her education had not sufficiently ingrained within her repertoire of etiquette and miscellaneous social niceties. She cleared her throat again. Barnes’ grin widened.

“I just...I wanted to say, er, well…” He looked at her expectantly, something suspiciously close to amusement dancing in his eyes. How could he be amused, though, when just a few hours before they’d watched two men die horribly right in front of them? “Thank you,” she finished feebly, her cheeks warming at the idiocy of it all.
Kierney was sitting on Barnes’ right. During her fumbling speech, he’d been glancing back and forth between the two, but once Elle had managed to get it all out, he looked away. Her voice softened on the last words, and suddenly, her gratitude felt too tender for ears other than those of her intended recipient.

For her part, Elle was generally unaware of the perceived intimacy of her actions: she simply felt that Barnes needed to be thanked for his aid and his care. In truth, she was a little embarrassed that she had gotten so completely beside herself, had so readily forgotten the golden rule of the factory floor - do not draw attention to yourself. McBride had aimed to break that rule, for a set of principles far too vaulted for her to think about right now. And even as she absentmindedly wiped at the now-invisible splash of his blood against her wrist, she understood that he had known what it would mean. Speaking out against HYDRA, against Hitler. Calling their foundational mythology mere fairytales. He knew he was courting his own death, daring them to kill him. She closed her eyes against the memory, but when a gentle hand closed around her shoulder, she jumped back and away, those hazel eyes blazing with a heat that made Barnes want to jump back himself.

“Hey,” he said ruefully, removing his hand and presenting both in a conciliatory, surrendering gesture. “Sorry.” Across the expanse of the cage, he could see that Falsworth had tensed, ready to pounce, lest his precious girl be somehow offended. Barnes sighed; he knew he’d overstepped the mark. A dame on a date might welcome a hand on the arm or shoulder, even just for a moment, but Elle had been beaten and broken, and though the feel of her in his arms had helped to bring him back to a better reality that afternoon, there was a world of difference between a guarding embrace and a flirtatious touch. One she’d needed, to keep her alive; this, well -- she needed to ask for that. Guilt made him bite his lip, offer another apology.

But she had already retreated, gaze fixed firmly on her feet as she disentangled herself and stood. The prisoners did not often stand in the cells -- room was limited as it was, and for most of them, the fourteen hour shifts on their feet caused cramps and aches by the time they were back within the cages. And so it was jarring, irregular, when she stood and forced him to look up to meet her eyes. “I’m sorry, Ellie,” Barnes repeated. “And you’re welcome.”

He expected politeness to win, for whatever glacier had just slid between them to be thawed by propriety. His smile -- that always melted his sister or his mother when he’d done something wrong. But not this girl. Those pretty eyes of hers rose up to meet his, finally, and the anger was still there: “My name is Elle,” she said coldly, before turning on her heel and hurrying back to Falsworth’s waiting embrace.

Blood, red and hot and hers, gushed from the wound. “Shit!” Gabe took her hand in his, tilting it this way and that. “Oh, shit, Elle, what happened?”

Honestly, though, she did not know. The world was happening in bits and pieces again, moments that slipped by before she realized they had occurred. The days since McBride’s death had marched by in increments she could barely comprehend; at the periphery of every second of her awareness there flashed that deadly blue light.

“What is the problem?” A HYDRA guard with his face half-concealed between those consuming helmets approached them at the table, displeasure biting at the edge of his voice. Any disruptions in productions inevitably lead to discipline for guards and supervisors as well as prisoners.

Gabe turned, easing her from her stool, hands still entwined. “Miss Andersen here, she cut herself,” he explained quickly, holding up her right hand slightly to show the blood trickling down her wrist. “By accident,” he added.
Though they could not see his eyes, the incline of the guard’s head told Gabe and Elle that he was considering the wound -- Gabe loosened his grip and lifted his fingers so the gash was visible. Crimson and angry, the rip snaked across her palm. It needed stitches, and would inevitably scar, but she could honestly feel no pain. She was not even sure precisely when the wound had happened -- it was the rush of red that had alerted her to its existence.

“Binde es,” the guard ordered. “Nach ihrer Schicht kann sie zur Krankenstation gehen.” Elle nodded to show she understood, watching as he strode further down the line, barking out a new series of directions at the rest of the table. Barnes and Gabe had been transferred to her assembly line just a few days prior -- Gabe first, to replace McBride, meaning that he was by her side every day; and Barnes later, after the death of a Canadian soldier a few nights before. They still had not heard what precisely had happened to that poor man.

Across the table, Barnes was observing the scene with concern. “You okay, doll?” he asked, passing off a double-plated sheet to the next man, taking the opportunity to sweep a hand through his dark hair and lean across the workspace to get a better view of her bloodied hand. “Elli - Elle?”

She did not answer. Since the day of the riot, Elle had been very cool and distant towards the newcomer. In spare, lucid moments, she often found herself biting her lip or pressing her fingernails into the palm of her hands, hoping that the little jolts of pain would do something to ease the mortification she still felt about the way she had permitted himself to be so...she hesitated to use the word “weak,” for she was very firm in her belief that sadness and fear were not indicative of a lack of strength. But “demonstrative,” of course, that would work -- as would “overwrought.” The way she had allowed herself to be bundled in his arms, to be directed to safety -- memories of that still chafed at her uncomfortably. And his smiling, earnest face simply reminded her of those moments, and she despised him for it.

It was not fair of her, she realized, explaining (rather detachedly) to Gabe that the guard wanted her gash bound and that she would be permitted to visit the infirmary following her shift. Truth was, Barnes had been nothing but kindness itself, if a little flirtatious. But she was not here for that, Elle reminded herself firmly. And after what had taken place at the hospital before she had left, she was loath to find herself too attached to any one man in particular. To this end, she had begun to sleep alone, curling up on the floor of the cage without touching James anymore. Some of the HYDRA guards had begun to make snide insinuations in German when they made their morning rounds, and she was aware of the risk of any expectations formed by her enemies. She’d heard stories. She knew what war often meant for women, forced to fight battles on multiple fronts.

“That alright?” Gabe’s voice broke her reverie and she looked down at the fairy neat job he’d done of winding a strip of fabric about her palm while she had been lost in her own thoughts. “Not too tight?”

He’d torn off a piece of his own shirt to bind her wound; her throat closed, soaked with unshed tears. “Yes, thank you, Gabe,” she whispered, turning back to her work. Soreness thudded up her arm now, but she could not afford to complain. The two of them had already robbed HYDRA of a good six minutes of work.

Barnes kept glancing over at her throughout the day; she could feel his blue stare on her bowed head intermittently through the following hours. He did not, however, attempt to further intervene or ask any other questions. By the time the end-of-shift bell had been rung, though, the shirt around her hand was entirely sodden with blood, and she was beginning to feel rather lightheaded.

“Herr Soldat?” she asked quietly, once she and the rest of her cellmates had lined up by the door. The guard assigned to lead them back to the block looked at her, head tilted curiously. “Darf ich jetzt
He was not the same guard who had given her the order earlier, so she held up her bloody, bandaged hand as proof that she did indeed have genuine need of a visit to the infirmary.

The guard called over a junior officer, a young man who had not yet, it seemed, earned the full facial helmet. His eyes roamed uncomfortably over her figure as he approached. “Take this prisoner to the infirmary, have her hand seen to,” the older guard instructed. Elle breathed; just a little while longer with this pain, then. She was worried about infection. “But…” The older guard nodded his head towards Barnes, standing just in front of her. “You will take this man with her. If she tries anything stupid, shoot him. If he tries anything, shoot her. The girl has a tendency to become distressed.”

Dissent rose up in whispers and mutters as Elle and Barnes were pulled from the line. James opened his mouth to object, but she silenced him with a terse smile. “It’s alright,” she said, trying to reassure her worried cellmates. “It’s quite alright.”

Down through the long corridors they walked, Barnes directly beside her. Chills crawled up and down her spine as their shadows lengthened and the HYDRA soldier’s boots resounded on the floor. Neither of them dare spoke -- Elle had offered him a quick English explanation of why he had been removed from the line to accompany her -- both fully understanding the threat posed by any sign of insubordination, particularly in the days following McBride’s death.

She had never been to the infirmary before, though it was located near Zola’s laboratory and shared much the same layout. A few HYDRA members occupied beds here and there, but she and Barnes were led to the back of the long room, to a narrow wooden table pushed up against the wall in a poorly-lit corner. Barnes helped her to sit atop it, enabling her to protect her now-burning hand, and he arranged himself firmly by her side as their escort barked out a sharp order to wait for the doctor. Before stepping aside, he ripped a curtain forward, shielding them from the view of the other patients.

Alone in their shady little moment of calm, Barnes let out a deep breath. “Damn,” he murmured. “For a minute there, I thought we were done for.” He glanced over with a small smile. “You okay, sweetheart? You don’t mind doctors, do you?”

He was trying to lighten the mood, she could recognize that easily, but God, didn’t he realize? There was no room for levity in this world, in HYDRA’s world. Elle was likely in for a manhandling, some nail-biting interaction supervised by a man with a magic gun who hated everything she stood for, and some shoddy sutures. In fact, she expected to be dead from an infection within the week. Marvellous. And here he was, taking the bloody mick.

“We shouldn’t talk,” she whispered, holding a finger to her lips. “They’ll get upset.”

“Oh, darlin’,” he said lowly, taking another step closer. “They’ll find a way to get upset no matter what we do -- silence, chatting, dancing, drinking. They hate us, doll.”

“Schritt zurück, Gefangener.” It was not Zola who had come to attend her, but a pale-faced beanpole of a physician who did indeed shoot them both a look of such utter loathing that she almost fell from the table with the force of it. Barnes glared at him for his abrupt manner and the way in which he simply grabbed Elle’s injured hand, causing her to yelp.

“Step back, he said,” Elle muttered, shoving him gently away with her left hand. “Please, Sergeant.”

The doctor rubbed some horrible smelling brown liquid into her wound, tossing Gabe’s bandage to the floor with an unprofessional expletive. His treatment caused the stinging to increase, so much so that she could not help but cry out and allow a few tears to squeeze out from her closed eyes; the
stitches, when he began sewing, were worse. *Herr Doktor* did not see fit to use any sort of numbing agent.

“*Stille, Schlampe!*” he snapped, reaching up a free hand to slap her firmly across the face. “You are interfering with my work!”

He did not have to do this, she reminded herself, turning to face Barnes instead. He could send her back downstairs with an open wound and let her die of blood poisoning in the cell or on the factory floor. She needed to be calm. Losing herself in a handsome face -- well, that had always worked to improve her mood before.

Barnes seemed to instinctively understand what she needed to do, to focus on something other than the possibly dirty needle threading in and out of her skin. He stood just a foot or two away, eyes bright in this dim corner of the ward. She allowed her own gaze to scan his features, finding purchase and comfort in the contours of his face, the way his dark hair swept back towards the crown of his head. His mouth was curled into a subtle, reassuring smile -- just for her. In that moment, when her eyes had found his lips, she felt her resolve faltering for a moment, the tears threatening to come anew. She was glad to be with someone familiar, someone who wanted to make her laugh. When had she last laughed?

The boy had always made her laugh. Mostly at inappropriate moments -- important dinners or quiet nights with his family. He would say the most outrageous things; he so loved to leave her giggling and breathless in his wake. Of course, she recalled now, he had often left her teary and disappointed in his wake, too, but that was beside the point at the moment.

Not for the first time, she wished he were here with her. With him, surrendering to his care and affection had never made her feel childish and weak, as falling asleep so frequently in James’ embrace had. The comfort that brought her had quickly been outweighed by a nascent shame she really needn’t have owned. No -- being with the boy was exciting and freeing, as though the rules did not apply to them. She had never worried about propriety half so much when she was with him as she did here, in this place and back at the hospital.

That sense of propriety was forcing her to resist Barnes’ kindness, she knew. When he looked at her with those blue eyes, when he tilted his head just so for that self-satisfied grin he often wore -- like the cat that had got the cream -- she wanted to blush and say something witty and wear a pretty dancing dress. He reminded her of the boy when he grinned. That smile belied promises she wanted to know -- kisses in the dark; soft hands winding through her curls; sly grins across a dinner table. But that world was so far behind her now, and the profound discordance of looking at Barnes and remembering the boy caused her feelings to tangle up so within her that she could scarcely stand it. The pain in her hand was more comprehensible than that confusion. Love did not exist here. She could not fancy Barnes, not out of loyalty to the boy, but because something that sweet could not grow here.

She needed to quash it.

The boy had not contacted her since she left England, Elle reminded herself. Barnes was a cocksure flirt who called women “doll” and “sweetheart” because he did not bother to learn their names. She was a prisoner in a HYDRA weapons manufacturing facility and she was probably going to die of medical malpractice.

“Wait here,” the man barked, taking a final look down at her palm. “Doctor Zola wishes to speak with you.”

Alone again. The only reason HYDRA was allowing this, though, was because they could both be
easily shot within seconds of attempting any sort of escape or resistance. Elle pushed away visions of Barnes dead on the floor, studying her stitches instead. “You’re one brave dame,” he said quietly, breaking their silence.

She glanced up at him again, anticipating the quirk of a grin about his mouth, but found only a serious, earnest expression. He was not joking. “Woman,” he corrected, misinterpreting her lack of response. “You’re one brave woman.”

“Indeed she is, soldier.”

Elle and Barnes broke their shared gaze to see that Zola had joined them; Barnes was forced to look down to meet his eyes, while Elle turned away. The doctor’s presence, his owlish stare, brought her back to those panicked moments in the lab, just before Lohmer had taken her for the second time -- the day she was certain she was going to die, and all for sneaking a glance at a manila folder.

“I am to understand you had a bit of an accident, Miss Andersen,” Zola sneered. “I trust Herr Mueller has treated you well?”

“J-ja, sehr gut,” she stammered, gripping the edge of the table, watching her knuckles go white. “Danke schon, Herr Doktor.”

“Look at me when you are speaking, girl.”

As she raised her head, eyes wet, Barnes took a small step closer, angling himself so that his own hand, where it stole between them, could not be seen. With a gentle touch to the top of her knuckles, she relaxed, giving him permission in the lowering of her shoulders. He began to trace light circles on the back of her hand, just one finger at a time, feeling for the easing of her grip, reminding her that she was, at least, not alone. “Ich entschuldige mich, Herr Doktor.”

She prayed he would not call Lohmer again for her rudeness. The rules of this game were ever-changing, following no true logic she could grasp at. Could a simple lack of eye contact warrant a beating? Would he take Barnes instead?

Zola was indeed appraising Barnes, who had fixed an even gaze on Elle instead. She watched as the doctor’s eyes took in his figure, tracing the sinewy ropes of muscle in his forearms; the resolute firmness of his chest. He was a wiry man -- not thin; slim but strong. Still fairly athletic, despite the weeks of hard labour and poor nutrition. He had a few old cuts and scrapes here and there, but all in all, Barnes still appeared fairly healthy, especially considering his living conditions.

“Wer ist dein Freund?” Zola asked, continuing to take in Barnes’ physique.

Elle cleared her throat. “Sergeant Barnes, Herr Doktor.” Barnes started at the mention of his name, glancing over at Zola with an incredulous expression.

Zola proceeded to fire a volley of brief questions at the soldier, all in English, so that he could answer for himself. With every reply, with every further query, Elle felt the tension rolling back into her every muscle, and her head had begun to ache. “Twenty-six,” Barnes stated. “From Brooklyn, New York.” He had worked in the dockyards at home, he explained in response to Zola’s final question. His finger did not move from her hand, continuing to dance in comforting spirals over her skin.

The doctor smiled hugely, evidently pleased with this information. “Thank you, Sergeant Barnes. You are free to go.” She closed her eyes.

Stiff thread in her palm; pain behind her eyes; cool bars at her back; James’ even breathing by her
side; copper blood between her teeth. And across the cell, across the wide world HYDRA had permitted them to possess, a few whispered words of comfort in the night: “Don’t worry, doll. One day, this all will have been just a bad dream.”

She could only hope.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're enjoying the story. Thoughts and feedback would be very much appreciated. Please let me know what you think! :)


Ache

The first blow sent her reeling. The second drew blood. And the third -- oh, God, the third.

“G’morning, Ellie. How’s the hand?” Barnes’ smile was wide, and far, far too bright for their dim world. As usual, she just offered him a nod, and then moved further along the table, situating herself between Gabe and a Frenchman who had never given his name. Pain pinched and spread through the palm of her right hand as she endeavoured to catch a grip on the metal plates before her.

As October drew on (and it inevitably must be, she reasoned), the air within the alpine factory and facility grew even colder. Dragon’s breath curled and ghosted away before their trembling lips most of the nights and mornings; occasionally, in the afternoon, the press of so many bodies generated a scant amount of heat. Those who were able to be constantly moving, like James and Dugan, fared somewhat better than most, as they were able to keep their blood pumping and their muscles in motion. For workers like Elle, Barnes, and Gabe, who were assigned to the tables and the slower assembly line, the cold managed to seep into their bones and make them sluggish and achy. The guards were displeased with this result, for it tended to slow down production. But how, Elle wondered futilely, did HYDRA expect them to perform at high levels of industry when the very fingers on their tired hands were threatening to freeze and fall off?

A deep misery had crept into Elle’s soul since her visit to the infirmary; more than once, James had asked Barnes to explain what precisely had transpired during their trip, but the sergeant simply shrugged his shoulders: “Exactly what you’d expect, Major: swabs, stitches, and annoying questions.” For his part, Barnes tended to push away his recollections of Zola’s interview, the way he had focused on his -- well, back at Goldie’s Gym in Brooklyn, they would have referred to them as his “stats,” broadly speaking: his age, weight, height, general health, that sort of thing. He’d found himself glancing over at Ellie as he replied, wondering how old she was; what she thought of him working down at the docks -- what she thought, full-stop. The girl was a walking, muttering mystery to him. And though Barnes fully understood that making a conquest of the only woman for miles was not the best use of his time as a POW, and indeed, should not be occupying his thoughts so much of the time, he could not help but dwell on her, observe her, wonder about her. Thinking about her was far better than worrying himself about why Zola had been so intent on asking those questions. And as it turned out, he was not the only one spending time thinking about Elle Andersen.

“I’m concerned,” James Falsworth said late one night, flinging the whisper out into the darkness. He’d waited until Elle had fallen asleep. “About her.”

She had retreated, Falsworth explained, into herself. “She was always far more talkative than this,” he murmured, looking down at her sleeping form where she had curled herself like a comma in the middle of the cell. The absence of her in his arms was troubling him, too; he hadn’t been sleeping as well since she had left. “At the hospital in Italy, she was so kind and thoughtful; she’d natter on all the time while she worked. But now…”

“Is it any wonder, though?” Dugan yawned. “We’re not all who we used to be, Major.”

Gabe agreed. “She’s scared and tired, just like the rest of us. Lohmer put a hell of a beating on her, you know.”

Barnes thought back to the night the girl had first appeared on the cellblock. Whispers of her arrival had echoed through the various cages; when the dull clang of her head against the bars had rung out, they had all cringed, railing internally (and some vocally) at the abject cruelty of Lohmer’s treatment.
The next day, she was a strange sight on the factory floor, and more stories and whispers swept through. Theories of her origins ranged from the likely (a nurse taken prisoner) to the fanciful (one of Captain America’s showgirls, kidnapped from backstage), to the absurd (a Bavarian countess, brought here for resisting the Nazi incursion).

He’d found out the whole story through the grapevine, and eventually, from Elle herself. One night, as they sat around slurping up their cabbage water, she had related the story -- at Gabe’s request -- of how she had met Falsworth back in Italy. Barnes found himself enchanted by the stories of her methods of comfort: she had brought shiny rocks and delicate flowers to the bedsides of raging soldiers; read them bedtime stories; recited poetry and sang off-key. And gradually, Falsworth explained, to the reddening of Elle’s cheeks, she had helped them. Her small kindnesses and gentle charm had entreated those weary, beleaguered soldiers from their shells -- reminding them of the taste of hope and humanity.

Part of Barnes wished he could have met her then, or on some starry London street, during a calm night off, when he could take her dancing or out for a drink and swapped stories. He knew how to treat a dame in a scenario like that, and he knew just what he’d tell Ellie: that her eyes were autumn; that her smile was rare and sweet. That he admired the ever-living hell out of her for being so brave, so stoic.

Another part, a logical part, told him he was transferring, coping. That his life before the war had crumbled away into dim memories and he had blocked out happy things: Stevie, his mother and siblings; the weight of his payday in his pocket; a night on the town with Dot (who, he recalled briefly now, had stopped speaking to him about two years ago); the glimmer of the New York skyline. His preoccupation with Elle, though she was pretty and kind, likely had more to do with an instinct to scrape together some sort of happiness in this new existence of his. If anything did happen between them, it would never be a grand wartime love story -- likely things would fizzle out the moment they were free of the bars.

But then he thought about the way he’d traced those circles onto her hand, after watching her fight tears and sobs while the needle had woven in and out of her palm. Ellie had relaxed into his touch then, allowing herself to be vulnerable, just for a moment. In that quick, private action, Barnes had felt more intimately connected to her than when he’d grabbed her during the riot, pressed her into his chest and marvelled at the trust she placed in him, only knowing him for a few days.

But in moments of calm, she resisted him. Spoke to him coldly, or looked away when he tried to engage. It was as though she wanted to hold him at arm’s length, lest he pry too deeply or sort out any secrets she held. Maybe, he reminded himself firmly, maybe she just wasn’t interested in him. This wasn’t Brooklyn, after all -- this wasn’t peacetime. Ellie had bigger things on her mind than hooking a sweetheart, and perhaps he just was not her type.

No matter all that, he understood one thing: he cared about the girl. And he believed Falsworth’s concerns, this fear that Elle had retreated too far into herself to be truly aware of her situation. “She’s slowing down on the line,” Barnes added.

Falsworth nodded. “That’s dangerous for her, then. If HYDRA suspects her of shirking, they will not hesitate to punish her again. Perhaps this time, more permanently.” He sighed deeply, glancing down once again at the girl, who slept dreamlessly and still between them all. “She was already forcefully ejected from Zola’s service once; her punishment was to join us here. If they decide she’s not useful…”

“Well, we can’t let that happen,” Gabe countered firmly, sweeping a hand through the air as though to dissipate those unpleasant possibilities posed by Falsworth’s trailing off. “We help her.”
“How?” They turned to look at Dugan, who wore a doleful expression. “Look, I’m not saying we don’t – hell, no. We protect that girl at all costs. But how are we gonna help her improve her production?”

Ideas were tossed around in the dark: Gabe suggested that he and Barnes take over some of the plating, but that was quickly shot down when Sampson pointed out that such a move would inevitably be spotted by their supervisors and would cause their own production rates to decrease, Gabe admitted to grasping at straws. Falsworth wondered if he might request some sort of meeting with a higher-up, where he could be transferred to her station and she could return to some sort of office work. “She won’t like that,” Barnes argued. “She’ll think it’s her duty to be with us.”

Falsworth started, opened his mouth to object, but Dugan beat him to it: “You’re right, Buck. Like it or not, the kid wants to be out there with us, and to be honest, I feel safer knowing I can look over and see she’s fine...don’t need her holed up in anybody’s office, if you catch my drift.”

No one wanted to, but every one of them did catch his drift. The prospect of Elle at risk of -- Barnes shook his head. “Not gonna happen,” he said quietly, allowing himself a deep, fortifying breath.“Let’s just agree to help...encourage her along for the next few days. Her hand should start to get better soon. Once she’s not in so much pain, she might pick up the pace again.”

“Stille! Geh ins Bett!”

Barnes shimmied down the bars until he had managed to carve out a small space for himself against them. Just a foot away, Elle’s breathing had not changed pace, so he assumed she was still asleep; he could not see her face. But by her side, clenched and clawed in the pain that tethered her to this bitter reality, her hand twitched ever so slightly. The same hand that had brought those treasures and comforts to her patients in Italy.

She was so unprepared for this, for being a prisoner and this hard labour. No amount of training, VAD or not, would have readied her for this eventuality. It wasn’t fair; it was so goddamn wrong. And yet there she was. Carrying her own pain in the palm of her hand, slipping away a bit more each day -- but she woke and she rose and she went through the motions. She did her part. That strength and resolution absolutely floored him; there was beauty in its simplicity. And God, but it reminded him of home. Of his past. Of that skinny kid from Brooklyn, who would have done the same damn thing.

“Elle, please.”

“Come on, doll.”

“Just a few sips, kid. For us.”

“Elle, sweetheart.”

“Just one?”

“Have some of mine.”

“Ellie...I know it tastes like shit, but you need it.”

“Please.”

The first time the boy had gotten her in trouble, they’d been just children. Her mother had owned a
prized vase, the only truly garish ornamentation she permitted in their household (for she was an austere and spartan housekeeper). The vase was out of place in the world of smooth lines and cool colours that her mother had crafted, but it had been handed down from her own mother and as such earned pride of place in the main hall.

“That’s a pretty thing,” the boy had said, devilish mirth dancing in the ice of his eyes. And Elle, because she was already half in love with him, had agreed, curls bouncing in her eagerness to join in on the secret fun.

Ten minutes later, an almighty shriek bloomed from the hall and Elle had felt all the blood rush from her face. She had never heard her mother scream before. A fat little toad went hopping by, as the two children peered out from around the corner. Her tall, golden-haired mother had turned an alarming shade of puce, bellowing out her full name as she stood above a fan of broken glass upon the floor. She left the boy in the shadows.

Elle took the blame. Offered herself up like a sacrifice. Anything to protect the boy. Always to protect the boy. His comfort and his peace of mind weighed more to her than her own contentment, her own justice. She took her mother’s vengeance with a stoic grace and a small glance back at a grateful, conspiratorial grin in the shadows. She smiled back.

In the present -- in the cold and the dank and the horror of HYDRA’s world -- her hand spasmed and the piece of metal she had been holding onto clattered to the tabletop. Beside her, Gabe jumped, clenching his fingers around her forearm. A brand of worry. Her eyes -- tired, wan -- slid up to meet his, and he understood, for the very first time, that she was gone. Elle’s body was there with them, going through the motions of survival, but her mind had left them, vaulting to a better place. Loss charged through him; hope faded in the back of his own mind, that small, flickering candle of victory he’d been steadily fanning. She would fade, too, he feared; perhaps even faster.

“Here, sweetheart.” Gabe had taken to calling her that over the past few days. He’d noticed the way her shoulders had begun to stiffen at Bucky’s “dolls” and “darlin’s,” and he couldn’t blame her -- Barnes did tend to lay it on thick where she was concerned. Of course the fool had fallen in love with her straight away. But when Gabe called her “sweetheart,” she softened, melting into the term of endearment as though she had never heard it before. It warmed him to comfort her, brought him a brief sense of peace and calm.

He took the metal from her now, and the tiny handful of screws she’d been gripping far too tightly. She opened her ruined palm and examined it detachedly. Gabe scanned quickly for any signs of infection, but he could see plainly that the swelling had gone down and there were no worrying red lines snaking out from the line of stitches. “Does it hurt?” he asked quietly, glancing around for their supervisor -- fortunately, the HYDRA guard was further down the worktable, chewing out a prisoner for sloppy work, so far as Gabe was able to translate.

Elle shook her head. “Itches,” she murmured, extending a bruised finger to rub gingerly along the wound. “Itches like mad, Gabe.”

“That’s good,” Barnes whispered from across the table. “Means you’re healing, honey.”

Every now and then there was a streak of pain up her arm, she explained dully. It made her lose her grip and threatened to slow her down even more. “And if I slow down too much, you’ll slow down too and they’ll blame you for me, an-an-and…” Her eyes gleamed with panic as she clutched at Gabe’s shoulders, fixed an intense gaze on his face. “What if you die? What if you die?” she asked, and Gabe felt his stomach drop and twist. “What if you die, Bucky?” She turned to face Barnes, and he realized with an irreverent kind of disappointment that the first time she’d called him by anything other than his rank and surname was while she was in the claws of some manic storm. “Oh, no,” she
groaned. “Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no.”

“Sh, Elle, sh.” Gabe knew he couldn’t soothe her, knew he couldn’t fix this. He’d held crying girls in his arms before — but those were classmates after a failed exam or a bad date; his little sister after she fell from her bicycle the day he tried to teach her to ride; his cousin Mary-Jo after her father, his uncle, passed away. Mary-Jo had twisted and sobbed in his embrace, too, but he had not felt this helpless, this confused, this terrified. Because back then it had been just the two of them and their grandmother in the parlour; no enemy forces stalking their every move.

Elle wept loudly and without any sign of stopping. The guard had taken notice, particularly when Barnes appeared on their side of the table, having crawled beneath to stand protectively in front of his weeping comrades, for tears had begun to streak down Gabe’s cheeks, too. He looked around wildly for aid, finding only concern and dismay etched onto emaciated faces. No one wanted to watch this girl die, but what could they do? Over the past few weeks, these Allied prisoners had gotten a thorough education regarding HYDRA’s firepower and advancements: any movement could warrant vaporization.

He could see Falsworth beginning to stride over, until he was stopped by a hand to the chest, one of his comrades shaking a dejected head at his action. It was this interaction that alerted Gabe to the fact that production had all but halted, as all the men tensed and prepared themselves for a riot or an execution, they weren’t yet sure.

Elle was trying to calm herself, he realized. Taking deep, gulping breaths of air and pulling away from his embrace, lest he be taken down with her. With her injured hand, she pushed slightly at Barnes’ back, silently urging him to return to his station. But it was too goddamned late.

“Was ist die Bedeutung davon?” He was a junior officer, not their supervisor. Elle jerked in his arms, nearly flying off her stool in an effort to get away from Gabe and Barnes, as though she feared tainting them with her inevitable punishment. She’d brought half the factory to a standstill; she would pay for this. Bile rose in his throat, and panic made his reply shaky and uncertain.

“My friend is hurt,” Gabe explained in croaking, patchy German. His accent had never been good, but the basics were still there. “She is upset.”

“She is more trouble than she is worth,” the officer spat, cold fish eyes sliding up and down her form. Barnes took a step back, closer to her, and Gabe watched with some surprise as the fingers of Elle’s good hand grasped a small handful of his shirt. When had they gotten so close, he wondered inanely?

Bucky Barnes’ mind was racing, barely registering the brush of her hand against him. What the fuck was he going to do? Fix a cool gaze on the officer, that was a start. Take a step back so that she knew he was going to fight her corner -- yes, that worked, too. But not for the first time since that god-awful letter had arrived in the mail months before, Barnes felt small and young; that officer knew it, too. That thin upper lip curled in a knowing smirk and though every instinct in his body was screaming at him not to, Bucky did what had always helped him to feel capable in the old world, and he drew back his fist.

Elle watched him go, felt him slip from her fingers. The first blow sent her reeling. The second drew blood. And the third -- oh, God, the third. She wanted to be sick at the taste of his pain, cloying in the air, and as she fell to her own knees beside him, flailing her own hands against the face of the monster who had put him there, she cried hot tears. “Stop! Stop! Please!” she begged, trying to cover Barnes’ face, trying to pull his now limp body away from those pounding fists. “Bitte hör auf damit. Bestrafe mich. Nicht ihm!”

Just as quickly as the attack had begun, it ended, with the cool, crisp voice of Colonel Lohmer.
“Fischer, melde dich bei der Krankenstation. Du hast deine Hand verletzt,” he drawled, gesturing to the broken skin tracing the junior officer’s knuckles. “I shall handle them now.”

Gabe had his head in his hands; the whole world was still, save for Barnes’ rasping breaths. Elle pulled his battered head into her lap, bowed her own over his eyes. If this was the end, she wanted to die with the face of a friend (or at least, something like a friend) in her eyes; he deserved the same. She held his gaze, waited for the blue light to pulse them into oblivion.

But it never came.

“Miss Andersen, you are thoroughly dramatic,” Lohmer chuckled. “Perhaps a career on the stage is in order?”

Tension, of the HYDRA variety, tended to roll out as a thunderstorm -- brewing on the distant horizon; seeping into the cracks and crevices of awareness slowly, then consumingly. Elle stood outside of herself for a moment, looking down at the woman holding the man she scarcely knew, but who was willing, it seemed, to die for her. Or perhaps HYDRA had just finally gone too far for Sergeant Barnes, and he’d seen a moment. Nevertheless, they were in the eye of the storm together now, in a strange little circle of unearthly calm, right there with Lohmer.

She could offer herself up now, Elle realized. Barnes had received his beating. He could be done. Gabe and Falsworth and Dugan and Sampson could drag him back to their cell, watch him through the night, and tomorrow morning, he could return to work. His insubordination had been paid for -- her reckoning was yet to come. “Herr Colonel,” she said lowly, pulling her gaze away from Barnes’. “I am sorry for the commotion.”

“‘The commotion?’” His smile was broad and lupine; his eyes flashed with interest. “Oh, my dear girl. You have caused far more than a commotion. You have stolen from HYDRA, child.”

It was time she had stolen, and focus, he explained coolly. And her carelessness and petulance had earned an able worker a solid beating. “This man --” he gestured to Barnes with the toe of his boot “- - will be unable to work for the rest of the day. Because of your selfishness, Miss Andersen.” In her arms, Barnes struggled to sit up, to mutter some protest against the accusation. She silenced him with a light finger to his temple, brushing against a patch of clear skin, where the rest was traced with blood.

She took a deep breath. “Herr Colonel, please, if you must punish me, do so, but I beg you to allow the other workers to return to their tasks. Please do not punish them for my selfishness.” Her tongue caught on the injustice of the last word. “Please.”

It was beneath her to beg, she knew that. Pride was not a trait ranking high in her soul, but her father had been poetic enough to let her feel like a princess, and in that moment, curled on the floor with a bleeding man in her lap, she knew a trembling little sort of shame. Begging her enemy for mercy. Pleading with a monster. But then she glanced down at Barnes again and she caught the blue of his eye, and there was an ocean in the span of her hands, and for the first time in her life she realized that love was not a choice, but a surrender, and she tossed herself into the blue. For him. For all of them. And she waited for Lohmer’s grip on her arm, for his fist in her gut, for shattered bones and the tang of blood and the wrenching, ripping, tearing of skin as she died. As she died for having an itchy hand.

She would die on the beach, she resolved again, recalling the painting upstairs: she would die on the edge of the ocean, like a soldier, for a soldier.
“Brooklyn,” Barnes muttered, as she wiped a trickle of blood from his jaw, savouring the rich stubble beneath her fingertips. It was a foreign sensation, one that sent a little tingle down her spine; the boy was a diligent shaver.

When he said it, *Brooklyn*, it curled from his lips as a lovely poem, one he had memorized a long time ago. She understood New York -- America altogether, really -- only academically, so the borough’s name conjured up only the image of the Empire State Building, an incongruous detail she elected not to share with him.

They had been sent back early from the production line, Elle earning herself only a slap about the face for her foolishness. Lohmer had instructed a nearby guard to escort both her and Barnes back to their cell, where there were to receive no medical care or food of any kind for twenty-four hours. The only comfort they would be permitted would be the return of their cellmates at the end of the day’s shift. And, of course, they had each other.

Yet, Elle waited on tenterhooks. Even though her experience with him was brief, she understood that a slap and a three minute beating were not to be her only punishments; sending her to bed without supper, that was a jest: Lohmer had something else planned. But the element of surprise was to be his sweetest torture so far.

“You?” Barnes coughed, shifting to readjust himself against the bars. He was no longer in her lap, as he had been on the factory floor, but they had both moved so close to each other that he could feel when her heart had finally stopped racing, could smell a tentative calm on the air. Every now and then she would reach out and wipe away blood, sweep the hair from his eyes. Barnes relished the small touches; they reminded him of a young man from ancient days, saying goodbye to New York on a warm spring evening -- learning again and again that a cheeky grin and a neatly-pressed uniform could mask from the rest of the world any little stirrings of fear. Now, though, he let himself bleed, let his mouth fall into a flat, tense line. This sort of vulnerability was new to him. Only his mother had seen him like this. Only his mother, and now Elle.

Her face relaxed, and his mouth quirked slightly. There was something soothing about this conversation. It was the sort of talk he’d bring out on a first date, trying to bring a shy girl out of her shell by tossing her easy, shallow questions that permitted them both to keep things light and easy between them. “London,” she murmured. “Westminster.” That didn’t mean anything to him. He’d had a short leave just outside of the city, but they’d never managed to make it in. Day passes kept getting revoked for stupid infractions (none of which he’d actually participated in, though he’d egged many on). But he smiled briefly and nodded at her response; racked his memory for the next question. “*Come here often*?” didn’t somehow seem appropriate.

“Do you have family?” she asked, glancing down briefly at his hands, lingering on his left for a moment. “In Brooklyn?”

His mother, he explained. Two sisters, and a brother. All younger. Dad had died when he was a kid; he’d kind of been the man of the house since then. “Then there’s Steve,” he said quietly.

“Who’s that, then?”

A skinny kid with no real clue how skinny he was, Barnes explained with a chuckle. She smiled at that, at the way the sound seemed to brighten the small, grim space they occupied. Without even realizing it, she inched a little closer, so that her left knee brushed his thigh; so that when he took her hand in his, rested it on his lap, he did not have to reach very far at all. “My best friend,” he added. “A real spitfire -- he’ll pick a fight with anybody. I’m always checking down alleys first when I go look for him, ‘cause I just know he’ll be down there with somebody twice his size.”
“Sounds like Lohmer would enjoy him.”

Barnes’ eyes twinkled as he looked down at her. “Oh, yeah,” he agreed. “He’d fix Lohmer up pretty quick.”

She tried to picture Barnes’ Brooklyn as he described it, but all she managed to do was superimpose some of the places he talked about (the boxing gym where he trained; the dockyards where he worked; the art college he and Steve took classes at a couple of times each week, and the seventh-floor apartment he shared with his mother and siblings) onto her memories of Westminster. Elle tried to summon an image of him in civilian clothing, hair slicked back and clean-shaven, strolling down the street with skinny Steve at his side.

Nostalgia enveloped them both in a sunny sort of haze, pushing away twinges of pain and anxiety, allowing them to come together in a shared space of wilful immersion. Memories of peacetime seemed so far back, that in order to answer Barnes’ next question, Elle had to claw back through eons: “My parents died several years ago,” she replied quietly. “I have friends at home, though.”

He gave her good hand a tender squeeze. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he whispered, and shame swept through her. Her loss? Her parents were gone, faded into brighter memories that she could treasure and dwell upon in private moments. They were memory now, and safe within that. Too far away from this pain, this darkness in which she now resided. They could not be touched by it. His mother, though -- her heart splintered at the thought of that poor, loving woman, one of those cursed telegrams in her hands, balancing the possibility of her son’s death with the deeper horror of his capture. How could she choose?

Her “loss,” indeed.

“Anybody special?” he asked after a beat, after they had languished long enough in an awkward silence.

The boy was not special, she reasoned. He would leave her in a heartbeat, the moment something shinier and more witty stalked by. He was a slave to novelty; she was archaic. The tenuous grip of her love for him and his infatuation with her had always left Elle uncertain of her place in his life. No ring, no commitment -- merely a simple, unspoken acknowledgement that they, somehow, belonged to each other. And yet -- the old “and yet” returned in her mind as she met Barnes’ gaze. No, the boy was not special. He was something more and yet something less, too. She could feel herself stirring towards this new boy, this man. This entity of suffering and courage, who inspired within her the comfort and surety she had always strove to provide for others. Her hand in his felt right, as though she had waited such a long time for the match. For the firm grip of his care. The boy made her laugh; the boy made her blush; the boy knew the power of a whisper, of a stealthy kiss behind the curtains. The boy knew so many of her secrets, but he did not know this one -- the one she gave to Barnes: “No. No one special.”

A smile burst on his face, a broad beam that made her think of Brooklyn sunshine, though she had never felt it before.

In the morning, he was gone, wrenched from her sleeping arms sometime in the hungry night, and she woke with a cry that nearly brought James Falsworth to his knees as he reached for her. “Where is he? What did they do? What have I done?” she wept.

Dugan patted her on the back, explained in a dull tone of resignation that Barnes had been taken by two HYDRA guards sometime after midnight. He himself had been torn from sleep by Bucky’s weak cries of protest. An officer -- Lohmer, though Dugan dare not mention this to the horrified girl
crouched before him -- had explained that Barnes was to be taken to Dr. Zola, for treatment. His injuries following the brief beating were extensive and internal, and because of his “shining work ethic,” the officer was willing to take certain extraordinary measures to ensure his recovery.

Questions bubbled chaotically from Elle’s lips, but there were no real answers beyond what Dugan had already shared. After a few minutes, her breathing had slowed and evened enough that she was able to stand, helped to her feet by James and Gabe. “Everything will be just fine,” the former reassured her, his mouth set tight against worry. “They need him better. They need workers like him.”

An order to rise and prepare for exit echoed from the main doorway; for efficiency’s sake, their cell would be one of the last to leave the block, but all inmates were expected to stand and wait silently for their call. Gabe took Elle gently by the elbow, directing her to stand between himself and James, her usual place. “Come on, sweetheart,” he said softly, watching as fresh tears welled up in her eyes. Her gaze was a tortured blur of hazel and grief, and he wondered at just how quickly raw emotion can alter person in such dire circumstances. Just a few days ago, she’d been ice itself to Bucky Barnes, and now she was crying for his absence. Gabe shook his head; normally, he was all in favour of love and the happiness of others -- now, he worried for his friends, that they had just stumbled into a far greater pit of potential loss than they had ever risked before.

Throughout their shift, Elle worked with a manic, detached enthusiasm that chilled (though none knew) even her HYDRA supervisor. Gabe watched as her right hand spasmed and clenched intermittently; as sweat gathered on her brow, curled the hairs at the nape of her neck. She produced a staggering number of plates in fourteen hours, all in silence; refusing to drink. Was this love, she found herself wondering? Was this the surrender? This panic curling its way around her heart as she imagined, not the broken body of a good man, but a mother’s tears, dripping onto the peeled linoleum of the home to which that man would never return?

To the relief of her companions, Elle did manage to choke down a few sips of the 
Krautsuppe
that evening -- but her motivation was far from appeasement. No, it was a stubborn resolve to do something, to do anything, to ease her dark imaginings and rectify the injustices she had been forced to witness. Lohmer’s punishment of Barnes was grossly unfair and she knew, she just knew that Barnes was not in the infirmary. Zola’s questions echoed in her ears as she laid out her desire quietly and furtively there in the fading light. Dugan was on board, immediately; Sampson and Gabe needed some more convincing, and Elliott expressed concern for her role in all of it. But James, James dipped into the plan as a warm bath, a sensation he had not experienced since Elle had brought him the first little bundle of wildflowers back in Italy, and thus helped him to recall the profound sweetness of being thought of -- and he would think of Barnes now. He would think of England now, and what a proper Englishman should do for an ally.

That night, she lost herself in an uneasy, broken sleep -- punctuated by the sounds of whispered plotting, and distant screams.
It was a bold move -- but then, tyrants are rarely toppled by meek musings. Or at least, this was what Elle told herself in the morning, after James had whispered most of the idea in her ear and Dugan had bit back a ghoulish grin of barely-concealed delight that action was finally about to be taken. They could not, she realized dully, knock lightly at this door -- they must pound and pound relentlessly until it had bowed and snapped in upon itself.

During the weeks of his imprisonment, Timothy “Dum-Dum” Dugan had taken small, infrequent pleasure in the undermining of HYDRA’s authority and orderliness: biting retorts, little shows of insubordination. Acts of childish rebellion, nothing nearly substantial enough to risk severe retribution. This was partially why Bucky’s punishment was bothering him so much -- though Barnes had raised his hands to that HYDRA agent, he had not disrupted production any more than injured Elle had; there had been no real show of defiance or disobedience beyond the raised fist (easily batted away), and yet he had been beaten into the floor again like...like he was nothing. Less than nothing. And Lohmer had allowed it all. Walked up with a smile. And when Dugan thought back to those moments now, when he had caught a glimpse of Elle holding Bucky’s battered body in her arms, when he’d felt certain that, at any moment, a blue light of obliteration would consume them both -- Dugan had felt truly powerless. What could he do against that kind of fervid strength? There was no room for heroics, not in moments like those.

But Barnes had always had his back, battlefield or factory floor; the least he could do now was run with the girl’s quiet questions from the night before: “What can we do? How can we stand up to him?”

She meant Lohmer, that was clear enough. Dugan couldn’t blame her for fixing her ire upon him, her desire for revenge (though, he had to admit, she’d never used quite that word). Elle seemed to be skirting around the issue, bringing up the idea as lightly as though she was proposing a harmless prank on a grumpy schoolteacher. She wanted to help Barnes, he knew, but seemed uncertain of how to make that happen. Or how far they should go.

Revolution, the smell of it, rose like new bread on the factory floor -- yeasty and full of promise. It stole between the workers, settling itself in the empty spaces where friends had once sat or stood; it curled around their ankles and danced before their eyes. The urge to rebel, to finally fight back -- that took their hands and invited them to craft the future for their very own. All in the name of one man. “Barnes, yeah, that’s right,” Dugan muttered to his workmates. “You remember? Lohmer served him up a few weeks ago, let it happen again the other day.” Together, they slung another series of plates up against the belly of the Valkyrie. “Yeah, with the girl.” God, it had been a stupid move, he added privately. When he’d caught sight of Bucky slithering under the table to stand before a weeping Elle and a bewildered Gabe, he had been so incensed, so damned furious at the risk being tempted right in front of him -- well, Dugan could happily have swatted the kid into the next century.

But the girl was still here now, and Dugan was glad for it. If things did not go as planned, and they
all died for this -- Buck included -- then at least the kid’s last act had been honourable. The grand finale of a good man.

Across the floor, James was having a similar, furtive conversation with a few airmen. “Three days from now, yes, that’s right,” he confirmed quietly. “Terribly important that it all seem... natural. Spread the word, but do so carefully.” He still had not entirely eliminated the possibility of collaborators or spies being placed in their midst. As he paused for his first drink of the day, he took another subtle glance around, observing that, for the most part, the inmates were focused on their tasks; there were no suspicious faces, German or otherwise, looking back at him. The plan for that first day was to simply send out tendrils of inspiration through small quadrants of the POW population, nothing more. Not everyone needed to know, and he’d instructed the workers in his section to keep it close to their zone. No reason for all and sundry to be performing when the time came. Shock tended to come off more authentically when it was indeed authentic.

He and the others had agreed to reconvene that night, after lights out. Elle’s role in the plan still needed to be more fully ironed out and explained in full to the girl herself. As he turned back to work, James wondered again if this was really worth it. Of course, Lohmer was making their lives a bloody misery and, though he did not know the man well, the mystery of Barnes’ fate (combined with the story Dugan had shared the night before) was preying menacingly upon his mind. He knew full well that the system was not sustainable, that the Allied prisoners did not have much left in them, and he was sick of chafing under the injustice and cruelty of the HYDRA regime. He itched for action. But they were weakened, and that must be counted in their calculations. The prisoners could not mount a full-scale rebellion. And Dugan’s proposal, that they focus their force on one man in particular, made James fear that there was far, far too robust a margin for error.

Elle knew a little, but not all. Dugan was still possessed of a sufficient sense of protectiveness that he did not want her burdened with knowledge of the entire plan, merely her part in it. Nevertheless, pity clutched at him when she, later that same day, pulled at his sleeve as they prepared to exit the latrine. She slipped her anxiety into his hands: “Is it very dangerous? Will -- what are the risks?”

She was so young, standing there before him, plaintive fear furrowing her brow. And she was pretty, too, Dugan noted. An ordinary sort of prettiness: there was nothing showstopping or otherworldly about those half-hearted brown curls, that pug nose. Elle was the kind of girl you took notice of, but rarely remembered beyond, “Oh, yeah. Her. Sweet thing.” But he knew, no matter how long he lived -- if he lived -- that he would never forget this girl. Elle Andersen had imprinted herself so indelibly upon his memory that he doubted very much if she would ever be shaken loose. Such bonds that are forged in blood and shared sorrow rarely are, after all. She was as much a comrade as Gabe or Bucky or even Falsworth, for that matter.

There would be risks, he explained gently, leaning close to her ear on pretence of stumbling slightly in the soft mud of the floor. He felt her shoulders tense beneath his steadying grip, but she did not recoil, so Dugan dared to leave his hands there for a few seconds more. “Yes, Ellie, I’m sorry. It’s gonna be dangerous. But it’s worth it. We won’t survive old Lohmer much longer, not if we don’t do something.”

“But a revolt --”

“It’s not a revolt,” he interrupted smoothly. Stamping an impulsive kiss to her forehead, he continued: “Don’t you worry about it, not right now. We’re just taking care of a problem, and hopefully maybe getting your man back.”

Elle blushed, and he wanted to laugh out loud at the sight. When was the last time he’d seen a dame blush? Hell, when was the last time he’d made a girl blush? “He’s not my...we’re not...”
“Yeah, whatever you say, kid.” Dugan released her as their guard came over to investigate the disruption, a lie trickling deftly from his tongue as he made up a story about losing his footing and Elle coming to his rescue. The HYDRA soldier merely pushed him forward and away from the girl, jostling Sampson into line ahead of her in his stead. There was another pithy remark waiting to burst from his lips, but Dugan decided to keep it to himself, lest the guard overhear: *You may think he’s not your man, but shit -- most guys aren’t willing to get vaporized for just anyone, sweetheart.*

The words he *had* said, however, kept running about in dizzying circles around Elle’s mind as the group made their way back to cell three. She had known Barnes only a few days -- she’d been fooling herself when she thought of love. She fancied him, certainly, and perhaps her much-assailed mind had been somehow tricked into believing she felt more for Barnes than was actually possible. After all, how could things have escalated so quickly? He was a handsome, charming man, but she’d met them before. Plenty of them. The boy was such a one.

No, she thought, shaking her head as she filed into the cell behind Sampson. No -- the notion that she and Barnes were anything more than two wounded souls in the same chasm of suffering was absolutely ludicrous. He was a flirt, make no mistake, and she may have gotten briefly lost in an agreeable mire of possibility but now, Barnes could be nothing more than a fellow prisoner -- someone worth saving. A good man, but not hers. No matter what secrets she had shared with him in the dark.

She had let slip another, the night before, to the men that remained. The memory of it sickened her, but more so did the knowledge that things had spiralled wildly out of control. “I am a creature of comfort,” she had once told Nurse Jenkins, ages ago, before this storm. And now she was a harbinger of harm. That first day without Barnes had been long and arduous, punctuated by pangs of guilt and thoughts of his poor mother and siblings. At the end of it, with the cabbage water roiling in her stomach and Barnes’ absence yawning across from her, she’d released a desperate plea, a grim desire: to do something, to do anything. Sitting there and abiding by the rules of the monsters’ game was no longer tenable, not when their friend had been taken, not when he had been stolen in the night for simply protecting his comrades. But when the planning had reached its climax, it was apparent even to her untrained eye that the only option was going to ask quite a steep price indeed.

Back and forth they went, through the evenings. During the day, they spread the word. Dugan, James, and Gabe stole quiet moments to whisper her part, piece by piece, into her ear. And with each detail, she wondered -- would this earn them Barnes’ return? Would he be punished more severely? What would they have to pay? And would it be worth the cost?

More than once in the space of those impatient days and nervous nights, James asked if she was ready. If she agreed. He did not want her involved if she was not willing to pay the price, but really, there was no way for her to avoid involvement. Elle had cast her lot in with these men a long time ago, perhaps before they had even met. Her father, the poet, would have said that fate had brought them together, an unhappy few thrust into a realm of dark deeds and lasting pain. Leaning against James that night, too weary and worried to concern herself about propriety, Elle tried to grasp at some fleeting sense of peace that, however tomorrow went, success or failure, she would at least be among friends -- of the dearest, hardest-won variety.

A preemptive sense of finality joined them in their cell, squeezing in uncomfortably between anxiety and resignation. The occupants of cell three immersed themselves in that finality, whether they truly realized it or not, saying their goodbyes in any series of words other than the most obvious. “Remember when Dum told that guard to go -- erm…” Sampson trailed off with a glance towards Elle. “Yeah, anyways. That was gold.”

“And when we first got here, and Elliott thought we had to shit in the cell?” A chorus of ill-stifled
laughter drew the ire of a nearby guard, but he could not order them to suppress their responding grins, not in the dark. In any case, the guard had to move on -- only two were assigned to the cellblock after lights out, and they could not be at every single cage at every moment throughout the night -- which, of course, had afforded them time to develop their plan in quiet and privacy.

James leaned closer, offering a story just for her: “When you brought me those flowers in Italy, I was... I didn’t know what to think,” he admitted ruefully. “I had never had a woman bring me flowers, and it didn’t seem like the sort of thing a soldier should want. But...those flowers...your care. That you looked at them and thought of me at all, when you had finished your shift -- it meant something far greater than I think you even realize, Elle.” He smiled down at her, a warm smile full of farewell -- the same way he had looked at her before departing from the hospital camp. “You reminded me that there were flowers, I suppose. That there was thoughtfulness yet in the world. And that’s why...well, I will never be happy that you were brought here, but damned if I’m not glad you’re here just now.”

The sentiment was echoed softly through the cell. Gabe related how much her presence had calmed him on the line; how her quick little glances throughout the long shift had helped him to find a strength within himself he did not think he could possess during his imprisonment. From Dugan, she heard how she reminded him of home, of a world beyond HYDRA’s grasp. “And we all know Bucky’s a fan,” he added with a wink.

Far from providing her comfort, though, their confessions simply forced Elle to retreat deeper into herself, into that sense of foreboding tingling through every nerve in her body. Something terrible would happen, she just knew it. They were courting some wickedness here, indulging in these plans. She was loath to stay still; reluctant to resort to HYDRA’s methods to get what she wanted. “Revenge” seemed to dire a word and yet, what else could it be? A rush of panic swept over her, as she looked around at what she had incited with her impulsive, uncharacteristic words. “Creature of comfort,” indeed -- evil stalked these halls, and it was only in fairytales that good men managed to triumph over that.

Elle struggled to her weary feet, suddenly feeling an intense need to pace, to grasp at the simplest, most manageable function she could find. But there was no room; she was a caged animal. Dugan noticed her discomfort and patted the empty cell floor beside him. This was unusual: during most of her time in the cage, Elle had sat next to James or near Gabe. Rare was the occasion that she moved from these spots, but Dugan’s grin was inviting, and the prospect of a warm companion on this cold night was more than welcome.

He shifted to accommodate her, giving her a moment to readjust his own sweat- and grease-stained jumper around her shivering legs. She was self-conscious about the odor, he could tell -- but a long time ago, everyone had simply decided that the stink of so many unwashed bodies was just another of HYDRA’s punishments to be endured, and any blame for discomfort or nausea as a result was to be laid firmly at their feet. Besides, Dum wanted to say, nobody really gave a shit, because they all smelled like shit.

The trousers she wore were not going to be enough to keep her sufficiently heated during the coming winter months, he realized. None of them were prepared for what those months would bring. But that was a problem that could be addressed after tomorrow. “What’s going through your head?” Dugan asked lowly.

Elle waited a while before answering. He watched as her chest rose and fell with shaky breaths; it was no mystery what had the poor girl so riled up. But there was nothing he could do. The plan hinged on her initiatory actions; after that, he soundly hoped to draw most of the chaos (and blame) away from her, but there was risk. There was always risk. But the girl was in danger every second of
each day anyways. And Dugan was of the opinion that it was a far better thing to risk your life fighting for something better than to walk your way into an enemy-dug grave.

She had to clear her throat before answering, but whether that was from disuse or unshed tears, he could not tell. Did not want to know, really. Her reply was quiet, secret: “Doesn’t this make us just like them? And -- and we may not even see Sergeant Barnes again, this may make Lohmer even angrier…if he...

“Oh, sweetheart.”

His heart broke for her, really it did. And he wanted to kick himself, because with that frightened admission, he realized he’d never told her the whole story. Was she blaming herself for this reckless mission?

Dugan could not know, but Elle felt as though she were ice-skating on stockinged feet, dancing haphazardly through terrifying choreography of unremitting pressure. One move -- wrong or right -- and she would topple over, taking down any number of other skaters with her. It would be all her fault. And there was Bucky Barnes, just out of reach.

“When we first --” and here Dugan paused, flexing his fist from where it rested atop his left knee “-- when we first got...captured...and we came here, Bucky was sick. Like, pretty damn sick. He’d been fighting a cold before we got called out in Italy. Before the, uh, the battle, I guess. And you know, that doesn’t seem like much, does it? You got a cold, you have some soup, take the day off work, maybe. Let your mom or your girl baby you,” he added with a smirk. Across the cell, Gabe offered a low chuckle.

“But a soldier,” Dugan continued with a heavy sigh, “a soldier’s gotta keep on, and Buck’s a good soldier. So he went out and did his part, and when HYDRA showed up with their fancy toys and invited us to their humble abode, he just kept his head down like we all thought we should. Except he was still sick. And getting a bit sicker every day.”

Elle’s stomach clenched at the thought of Barnes wasting away, a wracking cough shaking his frame. She imagined he had attempted to conceal his illness from HYDRA, lest they decide he was not worth the effort of keeping around. She wanted to cry.

The first few days had been the worst, Dugan explained, as Barnes had indeed tried his best to adapt to the workload without revealing too much of his sickness and gradual weakening -- he’d had a wracking cough, Gabe told her, and looked like death warmed over most days. “Lohmer took an interest in him,” he added, sharing a heavy glance with Dugan. “Picked on him. Tried to trip him, smack him around, forced him to do stuff over and over again, even though it was right the first time. For the most part, Bucky just let him go and get it out of his system, until the day he didn’t.”

Barnes had said something smart, which turned out to be, as James put it, the “stupidest decision of his life.” Right on the factory floor, Lohmer had tossed Barnes to the ground and set to pummelling him for a good three minutes as the rest of the POWs watched in shocked silence.

“Oh, I’ve never…”

After that incident, Lohmer had simply sent Barnes back to work and to his cell. The injuries he’d sustained had, mercifully, been largely superficial -- accounting for those faded cuts and bruises Elle had observed in the infirmary -- but the blow to general morale had been deep and wounding. “And then Lohmer stopped coming around for a few days,” Dugan finished, “until he showed up with you.”
Dugan watched her face -- looked on as her eyes cast down and around for reassurance of a deeper sort than he could provide for her in the moment. Her hands twisted in her lap, tightening and then freeing a handful of his jumper, and he knew, he just knew what she was seeing and feeling: a blue-eyed man prostrate on the floor, blood and bone giving way beneath the boot of the same monster who had used her so cruelly, and Dugan knew then, and again a second later, when she met his gaze and nodded -- he knew then that she understood. He didn’t need to say it, but he did all the same, just in case she still needed to hear it: “We’re done, sweetheart. We’re just...done.”

Halfway point of the shift. The water server was on their side. He knew the plan. When he blinked three times in rapid succession at her, she moved to drop the tin cup back into the bucket of water. She missed. She cried out.

All according to plan.

This was the riskiest element of their day by far, and James had been dreading it for nearly seven hours now. From his vantage point across the floor, he could see the brown streak of her hair as she fell to the floor, and the shock of her cry, though anticipated, shot through him as a bullet, urging him to do something to help her. But he was, he reminded himself. He was about to do the most foolish thing in his life thus far, all on the slimmest promise of a slight victory.

Another beat passed.

“What jetzt?”

Gabe’s hand twitched by his side; the instinct to bring Elle back up to her feet was strong, but he needed to resist. This was the plan. This was the plan. A quick glance to the right confirmed that their supervisor was headed over, having removed his visor to shoot them a look of utter disgust. This was their last straw, Gabe knew.

On the floor, Elle took a breath, a deep one. Here was the moment, the most dangerous moment. She was well aware that she had nearly exhausted HYDRA’s patience, and she understood that the sight of a young woman cradling her injured hand on the factory floor was decidedly not going to inspire any real sense of sympathy in the guard striding over, repeatedly demanding to know what was going on. She had already stolen enough time from HYDRA.

Thirty seconds more.

Sweat pooled on Dugan’s brow, but he did not pause to wipe it away. He had a job to do.

No weapons, and hands off: those were the rules. Hammers, metal plates, screws -- any of those implements could escalate this delicate incident so quickly that they would not stand a chance. HYDRA would shoot them where they stood, no questions asked. And Dugan had not been lying when he’d reassured Elle that this was not to be a riot or revolt; it was just a moment of subtle, controlled chaos. The briefest of tempests in an iron teapot.

“What is the meaning of this?” The supervisor had hauled Elle to her feet, but she dared not look at Gabe. “What now, you stupid girl?”

When a world within itself holds a collective breath, the air in that world stands still as well. Elle could feel it, the heady whoosh of its absence, combined with the keen bite of awareness that, in that moment, she was suspended between life and death, a living ghost. And as she haunted those tenuous seconds, she understood one thing: that this task was worth every risk that its undertaking posed. Barnes was worth the risk; Gabe was worth the risk; James and Dugan and Elliott and
Sampson and every Allied prisoner watching her in those seconds (some in complete ignorance; some knowing the plan down to the last detail) were worth it. Again, she felt the memory of hot blood on her wrist, heard McBride’s fading breaths, and she felt enlightened, reminded. Though she might die for her actions -- for truly, the simplest solution for HYDRA would be to just shoot her, once and for all -- she was also dying on her feet. And if her last act was to be a foolish, sentimental one, then at least it was for a good cause.

Elle looked up at the guard through honest tears -- the only true element to this little fiction. “My hand, Herr Soldat;” she choked. “I cannot work any longer, not without treatment. My stitches, they have ripped.” She extended her trembling hand for inspection, but the guard just made a noise of irritation at the sight of her the few drops of blood she’d managed to shed by picking away at some of the lower threads. The stinging had returned, but Elle scarcely registered it in favour of savouring the abject terror rushing through her veins like ice. Oh, ye gods, she thought, her mind racing from one vile possibility to the next, her feet slipping on the ice below. I’m going to die for this. I’m going to die for this.

Dugan gnawed on the inside of his cheek, indulging in a few furtive glances in Elle’s direction. Everything hinged on this moment, that’s what he and James had decided. If the bastard crawled out from his lair to see how his favourite little torture subject was getting on, they had a chance to make this happen. Not just for Bucky, but for all of them. The monster-in-charge was about to get a taste of some Allied vengeance. And he couldn’t wait one more minute.

The HYDRA guard swatted Elle’s hand away, but she swallowed the second cry. No use in chewing the scenery. “Der Dummkopf,” he snapped. Yes, yes, insult me all you like, Herr Soldat, she thought mutinously. Just get on with it. Call him down.

Gabe exhaled.

Elliott swore under his breath.

Dugan prayed.

If he shot Elle now -- which was a distinct possibility, what with the Luger at his waist -- what would be the price? Some paperwork? She was a VAD prisoner, coddled and cared for by her compatriots. Certainly her presence inspired some sense of morale, but that needed to be in short supply. Things would be easier for HYDRA if she was gone.

And what an anonymous death that would be, she feared: an English orphan with just a tiny group of friends to mourn her; a dentist in Harley Street to recall her as a loyal employee; a bookshop in Marylebone to miss her patronage. And a ragtag band of brothers to prostrate themselves with guilt over her death.

She closed her eyes. Filled her mind with memory. Her mother’s hands, quick and sure; her father’s laughter, rosy and full; the boy’s eyes, sharp and knowing. And now a sweep of dark hair; that blasted cheeky smile.

If she was to die for him, he could at least be the last thing she imagined.

At the rap on the door, Colonel Lohmer shuffled a few pieces of paper before him, trying to look busy. He had a headache and did not want to be bothered with any news of delays or interruptions on the production line. Schmidt had been breathing down his neck and was threatening to make another visit out within the next few days.
But then his assistant whispered those golden words, and Lohmer found himself actually grinning with anticipation.

The stride was sturdy. Steady. True. Without even looking up, Elle knew it was him. And she knew that this was their moment. She could taste the chaos on the air, the tang of promised finality.

“Miss Andersen, what is wrong this time?” His tone was light. He had no cares. This idiotic woman before him, who had been wrenched back down to the floor, kneeling in a cold sweat -- she posed the kind of sport he liked best. Easy and affective.

Her hand bled. She held it up for him to examine. “Stand,” he ordered brusquely. “Stand, Miss Andersen. We must finish this.”

James’ levee of self-control threatened to break at the first blow. He should have included this in his calculations; it was his fault. But at least, for the moment, it was only a quick, preparatory strike. He was familiar enough with Lohmer to realize that the colonel was merely working up to a speech, intending to punctuate each line of his grandstanding with a punch or slap to Elle’s poor face.

This needed to be timed perfectly -- the only problem was, James was wholly unsure which precise moment would serve them best in this aim. It was not as though Dugan or Gabe could simply stroll over and say, “Now’s the time, old boy. Now’s the time.” Not that either would ever utter the phrase “old boy,” under any circumstances beyond mocking…

Damn it. He looked back at Elle, who was curled on the floor; Gabe was holding on to the last shreds of his composure, gripping on to the edge of the worktable in an admirable show of restraint. He watched as Lohmer brought his hand up for a second strike, and then he let out his own blue streak.

Everything stopped. Actually, Dugan thought, his eyes trained on Elle and Lohmer, it was quite a comical sight, the stern HYDRA colonel with his hand in the air, frozen on the spot at this sign of insubordination. No one dared speak out on the factory floor, not unless dire or dangerous had happened. For Falsworth -- he the upright, steady British officer -- to break protocol in such an unabashed manner had shocked even the most seasoned HYDRA agents into a stunned silence.

“Was zur Hölle?” Lohmer snapped, any remnants of propriety quickly evaporating in the face of his confusion. “What now? What is going on?”

James swore again, feeling the cuff of his supervisor’s fist around his left ear as he gestured towards the frayed canvas and leather strap that had been wrapped taut about the underside of one of the Valkyrie’s wings. The frame was massive, but the sunken portion of the factory floor allowed workers to step out onto wooden platforms or lean against (worryingly loose) iron railings to reach over and attach the various metal plates required to give the beast some shape. James had been working on this station for weeks; and for the past few days, he had initiated an extra task.

The supervisor leaned closer to the edges of the strap, observing where the canvas fibres had begun to pull away from the leather bindings. It was a good job the prisoner had noticed it, though the agent would never admit to that. If the strap was allowed to fray entirely, the resulting snap could pose serious ramifications for production and the general safety of the workers. And though HYDRA was not exactly endeavoung to provide comfortable working conditions, the prospect of losing the dozen or so who were now becoming relatively skilled in plating the wings was inevitably going to be more trouble than it was worth.
The supervisor sighed in obvious irritation. “Cease production for now,” he ordered. “And you” -- here he jabbed a finger in James’ face -- “go see section seven and ask for a replacement wing strap. Now.”

This was not according to plan, but then, James thought, it was not as though he could expect HYDRA to conform perfectly to their plan. He could only hope that Dugan was still able to aptly take advantage of this development, and that the plan was able to proceed. Only hope.

Copper burst in her mouth.

Elle hit the floor again, tumbling down to the cool concrete from her knees. She would wear these inevitable bruises with a little pride, because she was a part of something. Something bold. Something reckless. Something stupid and something utterly honourable.

Above her, the squeak of Lohmer’s boots distracted her from the pain, however briefly. He strode away, away, away, off into the dim periphery, where lay her slimmest hopes.

“These delays are unfathomable.” Lohmer bent slightly to peer more closely at the frayed strap. “How was this allowed to fall into such disrepair?” He turned to the HYDRA supervisor, who had no answers save an expression rather like that of a goldfish, generally.

A small knot of interested prisoners had begun to crowd around, and that sent a stabbing pain through Lohmer’s already aching temple. It did not do to have a commotion on the factory floor, and he was convinced Schmidt would be arriving at any minute, though the visit technically not scheduled for a few days yet. He snapped out a few orders for the fools to stand back, to return to work -- to do anything but delay production further.

“Sir, should we --?” Two workers had stepped even closer, cutting between Lohmer and the supervisor, the taller of the pair pointing at the remaining straps on the wing. Lohmer barely paid any attention; he simply wanted to return to his office. These people were altogether far too irritating for his enjoyment -- even the fun he’d hoped to have with that stupid girl had been spoiled.

It happened like this:

Dugan moved with the press of the crowd, flowing over the fifteen or so feet from the edge of his station to the far side of the wing.

Elliott and one of the Canadians moved slightly to approach the supervisor and Lohmer.

Another Canadian and a medic from Louisiana took eight steps each with him, preluding his arrival so subtly that it seemed he had not moved at all.

He waited a beat.

Another.

Another.

Lohmer’s cursing rose like a wave in the near distance, and Dugan bit at the inside of his lip. This had to be seamless. Quiet.

All eyes were on Lohmer and the upset -- all eyes except for two pairs. Dugan was focused on his
task; a hazel gaze he was not aware of tracked his every move.

Another beat passed. Dugan reached forward, keeping his hands as low as possible, the tiny glint of stolen silver a secret just for him -- for him and those sharp hazel eyes.

*Here we go, kid.*

He jumped back.

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Elle watched the red bloom on Colonel Lohmer’s forehead with a kind of detachment, as though it were all a scene from a film she had watched too many times already. Later, she would pride herself on managing to struggle up to her feet, on standing while he fell.

As she gripped the edge of the worktable with one hand, and Gabe with the other, Lohmer pitched forward. She watched as the railing folded into his uniform, as the supervisor and three other guards watched on in horror, as Lohmer scrabbled for purchase on smooth iron. The railing was too low, hitting him just above the hips, and though she realized what was about to happen, that things were about to get much worse -- although she knew he deserved it, she closed her eyes against the end.

Gabe watched him go.

Watched as his body toppled over the edge of the railing, the force of his impact against the barrier proving far too much to sustain any sense of balance.

The dull *thud* of his death was deafening in the shocked silence of a momentarily leaderless HYDRA division.

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Blame was ephemeral. Beatings were organized; meals were withheld, and they were worked an extra four hours. But the blame was mist, and would not stick to anyone.

Their victory was not hollow, but it was not warm. It was not filling. And they ached with the loneliness of it.
She dreamed of red flowers and a yellow dress that kicked pleasantly about her legs. She dreamed of cool, fresh milk and the flicker of candlelight. She dreamed of pillows, thick and soft, and the sweet embrace of a downy duvet.

She dreamed. And in those dreams, it did not matter that Barnes had not come back; it did not matter that Schmidt had arrived to launch an investigation into Lohmer’s “accidental” death. It did not matter that she had not eaten in days, that none of them had. Her dreams were of home, of a past and a future she felt now did not belong to her.

The facts were this, and they were cold: Colonel Lohmer had suffered an unfortunate workplace accident, when a second frayed canvas strap securing one of the Valkyrie’s massive wings had released quite suddenly. He had fallen over the railing which prevented workers from tumbling down the thirty or so feet that had been cut away to a lower floor. This allowed the Valkyrie to be nestled in beside extended work platforms and the edge of the concrete factory floor. Disoriented from a head wound earned when the canvas strap and its accompanying steel buckle had snapped back and struck him directly above the eyes (for he had been leaning close to inspect the remaining straps), Lohmer had not possessed the acuity to gird himself against the railing. He had died upon impact.

In the moments directly afterward, three hundred prisoners and HYDRA soldiers had simply stood in a dull, confused silence. Protocol existed, of course, for a world without Lohmer in it, but they had simply not prepared to enter this world so soon. In the silence, Elle had finally felt safe enough to open her eyes again, and realized with some dismay that she had further opened more of her stitches by gripping the table tightly, and that her blood was drip-drip dripping upon the floor.

Fitting, she supposed darkly. They all had blood on their hands now.

“Are you sleeping?”

Well, not now, Elle wanted to reply, but did not, because James had not slept properly since that day, and did not deserve her ire.

Moonlight illuminated his face in shards, and she longed to reach out and anchor herself to him, to tether herself to this reality, rather than the dreams from which she had been pulled. Red flowers and yellow dresses were not for her, not here.

Above them, guards paced. This was new; ordinarily, the HYDRA soldiers on shift while the prisoners were supposed to be sleeping tended to remain and do their rounds on the lower floor, though there was a second just above them. At their feet on this upper floor, the tops of the cages below afforded them a better shot at the slightest indication of insubordination. “Like shooting fish in a barrel,” Dugan had muttered the first night he watched a guard peer down into their cell.

The new rotation had been Schmidt’s idea.

“Yes, James?” she murmured, unfolding her legs and stretching the sleep from them. Perhaps, she wondered suddenly, looking around at the others, who were all wide-awake and pensive -- perhaps there was something wrong with her, that she could finally sleep well and dream only after she had participated in a murder.

“This is Jacques.” James pointed across to a new face -- a slim, dark-haired man who offered her an uncertain smile. “He’s just arrived.”
“Pl-pleased to meet you,” Elle said quietly, the words sour in her mouth. There was only one reason that Jacques had come to join them, in their full cell: someone else had left. She had been asleep a few hours now; what had happened while she was gone, lost in those flowers and that bloody dress?

By her side, James shifted, propping up his legs and ducking his face down to look at his hands dangling between his knees, rather than at her, as she surveyed the remaining inmates. Dugan was still there, half-dozing against the bars; Gabe was right next to her, and Sampson was curled up upon one of their thin blankets, but where Elliott should be...

“I didn’t want you to wake up and see…” James cleared his throat, and Jacques looked away. When the man from cell three had died a few hours before, a HYDRA guard had come to collect him and redistribute the members of his cell. Only four of them remained, and with Elliott’s death in the night -- from exhaustion, from hunger, from the bitter burn of lost hope, and from the secret festering of a gash he had chosen not to disclose -- the night shift supervisor had elected to completely empty cell eight and move the inmates around to accommodate a potential new shipment of prisoners. A recent victory in northern Italy promised at least a small contingent of Allied soldiers arriving at the factory; Schmidt had promised them this, as well as the appointment of a new governor, of sorts, to replace Lohmer.

“Cut off one head, and two more shall grow in its place,” he had boomed from the catwalk just the day before. “Colonel Lohmer’s death is a tragedy, but only for the loss of a fine HYDRA officer, devoted to victory.” His cold eyes fixed upon the brown-haired girl in the front row, flanked as she was by weary prisoners. Lohmer had formed a particular interest in the girl, he recalled. A bit of a plaything for him, he had hoped. Whispers in the corridors had told Schmidt of the late colonel’s plans for her, once she had been utterly broken. He turned away. “But it is not a tragedy for HYDRA,” he continued. “We are strong. We are legion. And we will continue the noble work he and Doctor Zola began here. We have lost one, but in honouring him, we shall increase twofold. Double our efforts. Become better in his memory.”

His memory. His nobility. The threat of HYDRA’s continued success, of their development and flourishing, had pained Elle in a way she could not yet understand. It was an ache in her soul, a battering of the last vestiges of faith in her possession. No matter what they did to rebel, they would always be prisoners. HYDRA was legion, tentacles of horror stretching out across the map of Europe, threatening to engulf the world with their weapons of oblivion, their profound and utter belief in their own infallibility. The truth of her reality, for the first time, slapped her full in the face, kicked her feet out from underneath her. She had thought the worst was McBride’s death, the loss of the black-haired man; Barnes’ disappearance and the faint screams in the night. But the true terror of HYDRA’s hold and their own imprisonment was not the moments of cruelty, but the campaign of it: the knowledge that they were outnumbered, outgunned. That they would languish in cells, their only consolation perhaps being to arrange for more accidents. Death by infrequent death, they could revolt in this little ways, but they would still be forced -- weakened from hunger and fear -- to languish in those cages each night. Revolution was beyond them now.

But that was not Jacques’ fault, so Elle carefully arranged her face in something resembling benevolence or welcome. She aimed for both, knowing she was likely missing the mark. Her eyes were dry now. She had no tears left to cry.

“When are the interrogations supposed to begin?” She leaned against James’ shoulder, realizing that more sleep would not be possible tonight, not with Elliott’s absence, and the broad, vivid question of his death. She hoped he had not been in pain; hoped he had slipped away quietly and easily, believing himself, perhaps, to be simply falling asleep. She hoped he could dream. Her only eulogy was a winged prayer that his soul could find the liberty he had been denied in life.
Schmidt had announced a series of interrogations for each workstation, to be conducted in the quiet of the cellblock during the coming days. Each workstation would be pulled from the factory floor, brought back to the block with Schmidt and several guards, and would be asked in great and painful detail -- so Schmidt promised -- about the events leading up to the accident that killed Colonel Lohmer.

That would be their undoing, she felt certain. James, Dugan, and Gabe had made sure to only inform the necessary prisoners, leaving others to be genuinely surprised (and thus innocent) when the accident occurred. But there was the always possibility that someone knew more than they ought -- James in particular thought about how he had instructed several men to “spread the word,” though he had emphasized the precise individuals who needed to know. Nevertheless, what was done was done, and though the prisoners’ lot had not been entirely eased by Lohmer’s death, the simple awareness that they had taken action against him, had paid him back for the misery inflicted -- it went some way to comfort them. A dark sort of comfort.

But James was not sure now when each volunteer would be called up, and he suspected that Schmidt would attempt to ensure that the interrogations were staggered and unpredictable in their proceedings, so as to keep the inmates guessing at which point they would be brought in. He did not, however, share this theory with Elle, who -- though absolutely shattered by the events of the past few days -- was still more lucid than she had been before the enactment of the plan. That time she had left them, retreating into herself and refusing food or the acknowledgement of her own pain -- James had no desire to see her return to that state. To this end, he merely offered her some noncommittal reassurance that Schmidt’s efforts would soon cease. He and the others had been very careful to ensure that Lohmer’s death looked like an accident, nothing more.

He voiced the unnecessary opinion that they should all, in cell three, try to get some sleep, but Elliott’s death was proving to be far too uncomfortable companion to allow that. Though Jacques had to come to physically occupy the space in which Elliott had once sat, there was a gaping emptiness where his breath should have been, his heartbeat. Together, they sat a silent vigil, punctuated only by the infrequent steps of their HYDRA guards up above. Back and forth, back and forth, a constant, illuminated reminder that they were prisoners, that they could not leave, that freedom was so far from their purview now. James bit his lip against the truth; against the inevitable onrush of loss. They had killed the monster, but this bleak tale was far from finished.

Elle’s weight against him was an anchor, a pleasant one, and he relished again the feeling of being needed. Perhaps there could be some sort of freedom found in this, he mused. In belonging to others, beyond HYDRA’s grasp. Perhaps they…

A weighty thud from up above jolted James from his reverie, and he felt Elle tighten her hand against his shoulder. He looked up towards their top of the cage, a direction he did not always enjoy adopting, because it simply reminded him that he was indeed in a cage, and he felt like such a reduction of their collective dignity. But the sight that greeted him, sprawled across the top of their cage, proved to be so intriguing that he felt himself nudging Elle so that she could look, too. Prone atop the bars lay a HYDRA guard, in full kit. Above him, James registered -- standing now, alongside the rest of his cellmates, including Elle, who had yet to release her grip -- a second man, struggling to release a ring of keys from the guard’s waist. “Who are you supposed to be?” Gabe asked curiously.

Somewhere to his left, a light panned around the man, illuminating his face by degrees. Elle could see that he was young, not much older than herself. “I’m, uh, Captain America,” he replied, chest heaving slightly with his efforts.
James’ tone was sardonic: “I beg your pardon?”

At the man’s words, a series of dim memories floated back to Elle -- posters she had seen back in Sussex, just before shipping out, promising a whirlwind show of American patriotism by their golden boy: some Yank in tights who chirped out some war bonds sales pitches on cue, but mainly got by on good looks and the boons of modern science. Elle had never been one for the pictures, not regularly, anyhow, and her training at the recovery hospital had taken up so much of her time.

And yet, the memory of that man from the posters -- with his winning smile and chiselled jawline -- was now sitting uneasily alongside the reality of their liberator, clad in uncertainty and a brown leather jacket, as he slid the iron keys into the heavy locks of cages further up the line, working his way down to cell three after a tense few minutes.

Dugan walked out first, and James gently pushed Elle forward to follow him. Liberty, in its first few moments, was absolutely bewildering. She stepped into it gingerly, toeing over the threshold of her cage as though testing the waters of it: how long had it been since she walked somewhere without being threatened with a gun first?

The newcomer -- the Captain -- reached out to briefly touch her elbow, steadying her as she adjusted to the combination of lightheadedness and nascent joy trickling through her veins, rendering the concrete floor a sheet of ice once more. “You alright there, ma’am?” he asked quietly.

Elle looked up into the gray, nervous eyes of a boy trying very hard to be a man, and she laid her hand on his arm with a grateful smile. “Yes, Captain,” she whispered, not trusting her voice at a higher decibel. “I’m just fine, thanks to you.”

A swell of freed prisoners surged forward, clamouring about the Captain and jostling to take leadership and direction in equal measure. Unasked questions shot through the air, but everyone knew they must keep quiet. The Captain certainly would not have been able to take out the entire HYDRA force inside the facility; and unless he had come with substantial (and stealthy) backup, they would almost certainly be making either a very violent or a very delicate escape. “Is there anybody else?” the Captain asked, stepping into stride beside James and Elle as they made their wary way towards the exit. “I’m looking for a Sergeant James Barnes,” he added.

Elle froze at his question, only half-listening as James explained that there was an isolation ward upstairs, where many of them suspected Barnes had been brought days before. “But no one’s ever come back from it,” he added. Her mind raced, calculating the odds and tallying up discordant facts.

“Treeline is northwest, eighty yards past the gate. Get out fast and give ‘em hell,” the Captain directed, striding on ahead, leaving them all to stare for a stunned moment at the vibrant red, white, and blue shield slung across his back. “I’ll meet you guys in the clearing with anybody else I find.”

“Wait,” Gabe said, pushing his way to the front of the crowd, coming to stand between Elle and Dugan. “You know what you’re doing?”

The Captain turned, appraising them without a trace of either confidence or bashfulness as he replied. “Yeah, I’ve knocked out Adolf Hitler over two hundred times,” he said, before sprinting off into the shadows beyond, the shadows leading to the same stairs Lohmer had dragged her down weeks before. He was going in the wrong direction, she realized, moving away from the confused bevy of prisoners -- this would lead him up past Schmidt’s office; the isolation ward was on the other side of the factory and, in any event, he did not want to go there. He did not need to go there.

“Captain!” she called, loud as she dared. Elle strained against James’ grip on her arm, pulling away
from her compatriots, straining for a second kind of freedom. “Captain, wait, please.” To James, Gabe, Dugan, and Jacques, she added a whisper of reassurance: “I know where Sergeant Barnes is, I can bring him there.”

“No,” Dugan insisted. “You come with us, sweetheart. We’ll keep you safe.”

“He can, too,” she pointed out. “Besides, it’s not about that now. There may be other prisoners upstairs, I can bring him to them; I spent enough time up there.” Their expressions darkened at her invocation of those days. “Please. We’ll get out, I promise. But I…I just need to help.” She looked up at the three of them earnestly. “I can take care of myself here. Please.”

In their eyes, there in the moments of rumbling chaos and promised mayhem, she saw reluctance, fear, and -- dare she say it? -- affection. She had heard before men talk of brotherhood amongst soldiers, of a deep sense of camaraderie not experienced in peacetime. And she understood it, then. What it meant to belong. What it meant to be one of them. She may not have borne arms against HYDRA, or done anything more than loosen a few stitches to get back at Lohmer. But she was one of them, in the kind of trembling, uncertain way of new warriors. She had not waged war on her enemy, but by God, had she fought. Quietly, subtly -- some stubborn part of her mind had refused to give in, kept a small flicker of hope alive just for this moment. She wasn’t even sure if it was Bucky Barnes he was looking for; if she was about to lead Captain America on a wild goose chase through a HYDRA-infested factory. And it didn’t matter. Because this was her mission, and she would see it through.

The men must have read that in her eyes, because James let her go and Gabe wished her luck, and Dugan made her swear up and down to meet them in the forest in one piece and without a scratch. “Breathing, too, mind you,” he snapped. And she smiled. Because love lives in such vitriol.

Captain America had waited for her, impatient but kind, and as she joined him in the doorway and explained her suspicions, that if it was Bucky Barnes he was looking for (and he indeed confirmed this), then he needn’t check the isolation ward first, but must head up a different flight of stairs. “I can take you there,” she promised. “I worked there for a while...a day, actually. An afternoon.”

“And you think he’s there?”

She glanced up, distracted for a moment by the goggles dangling from his helmet. He did not look like the conquering hero one would expect to plunder an enemy stronghold by night, but then, perhaps that was best. He simply looked like a kind man on the edge of desperation. She resisted the urge to embrace him, because if there ever was a definition of highly inappropriate timing, that would be it. Instead she nodded. “Yes, I do.”

Together, they moved through the shadows, Elle taking the lead up the stairs, pushing aside memories of the last time she seen the upper levels of the facility -- her head throbbed in remembrance. “Just down here,” she murmured as they rounded a corner on the fourth floor. Down the brick-walled corridor lay Zola’s office and laboratory. Outside, the flashes and booms of rebellion echoed high and proud.

“Hold up,” the Captain said, reaching out an arm to slow her pace as a figure emerged down the end of the hall.

The stout, rounded form could only be Zola, Elle realized bitterly. A pale yellowish light illuminated him slightly as he turned to look back at them, coat and bag in hand, pausing in his flight. She wanted to rail at him, scurrying away like a rat in the night, but there was no time, no time. He dashed down and away from them, and beside her, the Captain broke into a sprint again. We can’t afford to stop, she wanted to say. We need to find him.
Elle followed, feet aching with disuse as she did, but with the emergence, between explosions, of a soft, low moan from their left, they both did an about face. “In here,” she whispered, reaching out for his hand to lead him into the shadowy confines of Zola’s lab. The Captain moved cagily, edging around her so that he entered first, hand still wrapped around hers.

“Sergeant,” a dazed, quiet voice mumbled. “32557…”

“Bucky.”

Barnes lay there, strapped to a gurney or reclined chair of sorts, visible only by a patch of moonlight shafting down upon him. Bruises and dried blood patterned his face. “Oh, no,” she whispered tearfully, following the Captain to his side. “Oh, no.” Pain, abject and sustained, seemed to emanate from his body; she reached out to touch his shoulder, recalling the firm press of him against her after McBride’s death; the cool glint of his blue eyes in the darkness of their cell. “Sergeant?”

“Oh, my God,” the Captain muttered, moving around her to loosen the straps binding Barnes’ legs, and then the ones on his chest. She watched as Barnes’ eyes left the ceiling, rolled over to meet the other man’s gaze.

“Is that…”

“It’s me,” the Captain said. “It’s Steve.”

Relief bloomed on Barnes’ weary face as he repeated the name, as the Captain helped him to roll off the chair and find his footing. “I thought you were dead,” he said, pressing a hand to his friend’s cheek.

Barnes looked up at the newcomer with an expression of disbelief, as though he could not quite recognize him, process what was happening. “I thought you were smaller,” he replied, gripping his shoulder. His eyes flickered over to Elle, standing just behind the chair, uncertain of her role in this reunion. “Hey,” he murmured, gaze softening. “There’s my girl.”

The Captain -- Steve -- glanced back at her questioningly, but she could not form a reply. She was no one’s girl, but if he needed to say that, if some part of his battered mind could snatch at some sense of comfort in calling her such, then she was bloody well going to play along, just for now.

“We must go,” she said firmly, stepping forward to pull Barnes’ left arm over her shoulders. “Now.”

He was weak, frail. Barnes tried to distribute what weight he did have onto Steve’s side, and really -- it did not take her long to realize this -- she was more of a hindrance than a support for the injured man, as the Captain was more than capable of handling his weight single-handedly. All the same, she was loath to let go, as though Barnes might dissipate if she did not keep a hold of him. He groaned in her ear as they led him from the laboratory, hurrying back into the corridor amidst the ruckus from outside; Steve had told the liberated POWs to give HYDRA hell, and it certainly seemed that they were following orders.

“What happened to you?” Barnes asked.

“I joined the army.” Baffled, Elle tried to keep up, tried to grasp at some meaning to their conversation. How long had they been separated, that such changes had been wrought?

Once out in the corridor, she quickly took stock of the situation. “We can cut across the factory floor, I think,” she suggested. “That way we could reach the lot and the main gate, meet the others in the clearing, as you said.”

Steve nodded. “Sounds good. Lead the way, ma’am.”
Down one level, and then another, into a brick-walled corridor that appeared much the same as the one they had just left. Elle led them left around a corner, and then through a door labelled *Fabrikfläche*. There was a single guard on the other side, but Steve pushed past her and rammed his shield into the man’s chest, leaving Barnes to lean solely against her.

“Did it hurt?” he asked as they made their way through yet another hallway. He gestured to Steve, who by this point had moved on ahead from them, trusting Barnes to rely on his own steam and Elle’s shoulder as he attempted to navigate.

Distracted, the Captain did not even look back. “A little.”

“Is it permanent?”

“So far.”

A thunderous explosion sounded from somewhere up ahead, followed in quick succession by another. Elle fought the urge to scream; she should have known. “That the factory?” Barnes asked, sliding his arm from her shoulder to rest one hand against the wall. “Shit.”

The Captain’s eyes darted to her, searching her face for an answer. Reluctantly, she gave a small, jerky nod. “Most likely. If they think the Allies have launched a full-scale assault, it would make sense for them to destroy what they’ve been working on,” she huffed; it had been a while since she had been so active. “Their technology is...unique.”

“We can’t go there, then. How else can we get out?”

Rapidly, Elle worked through their options. Her awareness of the general layout of the facility was limited, but she knew enough to lead them to some of the main locations. Getting back around to the other side of the factory, nearer the cells and the exit that could lead them outside, thus allowing them to skirt around the entire expanse of the facility and meet the others -- well, it made no sense. It would be far faster for them to simply continue with this path, merely a little higher. Steve and Barnes agreed. “We can use the catwalks,” Barnes said firmly. “We’ll be fine. We’ll just keep going higher if need be. I’m not much interested in staying here any longer than we need to.”

They moved together back up to a higher floor, emerging onto the massive steel stairs that HYDRA guards and supervisors used to get a wider scope of the factory floor. It was from here, she recalled dimly, that Lohmer and Schmidt had made so many of their speeches. They moved down one flight together, Barnes nearly collapsing against the railing as the three of them looked down in mutual, growing terror at the flames licking higher and higher into the air. The entire factory floor was ablaze. “W-we-we…” Elle could not find the words; smoke seared her throat.

Barnes grabbed her by the hand, following Steve as another explosion rocked the grated metal beneath their feet. “Come on.” Together, they struggled their way up the stairs from which they had just descended; she coughed and tried to blink away the vile soot beginning to whirl in the air around them.

“There!” she croaked, as Steve rounded the corner onto the higher catwalk. She pointed several feet ahead toward a horizontal extender. It led across to an industrial lift; she had no idea where that led, but as long as it was not to the fiery horror below, she was willing to try it. Almost as though they wished to offer an invitation, as soon as she alerted the Captain to their new destination, the doors slid open.

Barnes pulled her along behind Steve; shared perspiration made their grip slick, but she could not bear to let go. They were nearly there, almost there, in a few short minutes they would be in the
green calm of the forest, surrounded by relieved friends --

“Captain America. How exciting!”

In the split second since she’d registered the doors opening and following Steve over to the edge of the extender, Schmidt and Zola had both emerged from the lift. Elle gripped the catwalk railing alongside Barnes, watching as the Captain stepped out onto the bridge.

“I’m a great fan of your films,” Schmidt drawled, walking over to join Steve on the extender. Beside Elle, Barnes was breathing heavily, shakily, bracing himself against the railing -- eyes trained, interestingly, on the doctor, who was studying the man beside her with clear curiosity. The instinct to reach out again, to touch him and comfort him and hold him close, was nearly overwhelming, but she was not sure from whence it had come. It was the instinct of old friends; people with a history between them.

Around them, sparks and smoke danced. “So Doctor Erskine managed it after all?” he asked, gesturing towards the Captain. “Not exactly an improvement, but still impressive.” He took another few steps forward, but merely earned himself a vicious punch to the face; he stumbled backwards, finding purchase on the rail.

“You got no idea,” Steve said, breathing heavily as he watched Schmidt turn, rubbing the side of his face. Elle tightened her grip, the heat of the fire below warming the metal uncomfortably beneath her hands. But she could still feel. She was still alive. All three of them were.

“Haven’t I?”

Schmidt drew back his fist, abruptly striking out towards Steve. The Captain, though, was able to bring up his shield in time to block his face. His opponent’s blow, however, did manage to leave a sizeable dent in the metal. Steve reached down to grab his gun, but Schmidt landed another strike, this time knocking Steve from his feet and sending the gun skittering to the edge of the bridge. Elle’s heart jumped into her throat; beside her, Barnes struggled to move, to help, but she held him back. There was nothing he could do, not in his condition; he would be more trouble than help out there.

Desperation clawed up her back as she watched them fight, as she realized the depths of her own futility. She scanned the area for inspiration, hoping to spot some sort of weapon or distraction, but there was none. Zola, it seemed, had found such a distraction -- as Steve kicked up with both feet into Schmidt’s chest and sent him reeling onto his back, the doctor took the opportunity to engage the retraction mechanism on the bridge. As he was pulled away from the Captain, Schmidt steadied himself on the railings and fixed that cold, triumphant glare of his upon Steve. “No matter what lies Erskine told you, you see -- I was his greatest success!”

He began to claw at the underside of his jaw, in a movement Elle could only associate (briefly) with scratching at an itch; nervous laughter threatened to bubble up from her throat, only to be silenced a few seconds later when Schmidt began to peel away his own face, stretching back the pale flesh to reveal a luridly crimson skull, his eyes peering out in gleeful contrast at their shocked expressions. “Oh,” was all Elle could manage, nausea rising where laughter had once threatened.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?” Barnes asked Steve dully.

“You are deluded, Captain,” Schmidt continued. “You pretend to be a simple soldier, but in reality you are just afraid to admit that we have left humanity behind.” He gestured between the two of them, as though there could be some sense of affinity between them. Elle couldn’t understand, couldn’t comprehend what had taken place. Erskine...the name meant nothing. The vivid red skull, that was a nightmare. Perhaps it all was.
“Unlike you,” Schmidt added, stepping into the lift with Zola, “I embrace it proudly. Without fear.”

“That’s okay, ma’am.” Steve was trying to sound reassuring, but the note of panic tripping at the edge of his words was deafening. “It’s okay.”

Step by step, one at a time -- there were no flames below her, only smooth, polished wood, and she was dancing with her mother, because ladies must know how to dance, and Mother’s voice was rain around her, cool and soothing, and the music was in her head and the steps were in her feet and he would love her so much for this, Mother promised. He would love her forever for this.

Just a dance. Just a dance.

She hit the floor of the opposite catwalk with a sob -- a sob of bitter victory. “Yes!” Steve crowed. “Let’s go now, Buck, one at a time.”

In the middle of the gantry, an impediment appeared in the shape of a thick, rounded joint of some sort. She scarcely recalled stepping over it herself (she had been so immersed in memory), but now she was forced to watch as Barnes extended one foot forward to step down, only to have the gantry shift again. He crouched slightly, gathering his balance as best he could, and then took a great, leaping step towards the railing and her outstretched hands, just as the makeshift bride gave way and tumbled into the flames. She held him there, under the shoulders, tears and smoke obscuring her vision as he worked himself over the side of the rail. The door, promising their escape, was so bloody close -- but now the Captain had no way to get across.

“Gotta be a rope or something!” Barnes shouted, and she looked quickly around their feet, hoping to spot some discarded implement, but the catwalk was empty. She pressed back against the wall, the smoke from the endless explosions below becoming too thick for her lungs. Before her, heartbreak played out on an epic scale, and pity snapped and stretched taut within her.
“Just go!” Steve bellowed. “Get out of here!”

“No!” Barnes slammed his fists down on the railing. “Not without you!” His desperation was palpable, hurtling through her, a runaway train of terror and love and all manner of deep, long history.

She grasped at the back of his shirt, but he did not turn, because he feared her logic. The girl who had no part in this, the girl who should not be here now -- he was afraid that if he turned and looked at her, he might leave his best and dearest friend behind to save her. He knew Steve would want him to do so, and he knew he couldn’t. “Go,” he murmured. “Go to the door, Ellie.”

But she wouldn’t. She did not let him go; if anything, she pressed closer, and he felt her hand, tentative and shaking, snake around under his arm to rest against his heart. She would stay. She would stay with both of them, until the end.

Elle could not bear to look, so she hid her eyes in the sweat-stained cotton of a stranger’s shirt, listening as metal bowed and fire roared, as hope and love and the miracle of a science none of them could comprehend buoyed the Captain high above the flames; as Barnes’ hands reached out to catch him, to hold him fast against the rail, to pull him over to his own freedom, his own safe harbour.

And then they ran.

The forest was a balm; the young winter a mercy. Together, Elle, Steve, and Barnes raced through the blazing embers of the factory, emerging into the crisp air with their chests heaving and their legs burning. Skirting around a secondary lot, realizing that most of the gunfire had ceased, and that the only sounds on the mountain now were the last few blasts of the dying factory. She pictured the Valkyrie, melting into nothingness. Those vile guns, sent to their oblivion. And despite herself, despite the guilt that they had not checked the isolation ward, the fear that HYDRA had beaten back the prisoners -- she smiled, pausing to drink deep of the taste of her own true freedom.

James saw them first; he cried out with delight, and she was in his arms in a second. Dugan and Gabe and Jacques and a crush of other men she did not know embraced them all, passing around Barnes like a ragdoll; clasping the Captain’s hand and shaking it heartily with gratitude. When an excited American pilot she didn’t actually know had finally released her, Elle’s own hand was taken by Barnes. She looked up at him, though he only had a couple of inches on her, with a shy smile. “Thanks, doll,” he said quietly. “For coming with him.”

It had been foolish to do so, she thought, nodding at his thanks all the same. She should have given the Captain some brief directions and then escaped with the others. In accompanying him, she had compromised his mission, foisted upon him an additional element, a handicap. If she had not had to cross the gantry first, perhaps it would not have given way and Steve would not have had to take such a tremendous risk to save his own life. She opened her mouth to apologize, to acknowledge her own stupidity, but then her hand was raised to Barnes’ lips and he kissed it with all the chivalry she had never known she wanted.

“Hey, there.” Barnes’ eyes left hers but their hands remained entwined as they both turned to look at Steve, who -- sooty and sheepish -- had escaped the grateful clutches of the liberated POWs. The grey dawn light lent something vulnerable to his aspect, so that she was again struck by the urge to embrace or comfort him. “You two alright?”

Barnes was the worst off; and she knew that, sooner or later, they would have to confront the consequences of whatever Zola had been doing to him in that lab. Elle was particularly concerned about the bruising at his temples; the old blood near his ear. But he just shook his head and grinned,
and her relief was so deep and so lovely that she did not press further, and neither did Steve.

The Captain stuck out a hand to her then, and Barnes released her for a moment, so that she needn’t shake with her bloody right one. “I’m Steve, Steve Rogers,” he said warmly, shaking her left hand gently. “Nice to meet you. Even under the circumstances.”

“Elle Andersen,” she replied. And then, all at once, realization flooded over her. “Y-you’re skinny Steve?” In her panic and desperation, she had not connected Barnes’ story of his feisty friend from Brooklyn with this muscled and heroic man she had just followed through a veritable vale of death.

Steve and Barnes laughed, and she could not help but join in. And it was a strange thing, to laugh. It was a stranger thing to be kissed. Freedom felt sweet but uneasy, as though any moment now a HYDRA soldier would appear to bring them back to heel. Schmidt was still alive, so far as she knew, and that awareness served to spoil that wavering sense of calm she was now experiencing. He had fled for his own safety, but if he were ever to figure out that so many of his prisoners had escaped -- she trembled at the thought, and of the memory of that horrifying red face.

They organized themselves into a column of sorts, as the dawn broke robustly. Several men went back to man a HYDRA tank, and there were plans to take at least two undamaged lorries with them. Dozens of soldiers had been injured in the chaos, and would need to be transported, to wherever they were headed.

As Barnes and Steve moved away to help arrange the mass exodus, Gabe appeared with a length of material, ripped again from his shirt. “When we get where we’re going, you’re gonna owe me a new shirt,” he confirmed with a grin, winding it around her injured hand.

“Darling,” she said wearily, “when we get where we’re going, I’ll buy you a hundred new shirts.”
Dawn broke with all the aplomb of a summer morning, though the air was cold and Bucky’s fingers slipped and slid on the stock of his stolen HYDRA rifle. Part of him resented the extra weight and presence, but he also possessed a fierce sort of bloody pride -- he had taken it, plucked it right from the smouldering wreckage of that goddamned factory. He owned it now, not them. They were dead, dying, or fleeing in the wake of the liberated prisoners. This sense of victory tended to outweigh the task of actually carrying the thing, although he also understood that -- not yet being behind Allied lines -- he might have cause to make use of the thing.

Victory had a sweet taste, but sweeter still were the notes of Elle’s laughter, bubbling up here and there to disrupt their relatively quiet progress through the north Italian forest -- tank and all. Bucky earned himself quite a few of those chuckles during the first few days, as he sought to coax Elle out from her stunned shell. She was trying hard to process all that had taken place, and though his own head was aching and his muscles were unsure, he chose to spend as much time as possible flirting, teasing, and making jokes that belied their circumstances. They were not, after all, out of the woods yet.

When he told her that, she rolled her eyes, and it was such a routine expression (something his sisters indulged in quite frequently), that he had work hard to hold back a peal of his own mirth.

Pain pushes down on him from all sides, and he is sure it will break, sure it will crest and break against the shore of his body, the planes of his face. It must break, it will break, because he cannot bear it, cannot bear one more second.

But there is another second, and another, and they stretch, they stretch into years.

He recalled the precise feeling of her hand against his chest, the rough streak of stitches across her palm as it had seared against his heart, fingers brushing his bare skin where his shirt had fallen open. He’d been desperate in those moments, sure he was about to watch Steve die, and then that woman’s hand had chased across his chest, tucking in against his heart. And it had been so long since a gentle hand had touched his skin that intimately, so tenderly...he shook his head in the cold air, as they scanned the area for signs of the enemy. He was not here to fall in love.

But she was just so damn endearing. His pulse eased when she drew near, when he caught one of her smiles or bought a laugh with a coy remark. When her smooth voice with that lilting accent rose on the wind, he relaxed, and those taste of copper dried up in his mouth. When her arm brushed against his, when she steadied herself against him as she stumbled, he was back on a sidewalk in Brooklyn, and they were both a little tipsy from a night on the town, and her parents would be furious with him, but by God, didn’t she look swell in that dress, the colour of sunshine?

He screams and screams, but no one answers. “More,” the doctor says, eyes glinting by the light of this horror. “More.”

“You really ought not to say such thing.” Ellie’s hand stole over her mouth, but he managed to catch the grin first.

“What?” he said with a shrug, as best he could manage with the weight of the gun in his hands.
“I’ve seen Italian girls, Sergeant --”

“Bucky.”

“Bucky,” she conceded, pink deepening in her cheeks. “Yes, well, I’ve seen Italian girls, Bucky, and they are far, far prettier than I’ve ever been on a good day, let alone…” She allowed her words to trail off into dragon smoke on the wintry air, holding up a lank brown curl in one hand.

He stopped, allowing her to pass him on the path. When she’d realized she was alone, she paused too, turning against the ebb of the crowd and the curious glances to meet his stare. His appraising stare. Bucky did not want to make her uncomfortable, so he kept his eyes light, tripping. Taking in the borrowed sweater, the man’s loose pants. The scrapes and bruises on her face. The dried blood at her wrist.

Poetry was not meant for days like these, and yet somehow, he read it in her movements, in the flicker of her shy smile. In the faraway stars of her eyes. And he thought about a dress the colour of sunshine, and her hand in his. No, this was not a place to fall in love. She was not his to dream about. He had much bigger things at hand. But for a moment, there in the green of the forest path, he allowed himself to fall in love -- allowed a story to unfold in the space between heartbeats, the world between blinks. And in that story...well.

“No,” he begs.

“No,” he begs.

“Doll, lie down for me, would you?” Her eyes widened and he bit back a chuckle. It had sounded forward, even by his standards. Pointing to the spot nearest where the small fire was being prepared, he waited as she settled herself down, graceful as a dropped plank in her embarrassment. Once she had stilled, he traced a line in the dirt from the base of her skull, using three fingers, over to the right about a foot and a half; he picked up a nearby rock and wriggled it a little, creating a cleft of sorts for it to rest within. Then, he moved down to her hip. Careful not to touch her, he quickly drew another line extending from the edge of her body, lining it up as best he could with the one above. Here, he left another rock. “Alright, you can sit up now.” She did.

Bucky began to dig with the stock of his rifle into the hard ground, chipping away at the dents until he had made two gentle valleys an inch or two deep. With his hands, rather than the gun, he patted down the sides of each indentation, ensuring that those ridges would be as soft as possible. When he had finished, he glanced up to meet a pair of curious hazel eyes. “For you to sleep in,” he explained. “Your head can go there, like the base of your head --” he gestured to the higher dent “-- and then down here, you can...your, uh...” Oh, Jesus. He’d said much more lurid things to plenty of other women in his time, but they had been sweethearts, girlfriends. Women who understood what they wanted from him, what he wanted from them. That knowledge was the operative element not at play between him and Elle; they were, truly, strangers.

Sure, Bucky might tease and tell her she was the prettiest girl in Italy; sure, she might blush and smile and duck her head away from his twinkling eyes. But he did not know one true thing about her beyond the warmth of her gaze and the small kiss of a scar tucked beside her nose. He did know her story; likewise, she had not read his. And there was no reason for him to desire more, given that she could be somebody’s wife, somebody’s sweetheart. Off-limits; not for him. It was not unusual for soldiers to keep their histories secret while at war, he reminded himself. Maybe she was just trying to preserve the safety of those memories by keeping them to herself.

He fell asleep that night to the whisper of her gratitude on the cold night air, as she settled into her makeshift bed. And he smiled.

Bucky jerked awake to blue eyes, wide with familiar concern. “Damn it, punk, lean back a little,” he muttered, pushing himself up into a sitting position. “Give a guy a heart attack.”

“You were thrashing in your sleep.” Steve’s tone was accusatory, his expression rueful. Bucky knew the briefest flash of guilt, which he elected to mask with a smile.

“I’m fine, Stevie, really. Don’t fuss.”

Steve did not look convinced, but knew better than to pry, not here in the dark, not here in the forest, not here surrounded by so many ears. Rather than press on, he settled himself down next to Bucky, propping his star-spangled shield up against a fairly sturdy sapling. He studied it for a moment, watching as the low light of the dying fire flickered it into a strange relief here and there. “Pretty fancy get-up,” Bucky said, shifting slightly, squaring his shoulders against the chill. “Standard issue?”

Captain America laughed, but it was a hollow thing, and it chilled Bucky more than the air. He waited a moment, ready to dish out another ribbing, just to warm him up, get him going, like the old days, and then...he couldn’t help it; the words tumbled from his mouth of their own accord: “What’d they do to you, Steve?”

It had started the night before Bucky had shipped out. He recalled now, as though the memories belonged to another man, the scent of Connie’s perfume and the way she’d squeezed his hand so tight. Her kiss on his lips.

“Doctor Erskine, he...” Steve trailed off, bringing Bucky back to the conversation at hand. “He and Stark and Agent Carter, without them, I wouldn’t be here.”

Bucky made a noise of derision, worked his heel into the dirt a little. Steve may hold a tone of gratitude to those people, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so. By the light of the fire, he did not see Captain America -- strong, tall, muscled -- but skinny Steve, half concealed by a trash can in a grimy alleyway, that look of absolute stubborn determination plastered all over his thin face.

And then he saw a younger man, wracked with coughs and aching lungs; pale skin stretched over sharp cheekbones. He remembered pulling the quilt away from Steve’s feverish chin, pleading with him to understand that though he felt cold, he could not overheat. He’d brought paper and pencils and paints up to that tiny bedroom, watched as shaking fingers wrought magic in lead and ink.

Bucky listened as Steve went on, talked about the chamber and the serum, the way he had been reborn; how his first act as a new man had been to avenge a death against HYDRA. Then, he had been used: a dancing monkey, travelling over the country, bolstering his own ego after years of deprivation. The Captain had then been brought overseas to support and cheer the troops. When he’d encountered the much downcast remnants of the 107th, Steve had realized what might have happened to his best friend.

Bucky sighed. “You risked a lot. You could have died.” There were a million ways it could have happened, sneaking alone into an enemy base in the middle of the night. What if Steve hadn’t been able to find the POWs? What if they’d used one of those horrific guns on him, obliterating him into nothingness before he had even stepped over the threshold?
But, he reasoned, there in the dark, just the two of them under the lonely stars -- he would have the same damn thing a thousand times over, for the slightest, slimmest chance of saving Steve’s life. There was no price he would not pay.

*His head feels like it’s going to explode, just fucking explode. He can’t move his arms, can’t lift them. Somewhere in the distance, his mother cries.*

She worked as a secretary, or -- more properly, she said, as a receptionist. A dentist’s office. She managed his appointments and arranged his conferences, ordered new supplies and offered sweets out to the smaller patients. He wanted to hear funny stories, but her giggles were gone that day, faded away on the wind. “We’re getting closer,” Steve reassured her that morning. For a moment, he thought her face darkened, but he must have been mistaken, because half a beat later she leaned, limp with relief, against Gabe when he repeated Steve’s word in an awed tone.

Bucky counted the beats of his dog tags against his chest, a second and third heartbeat. Trusted the weight of the gun in his hands, the way it hit at his hip every now and then. Lived for the moments when Gabe would clap him on the back, or Steve would give him that look, that look of pure admiration, gratitude. When Ellie’s hand would brush his arm, and she’d try so hard to pretend it had all been an accident, but God, he was getting used to seeing her cheeks flush with that funny little mixture of mortification and amusement. He’d like to see them that way more often.

Because in between those new heartbeats, an old one was still festering -- beating in a panicked staccato, a chaotic confusion of his reality. Dead or alive, dead or alive. By night, he tore through nightmares of wide eyes and cold hands, the press of something metal and menacing against his head. During the day, he counted the time in those small, anchoring interactions: Gabe, Steve, Ellie, Dugan. A bird landing on a branch. A cool wash of rain. His turn on the tank or the truck, when he could rest his feet and grasp at a shallow sleep, not deep enough for dreams.

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” he said quickly, impulsively, one afternoon on the truck. Her leg was pressed against his, and he cocked her that grin, the one that made his eyes crinkle just the way girls liked. Innocent and devilish all at the same time -- it was his best move. It did not matter that they were trying to slide their way out of enemy territory; did not matter that they both smelled of blood and sweat and shit. She was the prettiest part of his world right now, and the way her fingers trembled as they reached for the back of his hand -- that made him want to sleep for a hundred years, because he knew that with her hand in his, all his dreams would be sweet.

They weren’t.

“Me too.” She told him that two hours later, once they were walking again. After they had fallen asleep and he had batted away those ghostly hands. After he had tasted again the leather, the sear of hot blood; known once more the aching struggle of those straps against his chest, against his legs. There had been nowhere to go.

Of course, they were both being utterly foolish, but fiction can pose such a lovely, lithe distraction -- who were they to resist? Bucky knew it was not true: something brighter was burning between them, but it was not yet love. She knew it, too. But somewhere between the factory and freedom they had decided together that, for a little while at least, such things were not of significance. Just for now.

As they marched through the burnished autumnal haze of the forest, Bucky was flanked by Steve and Elle, and bolstered by a sense of -- at least this will soon be over. In the quiet moments, when he wasn’t flirting or joking, fielding with some sympathy complaints from other prisoners -- in those
moments, he was visited by a sense of urgency in the subsequent challenges laid out before him. *Finish this part. Climb that hill. Walk that mile.* Beyond, he knew, was the end of the road, when he would be able to rest and hand over his gun for a while. He would probably have to write a report or answer some questions, and that was fine, that was expected.

Should he tell them?

It was his duty to do so, he figured. And the topic would inevitably be broached in Dugan’s report, or Gabe’s answers. His CO would want to know why Bucky had been removed from the prison population and brought up to Zola’s laboratory. The facts, when laid out, where grim but not incriminating -- he had been taken against his will, restrained, subjected to a series of medical tests and then….

Not incriminating, no. So then why did he feel so furtive? Like a sick secret was curdling in his stomach, as though something malignant was brewing in his veins? For a moment, he considered telling Steve, pulling him aside behind a tree or something and letting everything out. Or Elle, for that matter. He could tell her. She would be kind and sympathetic; she would tell him everything he needed to hear. If he told her, Bucky would be able to luxuriate in her care and comfort, but telling any of them, speaking any of it aloud, that would make those nightmares -- those murky depths of dark memory -- real. Everything he feared Zola had done to him -- that would become real.

He kept his silence, and when he did venture to speak, he chose lighter topics: plans to take Elle out for dinner in London, if they got sent back on leave -- at the very least, he promised, he’d treat her to something at the mess. To Steve, he offered observations of the area around them, possible vantage points if they were ambushed. They did not really have a firm plan in mind if that did happen -- “run like hell” seemed to be the most likely option. But the former prisoners were quite heavily gunned, and the likelihood of either HYDRA or Nazi forces being able to completely surmount them were slimmed further by the presence of that firepower and the tank. The two friends (and now compatriots) discussed for a while the possibility of some sort of attack, but Bucky quickly clued in to Elle’s discomfort, and dropped the subject. If worse came to worse, he figured they’d be able to handle themselves, and the whole lot of them had made it this far unscathed.

“That’s Allied lines,” Steve said quietly, at perhaps noon on that final day. As the message travelled through the crowd, joy followed, springing up into contained cheers and mild euphoria as it became clear they need only walk at least a few more hours. Just a few more hours.

He would keep his silence until then.

The road rose slightly, and Bucky tightened his grip on the rifle as the blockade was lifted and the sea of khaki and curious faces emerged in the late afternoon light. He pulled back slightly in his pace, allowing Steve to take the helm of the column, reassured by Elle’s nervous presence beside him. She didn’t have a damn thing to be afraid of, he wanted to tell her, but was too keyed up to form the words. He’d hold her hand, he vowed, once he had a chance to lose the gun.

Rejoicing, the 107th formed a gauntlet of sorts for the POWs to enter the camp, offering them applause and claps on the back. Bucky tried to train his expression, keep the bubbling nausea at bay. It had been far too long since a solid meal and a good night’s rest, and he was loath to return snivelling or yawning. No, he would be the stoic soldier, just doing his bit -- but when Steve looked over at him, pressed a hand to his back and offered a slight smile Bucky felt his face soften. Despite everything that had happened, he still could not believe Steve, little Steve, was right there with him.

And so was Elle. He glanced over to give her some reassurance, but to his dismay, she had fixed her eyes on the horizon, clenched her fists by her side. *Oh, darlin’,* he thought sympathetically. *Don’t
Steve came to a halt near the centre of the camp and saluted an approaching Colonel Chester Phillips. Bucky straightened up, standing to attention. “Some of these men need medical attention,” Steve explained, as the rest of the crowd converged on the newcomers. “I’d like to surrender myself for disciplinary action.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Phillips said gruffly, resigned.

“Yes, sir.”

As Phillips walked away, Bucky noted the approach of a young, strident woman. She stepped up to Steve as though she knew him well, and he bit back a grin. Poor little Steve Rogers, a true romantic who’d never been romanced. Something in his gut told Bucky that was about to change, too. “Hey!” he called out, once the tense (and possibly flirty) exchange between the two had concluded, because he was sure as hell not going to permit this celebration to take place without acknowledging the man, the Brooklyn boy who had gotten them all here. “Let’s hear it for Captain America!”

As the crowd burst with a fresh round of whoops and applause, Bucky turned to his own girl, ready for a proper celebration of their own, ready to hand off the gun to Gabe or Falsworth or whoever the hell could take it for a moment so he could sweep her up in his arms, movie-style. But then he froze.

Elle had stiffened visibly, at the outpouring of affection and relief from both the POWs and the 107th. From Gabe’s embrace, she seemed to cringe, sidestepping so subtly that Gabe himself did not notice it, and he quickly moved on to having his hand violently shaken by a trio of welcoming soldiers. Bucky watched as she took another step, and another, and the need for her to stop bubbled to his lips, but would not come out. She looked -- disgusted. No, that can't have been right.

And then she was gone.

After asking around, pushing his way through the raucous crowd, Bucky found a nurse who said she’d seen the “poor thing” head into the medical tent. “Her hand was bleeding,” the woman clucked sympathetically. “She looked like she’d been through the wringer.”

Bucky nodded and thanked her, visibly relieved -- her hand was hurting, that was all. It hadn’t been disgust painted on her face; she hadn’t been trying to pull away. She wanted her hand tended to, just as they’d promised her. “Which way’s the tent?”

The nurse pointed out the way, advising him to get some his own wounds treated while he was there. Scratching idly at the dried blood on his cheek, Bucky agreed and then headed for the tent.

After about a full minute of staring, he realized he probably should not have entered. Elle’s eyes met his over the yellowed ivory of her slip, her cheeks flushing deeper than he had ever seen them. Bruises in various stages of healing, a rainbow of past pain and future scars, tracing bare arms he should not have seen. He was aware of his jaw slackening, heat rising in his face. Entirely dissipated was the boldness in which he had gone looking for her, “his girl.” His girl of icy anger, who lifted her arms to cover herself, who shrieked at him to leave, mortification and fury battling for the spotlight on her face. “Go! Get out! Leave me alone!”

He found no absolution in the winter air, nor in his abrupt solitude. In the quiet aftermath of unbounded jubilation, he held only uncertainty, and the seething acquaintance of a sudden stranger.
After so long in the cramped confines of cell three, pressed between familiar bodies, the small and narrow garret flat seemed vast and lonely. For the past few nights, Elle had been escorted back to the two rooms she was now permitted to occupy by a pair of female SSR agents. Kind and patient, the women did their best to reassure her that the way events were unfolding (long days of interview questions and empty waiting rooms) was perfectly standard, and that she presented an “unusual case.” Agent Novak often repeated this phrase throughout their exchanges.

“Miss Andersen, you do present an unusual case,” the poised and polished American observed, not for the first time, on the fourth day. The morning was cool and an immense fog had rolled in from the Thames, leaving Agents Stark and Edwards to cagily inch forward through the mire in the rented car. Stark had taken the wheel; Edwards had gripped the edge of her seat with white knuckles, offering occasional (and hollow) reassurances to Elle in the backseat.

Now, in the interview room for what felt like the thousandth time, Elle just nodded and fingered the hem of her borrowed frock. It was pretty and airy; entirely out of season, but beggars could not be choosers, and she’d contented herself with the cleanliness of it, rather than fashion. There was still a war on, after all. Briefly, she wondered what Bucky would think of it, of her in it, those little white flowers against navy blue, the rolled collar…

“Miss Andersen?”

A blush crept up Elle’s neck at the sharpened tone. Agent Novak had been quite friendly in the days since their first interview -- a term she insisted on, preferring it over “interrogation.” But truly, an interrogation was what it was, what the volley of questions and attestations amounted to, altogether. She had not done anything wrong, Novak had reassured her, and Stark and Edwards echoed the sentiment each evening as they drove her back to the flat.

She had yet to hear Novak adopt such a tone with her -- it sounded as a scolding, as though she were an errant child brought before a stern mother. Like her mother.

Elle cleared her throat, smiled apologetically. “Sorry, ma’am. I missed the question.”

Novak sighed, appraising her slightly. Four days now; she had all the answers she needed, the entire story from Elle’s perspective had been told and held up against those of the other prisoners interviewed formally, including Sergeant Barnes and Major Falsworth. The Strategic Scientific Reserve, as well as the British military, would be satisfied, and the girl was probably in for a small promotion or, if she preferred, a nice little settlement to see her ease back into civilian life. It was not an extraordinary case, but the fact that a pretty young aide from Westminster had been kidnapped by Schmidt’s shadowy organization -- well, suffice it to say, the tabloids would love her, and MI6 would hate that.

Her only job, set down to her by Agent Carter and Colonel Phillips, was to ensure that Elle Andersen understood fully the gravity of her situation, the gratitude of the SSR, and the onus upon her shoulders to keep the whole affair quite mum. Hence the overly formalized interviews; the isolation from her fellow prisoners; even the borrowed clothes were aimed at keeping her just on the right side of uncomfortable. “Ill at ease,” had been the exact phrase Phillips had used. She was, essentially, there to test the girl.

“I just asked what you think your plans might be in going forward,” Novak repeated, suddenly gasping for a cigarette. These days had been long and tedious; not exactly the sort of work she had
been hoping to find when she’d joined up. One last question, and then the girl would be off her hands; Carter had a follow-up interview scheduled for three o’clock.

Elle worried at her lip, hands twisting beneath the table. “I, er, haven’t given it much thought, really,” she said nervously. “That is, thinking about all that -- the future -- did not seem quite sensible in...when I was...there.”

For the hundredth time in four days, Novak’s throat constricted in pity. The girl had certainly been through hell, but she had a stubborn, endearing sort of strength that the agent liked. Carter and Phillips liked it, too. Elle tended to rush over the details of her punishments from Lohmer, lending only a few details to the deaths of several prisoners. When she talked about Barnes’ removal and the “accidental” death of Lohmer (Novak had it on good authority it was no accident, but she admired the girl’s refusal to lay blame at any of her friends’ feet), she tended to get a bit emotional, tears welling up and words escaping her, the whole shebang.

She never fully lost her composure, though, and she declined all offers of hankies or smokes. Sitting there, neat as she could manage in hand-me-down frocks, too-big pumps and little girl’s ribbons in her hair, Elle Andersen struck Novak as the sort of woman who simply made the best of any circumstances she found herself in. If things worked out, she could be a perfect fit for this scheme of Carter’s and Phillip’s designing.

Novak found herself wrapping up the interview, offering Elle another cup of tea (which she politely forewent), and standing to direct her to the main waiting room for their section -- a rather grim, dull-looking space of beige and green. On the corner table, there was a small stack of newspapers and an abandoned novel or two; as she had several times already, Elle chose a seat near the table and settled herself in for the wait. She was used to it; Novak typically instructed her to wait there prior to their sessions and Agent Edwards arrived there, in the door leading to the main corridor, to escort her home of an evening.

Standing in the doorway that led back to the interview rooms and beyond that, the main hub of SSR activity here at their London headquarters, Agent Novak took a last look at Elle Andersen, knowing full well that her part in this operation had been concluded. Elle looked up, searching the other woman’s face, sure the agent was about to fire one last question at her, perhaps insist on an answer to her most recent one -- her eyes certainly seemed to hold some final curiosity. But Novak said nothing, save for a quiet, polite goodbye. And then she was alone.

As she had been so often lately.

Bucky had not spoken to her since the incident in the medical tent, when she had so coldly rebuked him for entering without sanction; when she had tossed up her arms and scowled and spat like a wildcat until he had bolted from her sight. The memory of it pained her even now, nearly a fortnight hence. Idly, she rubbed at her aching head -- she should have accepted the second cuppa.

He had seen her broken: the purpling souvenirs from Lohmer; the old cuts and scrapes from the river. And he had seen her vulnerable, clad only in the cotton slip that had seen far, far better days. Elle had pushed him out for his own good. She’d been protecting him, because she cared.

The main problem was that she had not since had an opportunity to explain that to him -- or the coldness with which she had turned from Gabe’s rejoicing; the messages from James she had ignored. On the ship, she had kept to her own private cabin, refusing to see even a concerned Captain America. Long days on the sea had passed by in self-imposed exile; between the lines of The Woman in White and The Monk -- the only books she’d been able to beg off a few generous members of the crew -- she had tripped again and again through those moments in the tent, experiencing them in painful flashes: Bucky’s broad smile melting into guilt; the hot blush on her
skin; the concern of the nearby nurses, and the sound of his boots beating a hasty retreat on the hard, packed ground outside. After, Steve had tried to see her, presumably to find out why she had been so upset, but she’d told the nurse who alerted her to his presence outside the medical tent that she did not want to see him. She did not, she explained, want to see any of them.

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” he’d said. She recalled the firm press of his leg against hers, the promise of his hand, the low, husky timbre of his voice. There in the deep of the forest, on the road to sanctuary, she had wholeheartedly believed his words. Now, in the strange orderliness of this military office, she believed him again. She’d spoiled it all, though, because that was her job. Her mission, of sorts. Elle had not signed up for the war to fall in love.

She had come to help, to do her part. Her mother had always insisted on that -- duty, honour, aid. Those were the credos of Elle’s childhood, and she knew them well. They had led her to those moments by the river, when the HYDRA scouts had found her; they had guided her through her tasks at the hospital, in her interactions with the other POWs. In many ways, those tenets had also led her to Bucky, to the way she felt about him. But she could not, she knew, conflate ideals of compassion and comfort with love and romance. A handsome man saying sweet, flirty words was a distraction from her cause, from her mission. Elle had allowed herself to be overwhelmed, to be consumed by the delight of possibility and the rugged planes of his face -- but no more.

She could not.

Desperate for a distraction from these guilt-ridden, wistful thoughts, Elle turned to grab at one of the novels on the nearby table. Well-thumbed and cheap, the romantic claptrap they promised could not hold her interest for very long, but for a few moments, at least, she could allow herself to be even just mildly concerned with the saccharine trials of one Lady Marguerite and the dashing sculptor Antoine.

Agent Novak had intimated that another member of the SSR wished to speak with her today, around three o’clock. Trouble was, she had no watch and the waiting room, ironically, did not possess a clock so she had no way of knowing how much longer she would have to sit there. With her thoughts. And Lady Marguerite.

Ye gods. When had things grown so complicated? A few weeks ago, she had been a simple VAD girl, bringing wildflowers to recovering soldiers and reading poetry by camplight. Now, she was on day four of official interrogations -- interviews -- by a special branch of the Allied forces, having been rescued by a man she had assumed existed only on the war bonds circuit and in the imagination of admiring children. She had lost all her friends, through her own explosive self-preservation. And she had fallen in love. Or at least, she had skated contentedly on the surface of it for a while. How was she to know? It wasn’t as though she’d actually done it all before. Not properly, in her mind. Not like this.

With the boy, love had grown so quietly she was not even sure it was love. Her affection for him was bound up in memory and familiarity; in the wishes of her mother and the simplicity of belonging to him, and he to her. Elle had never questioned why, when, or precisely how she had become associated with him, and though she had always been able to admit to his shortcomings and flaws, she had never sought a way out. Had never seen the need to do so. Their relationship was not overly complex, and they had been firmly on the same road for some time now, but...it all felt so contrived. With Bucky -- his sweet words, compliments flung simply and kindly; the honest intentions of his hand in hers -- she felt understood. Or at least, that he was trying to understand her. For the first time in her life, she had to introduce herself to a man. Bucky had not known her since she was a girl, had not witnessed the awkward stumblings, the episodes of grief and embarrassment and the endless
growing pains. The lack of history between them meant they could meet on a new level, both unsure and uncertain of how to go about things, but both committed to actually doing so -- she’d thought.

In contrast, the boy was often dutiful in his courting. Flowers and dresses, that sort of thing. Gifts at the usual, most appropriate opportunities. Kisses on cheeks and sweet nothings he could whisper in the presence of his mother. Of course, there were other moments, too. Naughty jokes and wandering hands and lips that seared as they mapped her neck and collarbone. He was good at that. And making her laugh. The boy could always make her laugh.

But he knew her, knew her so well. The weight of many years hung between them, colouring their every interaction. He had seen her at her worst; she had felt his thoroughly. Though their parents had amply encouraged their love and attraction, and though, really, all things considered, a more permanent bond between them would not only be logical, but so, so very easy --

She wanted to groan aloud in her frustration, but knew she could not. How strange would that appear to anyone walking by the waiting room? Stop this now, she ordered herself firmly. Absolute nonsense. Honestly, she was no better than blasted Lady Marguerite, torn between her loving, if distant, fiancé and her torrid affair with the rather vapid Antoine. Not that Bucky was vapid, by any means, nor was this technically an affair…

It could not happen. Elle had not gone about ending it in the most gracious way, but she had been foolish to respond so to Bucky’s confession and affections. To place her hand on his chest, even in the dire stress of those final moments in the burning factory, had been egregiously inappropriate, forward. Her subsequent rejection was about protecting him, caring for him, as was her duty. Her honourable duty. It was what her mother would have wanted, and Elle was, if nothing else, a good daughter. She had to consider what she was now privately referring to as the “Italian matter,” and its attending shame. Because of that, she had to protect him, Gabe, James, and herself from suspicion, from slander.

She had done right by him. She had protected him. He would be better off for this. They all would.

“Date of birth?”

“June twentieth, 1917, ma’am.”

“Your mother was Enid Andersen, née Knott? She was employed as a nurse?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And your father was Neeley Andersen...it says here he worked as a freelance writer and as a tutor?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“They are both deceased?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You lived alone, prior to enlistment?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Agent Carter hesitated, the first sign of awkwardness she’d displayed since entering the interrogation room some ten minutes before. “I do apologize, Miss Andersen. I know you’ve answered these questions already, and that the next one is of a personal nature, but I would like to reconfirm its
“veracity, if that’s alright by you?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Carter cleared her throat. “You have no romantic attachments? Unmarried, not engaged, not, er, seeing anyone?”

The boy’s face flashed to mind. Devilishly handsome. Elle closed her eyes against him, and against the secondary vision of encroaching stubble across a sharp jaw. “No, ma’am. None. I’m unattached.”

Visibly relieved, Carter’s expression softened slightly as she glanced down to the manila folder, with its mysterious pages of type, which she had been referencing throughout the session. “Excellent. And pre-service, you were employed as a secretary with Doctor Edmund Hayes of Harley Street?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Very good. Now, onto other matters.” Agent Carter closed the folder and folded her hands neatly atop, fixing that intense brown-eyed stare upon her in a way that made Elle feel that she had never in her life possessed a secret that this woman did not now know.

“I’ll be frank, Miss Andersen,” she said evenly. “We would like to offer you a position with a newly-developed active division of the Strategic Scientific Reserve. It’s so new, in fact, that we have yet to actually name it. Captain Rogers is assembling a specialist team to be deployed on operations concerned with infiltrating known HYDRA locations and cells across Europe.”

Agent Carter paused, allowing Elle a moment to let the information sink in. At a dazed nod, she continued. “The Captain has been given leave to design this team himself, hand-picking the members. He mentioned your name early on; wondered if there were any possible positions for you.”

Steve Rogers, who had known her all of a few hours, wanted her for a specialist task force? A specialist bloody task force?

“I would like to formally offer you the position of SSR liaison with Captain Rogers’ team.” Carter smiled widely, as though she were proffering a tremendous treat, dangling the most enticing gift before her. “Now, bear in mind, this is being used as an umbrella term of sorts, as your position would incorporate a vast number of tasks, some unpredictable.

“For instance, you would have some administrative responsibilities while deployed, including collecting and filing mission reports, maintaining a communication detail with the SSR, arranging for transport. We have also proposed and will require you to enhance your medical training, so that you could function as a source of primary care, a sort of field medic, for the team. Furthermore, you may, depending upon the situation, be called upon to occupy a more” -- her eyes twinkled -- “incognito role, shall we say.”

Dumbfounded, Elle sat in silence, the hard-backed wooden chair now feeling far too large for her; the room too small. On the far right, a photograph of President Roosevelt glanced over at George VI. She found herself studying the images, wondering about this union, this agreement -- this place. This whole secretive organization she had never heard of before Steve came into her life, before they were brought back to the 107th. Before this whole mysterious, chaotic, wild adventure.

Adventure?

Oh, the word held promise. Always had. But Elle had always assumed there was not an ounce of adventure in her, merely obligation that sometimes led her into some precarious situations. The boy had told her that often enough. His sweet, even-tempered little love, content with the thrill of myths,
Agent Carter was looking at her expectantly, but not impatiently. Evidently, she well understood the shock of the offer. “Miss Andersen…?”

“They?” Elle blurted.

“Honestly, Miss Andersen, it comes down largely to Captain Rogers’ recommendation,” Carter said reassuringly, warmly. “You must have made quite an impression on him.”

Elle quaked at the implication of those words, fisting her hands in the hem of her dress in an attempt to stop them trembling.

“He said that you were an asset to him in his rescue mission, and you displayed a remarkable sense of composure under high pressure conditions. Furthermore, he finds, and has corroborated this sentiment with others in your company, that you are a highly calming, helpful person. You would be a boon to a division such as this one, particularly as concerns morale.”

Despite the gathering storm of her panic, Elle was moved, her eyes glazing slightly with emotion as she considered Steve’s kindness, his generosity, especially since he was aware of how she had treated Bucky back in the medical tent. She looked down at her lap, unwilling to let Agent Carter see her tears.

But the agent was unconcerned, still resolutely ploughing on with her explanation. “Additionally, I must confess that having no familial or marital attachments makes you an appealing candidate for this position. I’ll be frank again, if you’ll allow it?” She waited for another shaky nod. “This is a dangerous proposition. But these are dangerous times, and I am speaking to a woman who voluntarily travelled to a warzone to serve her nation. I admire that. And I think -- well, I strongly suspect -- that that sense of honour and duty runs deep within you, Miss Andersen.”

Elle’s muted reception did not bring Carter pause, who spoke more earnestly now, reaching across the table so naturally that Elle found herself raising her hands to meet the agent’s halfway. Carter clasped them firmly, eyes gleaming with good intentions. “Here is a chance to help, a chance to prove yourself in a way that few men and women have the opportunity to do. But this must be your choice, and your choice alone, which is why I asked Captain Rogers to permit me to conduct this, the final portion of your interview, and make the proposal.

“You impressed Agent Novak, Miss Andersen, and she is not easily impressed. She reported that you related your experiences honestly and clearly, and that they were most affecting.” Carter cocked her head slightly, appraising Elle in much the same way that Novak had before leaving her earlier -- curiosity, mingled with with not a little esteem. “And you certainly impressed your fellow...er, prisoners -- apologies. Private Jones, Major Falsworth, Sergeant Dugan, and Private Sampson have all attested to your professionalism and composure during imprisonment.”

The absence of Bucky’s name and good wishes was somehow deafening. A dull buzzing accompanied it, as a single thought began to run about in deranged circles through her head: This is too much. Not for me, not for me. Too much.

That repugnant little secret slithered about in her stomach. Any moment now, the rug would be pulled out from beneath her. Any moment.

“Now, you will not be forced into this.” Carter released her hands and flipped open the file again, running a finger tipped with scarlet down the length of the first page, surveying a quite substantial paragraph. “The British government is prepared to offer you your choice of secretarial or clerical positions at any number of organizations, both civilian and military. You will receive a thorough
recommendation, of course. Furthermore, you would be provided with a small stipend to help you reintegrate and resettle.” She glanced up, and once more Elle knew the intensity of her gaze. “You can walk away from SSR Headquarters in a few days, leave the safe house, say your goodbyes, and move on with your life, leaving all of this behind as a brief, perhaps unpleasant chapter.

“Or”-- and she leaned forward again, eyes bright, smile inviting -- “you can grasp a challenge in your own two hands, and make bloody history.”

Elle stared. What threshold had she crossed that had led her into this world? “Make bloody history?” She was an aide, a volunteer. She couldn’t tend battle wounds, liaise with government officials. Did this woman not know what she’d been accused of back in Italy? How poorly she had handled her own fear? What damn use would she be on covert operations, when she could not even contend with her own emotions on a quiet day?

She closed her eyes, nausea threatening to bloom into a cold sweat, and returned her shaking hands to the privacy of her lap. “Miss Andersen?” Agent Carter’s voice faltered. “Is there...anything you would like to ask me?”

The shame. The subtle sense of shame that had lain dormant those weeks, when the risk of pain and death had so well outweighed it in her mind. But with those bright words, the knowledge that Carter’s offer was everything she should have wanted -- everything her mother would have wanted -- her mission, her mandate, her creed. And yet, she knew, with a little shiver of that old shame, that her next words would take it all away. Bring her back to reality.

“What about the accusations?” she whispered, not trusting herself to open her eyes.

A beat of pregnant silence followed.

“What accusations?”

Elle glanced up to see that Agent Carter’s mouth had compressed into a terse, flat line which seemed to brook no suspicion, no virulent recrimination. She was holding something back, Elle could tell, but just quite what, she had no idea. “The...accusations from Italy,” Elle said slowly. “That...that I was...it should be in my file.” She pointed to the folder. “It was well-documented, I’m sure.”

Certainly, the matrons had assured her the ugliness of Pat’s accusations would be dismissed -- but that was before she had indulged in such histrionics at the news of James’ MIA status. Surely after all that and her dismissal, those accusations had entered her record at some point.

Carter’s eyes never left her face; she made no move to check the file again. In preparation, Elle took a deep, fortifying breath, and told the whole sorry tale, watching the agent’s face carefully the entire time. She related how an overwhelmed and grief-stricken colleague had levelled a series of vile accusations at her, in an effort to slander her name and have her dismissed from the VAD. “Pat really wasn’t trying to be horrid,” she explained tearfully, trying her hardest to keep from actually weeping. “I think she was just struggling, and I must’ve looked as though I had it quite easy, and she just...” Elle dabbed self-consciously at her nose, knowing she must seem exceedingly crude. “The night I was taken by HYDRA was the night before I was being sent home, dismissed. It was so awful, ma’am, and I...I...”

“Miss Andersen.” Agent Carter held up a hand, effectively putting a stopper in what was brewing up to be quite an upset. “Please. I’ve been in communication with your former matron, Agatha Barnett. She’s on leave here in London; we’ve had a few meetings since Captain Rogers first brought up your name as a possible candidate for the team. Matron Barnett has nothing but wonderful things to say about you -- how devoted you were to your patients, how beneficial your care was. She never made any mention of such accusations.”
Oh, no. And yet here she’d just confessed the whole mad affair. “But --”

“Stop. The SSR is not interested in any false accusations which were officially retracted and then subsequently destroyed, nor in the petty domineering of a matron-in-chief who values order over the mental wellbeing of her charges.” Something flinty had entered Carter’s gaze now. “Burned, shredded, and redacted documents of well-intentioned aides are not in our purview, and certainly have no bearing on any official staffing decisions.”

“But --”

“Elle.” Carter leaned across the table again, her tone far sharper and more forceful than Elle had heard it yet; the use of her first name was also jarring. “Listen to me. There are no accusations. None at all. Your service is untarnished, your record spotless. You are a perfect fit for this role, if you want it. No one is going to shoehorn you into this, but you have proven yourself to be an exemplary, brave aide with clerical experience, a keen sense of composure, reliability, and, well...I would hate to see you turn this down because you’re worried about some ancient gossip that no one here will ever find out about.”

Elle blinked. “So...there’s no records?”

“There’s no records because nothing ever happened. That’s what you stated in your affidavit, correct?” Elle nodded. “And Barnett assured me that the whole thing was a sham, a rather cruel prank I do not care to revisit.”

The clock on the wall opposite the President and the King ticked loudly; Elle tried to match her breaths to it. Was this the taste of utter relief, she wondered? Was this the feeling of absolution? As they had approached Allied lines back in Italy, after Bucky’s admission in the lorry and her own response, she had been plagued by such anxiety, such fear. Recollections of Pat’s accusations, her outbursts, her dismissal became a thundering, roiling storm warning that everything she’d enjoyed, everything that had brought her even a little comfort in those dark days, about to be swept away.

She’d turned from Gabe, fixed a cold stare on James (which he did not see). Railed at Bucky. All to protect them. Because she did not want their honour muddied by association, or their names scorned. And she did not want those words, the ones that had danced -- unspoken -- between Clarke’s anger. Anything but those words.

But now, things could be different: she could apologize to the men, to Bucky in particular, whom she had treated so horrifically. She could tell them the whole story, perhaps, or just gloss over the more mortifying details. However she decided to go about it, Elle felt a glow chase through her, tugging a small smile from her lips, as she realized that she could go back to them. Laugh with them. Fight with them. Fall in love with him.

If she really wanted to. And a furtive little part of her practically sparkled at the prospect.

“Do you need more time, Miss Andersen? More information?” Smiling at her visible relief, Agent Carter reached to her left, selecting a small packet of papers from a neat stack. “I have some plans here, the prospectus for the team, if you’d like to --”

“I’ll do it,” Elle said, beaming. This, her second liberation, was making her quite giddy. She was running from the factory all over again.

“Wonderful!” Agent Carter stood suddenly, stretching out a hand to shake Elle’s enthusiastically. “There will be plenty more to discuss, but now, let’s get you fixed up. Out of those ribbons,” she added, stepping around the table and tucking Elle’s arm through her elbow. “You’re an SSR liaison
now, my dear, not a little girl. In fact, I’m taking you for a celebratory drink. My shift ended twenty minutes ago.”

Dazed and not a little startled, Elle allowed herself to be swept down the corridor on Agent Carter’s arm, dimly aware of a series of closed office doors and a few curious glances. “Out...for a drink?” she asked dully.

“Yes, if you’re amenable?”

Well, and why not?

The dress was lovely. A golden yellow, muted enough for the early winter, complete with a borrowed black velvet handbag that felt a little too much for the short walk down to the Whip and Fiddle. Agent Carter -- Peggy, as she’d insisted Elle call her now that they were both officially off-duty -- had lent her the frock, a coat, and a pair of shoes so comfortable it was as though they were made for her. The woman had even kindly offered to do her hair, giving her a quick set of gentle victory curls and a spritz of perfume that had Elle feeling absolute worlds away from that lonely flat and the cold metal cage, her most recent homes.

“I believe Captain Rogers had chosen tonight to tell the rest of the team, and this seems the most likely location for them,” Peggy explained, pointing out the wooden sign just a few yards ahead. “It’s been quite popular with them.”

Elle experienced a flash of guilt, followed quickly on its heels by a churlish sense of being left out (though, she reminded herself, her isolation since Italy had been largely by choice). She missed the companionship -- Dugan’s booming voice, James’ attentiveness, Gabe’s cheery care. And Bucky. She missed Bucky.

The pub proved to be a smoky, yeasty cavern of conviviality, with a great number of patrons -- servicemen and -women, civilians -- boisterously enjoying a night of reprieve from war work. As they entered, Peggy pointed out a series of hooks near what had once been the ladies’ only section of the bar, and Elle shimmied gratefully from the heat of the black coat, scanning about for familiar faces as she did. “Give me a moment to attend to business,” Peggy said, hanging up her own coat to reveal a gorgeous, satiny red dress that still -- though it was her second time seeing it, made Elle feel approximately ten years old in comparison. “And then we’ll have that drink.”

A man was playing a jaunty tune on the piano in the corner, and although her experience with public houses was limited to say the least, Elle found herself warming to the prospect of an evening spent there, with Peggy and her former companions. She’d been in a bit of a daze since the events of this afternoon, when she had accepted the job offer, but Peggy’s enthusiasm and admiration (not to mention a proper bath for the first time since Italy; sponges and flannels were no longer cutting the mustard) was going quite some way in unravelling those thick knots of tension and guilt. Things could be sunnier, she decided -- apologies could be made, explanations offered, and she and Bucky could perhaps put their heads together and sort out the strange dance they’d been doing back in Austria.

The boy did not enter her mind.

Briefly, as she followed Peggy through the thick press of the crowd, Elle wondered if she would even be able to locate Steve and the others, let alone hear them when she actually sat down. But as Peggy moved further into the pub, the raucous singing died away, drinks were lowered, and eyes were raised to the crimson-clad vision smoothly navigating her way to the back of the main room, where an opened pair of doors promised an annex, of sorts.
A flicker of disappointment that Elle was more than accustomed to fluttered deep in her stomach as she observed the reactions. Peggy led her past a round table positively brimming with familiar faces, though it took a good while for them to notice the girl in the yellow dress. “Well,” Dugan boomed, the staggered vacancy sliding from his face to be replaced by a wide grin, “if it isn’t my favourite mystery girl. Where’ve you been hiding, kid?” He stood, enveloping her in a gasping embrace.

“Er,” she began, glancing over at Peggy, uncertain of how much she could actually say. “I’ve been…”

“Gentlemen.” Peggy wound her arm through Elle’s again, offering them a lukewarm nod. “Forgive the interruption, but Miss Andersen here has to speak to her new CO. Apologies. Through here.”

“Hey,” Gabe asked with a grin, as she was marched away. “What can we get you, sweetheart?”

Elle scanned her memory -- what had she liked, in a world of choices? She remembered the taste of golden apples, how sweet that had been, and requested a cider.

The pair paused a moment on the threshold of the annex, watching as Steve (shipshape in his dress uniform) and Bucky (looking a little worse for wear, his jacket unbuttoned and his face wan), pushed away from their stools to stand politely before them. Elle’s stomach gave a distinct and rather tremulous flip at the sight of Bucky -- she had not really properly seen him since the tent in Italy. Most of his cuts and bruises had healed, but he looked so, so tired. His eyes roved appreciatively over Peggy’s figure, treading just the right side of respectability; but he made no move to glance over at Elle, or acknowledge in any immediate way that she was there. She loosened her grip and hung back when Peggy started to walk towards the men, disappointment bitter on her tongue. It was, though, she thought firmly, no more than she deserved.

“Captain,” said Peggy lightly.

“Agent Carter.” Steve nodded, and then aimed a soft glance in Elle’s direction. “Miss Andersen.”

Bucky grinned. “Ma’am.” To Elle, he said nothing.

Something raw and mean clenched at Elle’s stomach as she watched Bucky’s gaze continue to survey her new colleague’s stunning figure. She was grateful for Steve’s greeting, however, stilted, but she was here for Bucky’s forgiveness, not Steve’s predictable kindness. As Peggy went on to explain to the Captain that he would be required to meet with Mr. Howard Stark (the SSR’s main scientist; Elle knew him only by name) the next morning to test out some new equipment, Elle tried to catch Bucky’s eye, stepping slowly forward to join the small group. “I have some good news, by the way,” Peggy said, noticing her approach. “Miss Andersen has agreed to join your team as communications and administrative liaison.”

Steve’s face relaxed again, breaking into a genuine smile. “That’s great,” he said earnestly, shaking Elle’s hand. The ice she’d feared would have grown between them as a result of her treatment of his best friend seemed to thaw away to nothing in the few seconds her hand was wrapped in his. Despite her trepidation, she could at least rest assured that this relationship was still in fine fettle.

To her dismay, there was no proffered hand from Bucky -- no indication at all, really, that he had actually heard Peggy’s news, let alone cared. Elle shrank back, abruptly aware that she had overestimated her potential success rate in this, her first operation. He was furious with her, obviously. Deeply, deeply offended, and she couldn’t blame him.

Unaware of either the coldness between them or Elle’s discomfort, Peggy glanced over to where Dugan and the others had resumed their lively singing. “I see your top squad is prepping for duty,”
she observed coolly.

“You don’t like music?” Bucky asked, surprised.

“I do, actually.” Though she was answering Bucky’s questions, Peggy’s eyes never left Steve’s face. “I might, even, when this is all over, go dancing.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” There was that old surety, the heated gaze of promise and possibility that Bucky had once given her -- now aimed resolutely at the beautiful woman before him, while Elle had seemingly become part of the woodwork.

A playful smile brightened Peggy’s expression considerably. “The right partner,” she replied, still looking at Steve. “0800, Captain.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Steve, almost deferentially. “I’ll be there.

Look at me, please. Give me a chance. Stupidly, desperately, Elle remained in the annex as Peggy glided away back towards the bar. She was waiting for Bucky to turn, flash her a grin, decide he’d punished her enough. But he didn’t. She could have apologized right then and there, she knew, but -- how bloody strange would that have sounded: “I’m sorry for screaming murderously at you; I was merely trying to protect you from being tainted by association with me when we returned to a military jurisdiction that I suspected would have access to records detailing my alleged affair with a major, as well as my dishonourable dismissal, prior to being captured by enemy forces. This, combined with my fear of being unfaithful to a man who has made no firm plans to classify our relationship, despite me shipping out to serve the war effort, rendered me highly reactive and irrational. Additionally, I don’t think I’ve ever quite fallen in love before and I don’t appear to be very good at it. So what do you say, Bucky dear, shall we have a drink and a dance and sort things out?”

No, not strange at all.

Her lips began to form the contours of a more eloquent (and economic) explanation, but no sound came out. Steve looked at her questioningly, encouragingly, but then Bucky drew him back in with an observation about his own newfound invisibility in comparison to “Captain America,” and Elle felt her knees threaten to give way.

The least she could accomplish now was to leave the pub with most of her dignity intact.

She rushed past the piano player and the bar, noting that Peggy had stepped up to place her own order. At the team’s table, in front of an empty chair next to Gabe, sat a rather inviting glass of gilded cider -- waiting for her, along with a circle of welcoming, cheery faces. But the details were blurring before her eyes, and she felt sick, so very sick, sick with the loss of something she had scarcely begun to enjoy. “Not feeling very well, sorry lads,” she murmured, brushing James’ concerned hand from her elbow. “Please tell Peg- Agent Carter, please tell her I went home.”

“Oh, let me escort you.” James stood, sharing a knowing look with Dugan, a look that made it clear they all knew full well what had transpired between her and Bucky. Empathy she could bear, but this pity --

“I’m fine. Really,” she assured them, trying to summon up a smile. “My flat’s not far.”

“Elle --”

“Please.” Impulsively, she glanced back towards the annex; no one had followed her from there. “Really. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all. It’s been an eventful day. Thank you for the drink. I’m very
By the dim light of a chipped porcelain lamp, Elle combed out her curls, tucking her hair into a low plait. The dress hung neatly from the back of her door, ready to be returned to Peggy in the morning; the handbag and shoes had been placed on the rickety chair her landlady (an elderly woman associated, somehow, with the SSR; Elle had yet to discover precisely how) had offered her just the day before. She scrubbed her face at the washbasin, making sure to rinse away the scent from behind her ears and at her wrists. The perfume only she had smelled.

She felt such a fool. Such a damned, pitiable fool. Of course Bucky was upset! Why wouldn’t he be? She had treated him so horribly, spoiled absolutely everything.

"My disposition depends on you..." From downstairs, the strains of romantic incertitude floated up, crackling on Mrs. Temple's gramophone. The blithe, lively poetry was striking just a little too close to home for Elle this evening, so she smashed her pillow over her ears and tried to catch at some sleep - without crying.

The real work began in the morning; it would not do to arrive puffy-eyed and blue.

Leans her head against his chest, moonlight rendering his visage too new for her to look at. “What’s the matter, my love?” he whispers. He can always tell.

It’s the weddings, she wants to say. The weddings they attend, the weddings they dance at, as they are now. The weddings of erstwhile playmates, bound now in promises he won’t make. “Don’t you love me?” she wants to ask, but doesn’t dare, because how heartbreaking would it be, to really, truly know? Is it loyalty between them? Lust? Or just habit?

“Nothing,” she says. “Nothing is the matter.” And he believes her sweet fiction, as he always does. Because if there’s one thing they’re good at, it’s dancing to the rhythm of pretty little lies.

The song referenced is "Sometimes I'm Happy," specifically Roger Wolfe Kahn's version (Franklyn Baur vocals) released in 1927.
**Testament**

Elle hit the mat with a *thud* that seemed, somehow to ring of “the last straw.” She clawed her way to a sitting position, shot Agent Novak a contemptuous glare that sent an actual shiver of trepidation down Peggy’s spine, and then crossed her arms with all the petulance of a spoiled child. “Enough,” she said firmly. “I’m finished.”

Novak glanced over her shoulder to where Peggy stood observing from the doorway, cup of tea in hand. She nodded her assent. “Fine, then. We’ll end for the day.”

“For *eternity.*” Peggy bit back a smile, admiring Novak’s ability to coolly ignore the venom laced in Elle’s muttered words. Like a housecat going paw-to-paw with a lioness, she thought with amusement. Exhaustion and disenchantment had brought out an infrequent acidic fierceness in Elle these past two weeks, as she had been attending lengthy physical training sessions with the experienced agent. When she had a few spare moments, Peggy stopped by to check on the progress of her newest recruit. Steve -- Captain Rogers, she thought, with a note of sourness she had not quite managed to rid the title of since that unfortunate incident in the office -- had been requesting a formal rundown of Elle’s development thus far. The first mission was fast approaching; the Howling Commandos would ship out in four days’ time.

She watched with a sigh as Elle stalked her way to the changing room to remove the sweaty romper in which she was required to spend most of her days. The girl was making some progress, but not a lot. Capable of dodging a few blows, but those were from Novak, just a few inches taller than her. The girl’s height would be an advantage, of course, in most situations, though if she were to encounter an opponent looking down at her from half a foot or more, combined with more weight and skill -- well, the Captain would do well to ensure his communications liaison was kept well away from the fray.

Peggy took a final sip of her tea and nodded at the agent still awaiting orders. Pearl Novak may have been nearly a decade her senior, but she was outranked here, and as such, had to wait for Peggy’s dismissal. “Thank you, Novak; that will be all.”

“Ma’am.” Novak made no move to exit the gym, though she was due her tea break. “May I...I have some concerns. May I speak freely?”

Elle was progressing, she explained, but very slowly. “She’s eager to learn, for the most part, and I think with plenty more training, perhaps with a greater diversity of instructors, she could show some real improvement. But she is not, ma’am, fully prepared for the responsibilities and risks of a full mission. In my opinion.” She stiffened. Resolute. “As her instructor, of course. Ma’am.”

“I see.” Peggy set down her cup on the table pushed up against the wall, wanting to sit down but knowing she could not. “But she is improving? Even a small amount?”

Novak hesitated, and in that brief space Peggy came to understand that this was not a conversation the agent *wanted* to have, just as much as it was not one that Peggy wanted to hear. Elle’s appointment was unconventional to say the least -- a volunteer aide with limited medical training, no firearms capability, and no espionage experience whatsoever. Phillips was against it, but needed Captain Rogers too keenly to say anything against the hiring. In fact, Peggy suspected that Phillips had simply contented himself with the inevitability of this sort of recommendation, so that the girl wouldn’t be put in harm’s way and he would not have to be the one to order or suggest her termination.
“She can deflect a few of my strikes, ma’am, which she couldn’t do at all ten days ago. And I’ve noticed her physical stamina is getting better,” Novak acknowledged. “But two weeks is simply not enough time to get her completely ready for the field. Furthermore, she has absolutely no weapons training. Ma’am, and I mean no disrespect when I ask this, but why is she even being permitted to join the team?”

Ah, there it was. Peggy had asked herself the same question more than once since the order had first come down. At first, she’d been mildly thrilled at the notion. She liked Elle Andersen plenty, had five minutes into their first conversation. The girl managed to unite humility and empathy in equal measure; before Elle had even actually spoken, Peggy had felt instantly at ease in her company, a feeling which had nothing to do with the official dynamics between them, and everything to do with the girl’s gentle movements, kind voice; the way her lips curved around her own compassion for her erstwhile cellmates made Peggy feel that things really were going to be just fine, things could be better.

Yes, Peggy thought, thanking and dismissing Agent Novak with a tight smile. Yes, she liked Elle Andersen, and the girl was certainly trying, but she was now wondering how wise Captain Rogers’ request really had been. His desire to have Elle as part of the team appeared to be rooted more in sentiment than practicality, and though Peggy wanted to see the girl do well, she was naturally reluctant endanger her life in the proving of her own capability.

With a sigh, she raised her hand to knock lightly on the door of the changing room, hoping to have an opportunity for a private chat. The debriefing session was scheduled for four o’clock, with all Commandos present; on the table was a hammering-out of the final details for the French mission, as well as a rundown of the expectations of as a newly-developed team. Perhaps if she could just catch a moment alone with Elle, she could gauge the girl’s own feelings about her current situation, open up the conversation to the possibility of some modifications, or delays. Peggy was not eager to dissuade or discourage Elle -- far from it. The girl had potential, everyone knew that, but Novak was right: time was not on her side.

Before she had the chance to formulate these thoughts into any firm sort of plan of action -- or indeed, actually knock on the door -- Elle had wrenched it open, clad in the navy shirtwaist dress she’d taken to wearing most days, it being the most professional-looking item she’d been able to purchase. Peggy had a uniform coming for her; there was some disagreement over her actual status. Technically, she was to be an adjunct member of the SSR, but she was not a qualified agent, and had no rank outside of that, like the other Commandos. The simplest solution would have been to just give her something, anything, but Colonel Phillips disapproved of giving out promotions willy-nilly, and he felt that Elle had not done anything substantial to prove herself capable of being an official servicewoman. To this end, she remained firmly “Miss Andersen” to all concerned, and tried her best to just blend into her surroundings -- hence the plain frocks and shoes.

Looking at her there -- weary and sodden, having likely just finished finangling herself into a girdle and stockings, all after a bone-shaking training session -- Peggy experienced a rush of stubborn affection, akin to something she’d felt not long ago for another, back in America. Elle was determined, bless her. She could see it in the set of the girl’s jaw, the squaring of her shoulders. She knew the doubts, the conversations taking place behind closed doors. And damn them all if she wasn’t going to show them. With a smile as wide as her swelling heart, Peggy Carter ushered Elle forward, commending her on such hard work, outlining the upcoming debriefing with enthusiasm. Peggy was so bloody excited, she failed to notice the streaks of old tears down Elle’s face, or the slight trembling of her hands.

“You can’t be serious.”
Elle’s eyes shot to Bucky, to the abject disbelief painted on his face. “Come on, she’s an aide. She’s got no real training. She can’t go with us. You can’t be serious.”

“Buck…” said Steve, through gritted teeth, with an anxious look at Colonel Phillips and Agent Carter, down the length of the table. His oldest friend was treading dangerously close to insubordination.

One glance around encouraged Bucky to even out his tone, and after a deep breath, he continued, much calmer this time, but no less insistent. “No, Steve. This has gone on long enough. I never thought we were serious about her actually going out on the mission. She’ll be a risk and a liability out there. To herself and to all of us.”

Falsworth started; he had seen Elle’s face before she fixed her gaze firmly on her lap. “Now, just a moment, let’s be…”

“Look,” Bucky interjected. “Sure, it’s nice enough that you all want her to be a part of the team. I get that. She can do our reports and that sort of thing, but she can do it from London. She cannot be out in the field. She’s a civilian.”

An awkward silence had descended over the room. At the head of the table, Phillips appeared to be intensely engrossed in a glass paperweight; Peggy was visibly seething. But no one interrupted. No one forcefully disagreed. Even Steve was at a loss for words, torn between his own good intentions and the advice of the man he’d always looked to for guidance. Bucky was trying to be earnest, not cruel, he knew that. And he was not backing down. “I don’t mean any disrespect to anyone here,” he said firmly. “And that is that Miss Andersen should not go with us to France. She should not be deployed on any overseas missions.”

Face flaming, Elle pushed away from the table, trying to prevent her hands from shaking too obviously. She could not bear anymore. The disgust and disdain she supposed were dripping from his lips were just too much. “Excuse me, please,” she muttered, scarcely noticing that all of the Commandos -- him included -- struggled to their feet in a last show of respect. She fairly burst out into the corridor beyond, leaving a stunned quiet in her wake. Bucky’s throat clenched, parched from the purging of all of that frustration, building up over the past two weeks.

“I...I just don’t want her getting hurt,” he finished lamely, speaking to the closed door.

“She held her own at the prison,” Steve pointed out. There were a few murmurs of assent. Dugan in particular recalled the stoic little nod of agreement she’d given him when he’d suggested loosening a few of her stitches to cause the initial distraction the day Lohmer had been killed. She hadn’t blinked.

“Steve,” Bucky said with a sigh. “You showed up on the last night. Yeah, she did her best, but she relied on us a hell of a lot. She shouldn’t go out. She’ll get hurt, or worse. She can do most of the job you promised her right here.”

In one way, it surprised him that Phillips and Carter were permitting him to go on like this. He’d tossed in a few “sirs” and “ma’am”s here and there, tried to keep his tone as steady and as far from churlish as possible, but he couldn’t help but feel strongly about this. God, she was brave and he admired the hell out of that -- the fact of the matter remained that she couldn’t shoot, couldn’t strategize, and they couldn’t afford to have a squad member like that. They just plain couldn’t. It was nothing personal, he told himself.

“She’s a tough old thing.” James offered. Dugan and Gabe nodded in agreement, but Bucky just shook his head.
“All due respect, she’s a well-meaning young thing. Two weeks of training won’t prepare her fully for this, France.”

“Same age as you,” Gabe fairly snapped. He was done. If Elle wanted to go, he’d accept it; do his damnedest to protect her, teach her. He actually was struggling to believe that Bucky was putting up such a protest here; sure, things had iced over between the pair, but Gabe and the others had simply assumed that the vocal tiff in Italy had simply been the product of some growing pains in a new relationship. “Hell, she’s a year older than me.”

“That’s not the point,” Bucky argued. “You know what I mean, Gabe. She’s just inexperienced. Unprepared.”

Carter’s voice was clipped, terse. “We’ve got soldiers, Sergeant Barnes. Look around. Miss Andersen can offer something to the Howling Commandos that you all will be in sore need of during the upcoming missions.”

“Like what?” Phillips asked, finally breaking his spontaneous vow of silence. “Barnes has got a point, Agent Carter. Now, I’m happy to leave this in your hands, no doubt about that, but Agent, can you reassure me that you’ve fully and entirely considered the implications of appointing a civilian to a special task force? What can Miss Andersen provide for this team that no other individual could?”


Bucky smacked a hand down on the table. “Then get us a damn mascot!”

“Sergeant Barnes!”

There was the line, far in his rearview mirror. Bucky closed his eyes against the inevitable discipline, but it never came, save for that cold remonstrance. Instead, there was Steve’s voice, low in his ear—not private, but quiet. He relaxed into the logic, eyes opening to blue earnestness: “She led me through that place to find you. She could’ve given me directions, run away, not bothered at all, but she didn’t. She risked her life running through the prison to find you, and at the end, she stayed with us. The door was right there; she didn’t even question it.”

_Her hand on his chest, unflinching and tender; “No, not without you;” it tears from his throat, he can’t leave, he won’t leave, he just found him again. She anchors him there, gives him permission to hope._

“All that means is she’s got no sense of risk assessment and doesn’t follow orders.” He could still see her face in that tent, that unaccountable anger he still could not comprehend. Maybe he’d pushed her too hard; maybe he’d put too much upon her. The kiss and the admission of love? Yeah, that had been a bit over the top, but there was a war on, she was a pretty dame who made his heart do a funny little beat-and-a-half every time she spoke...he had been in love. Now? Now he just wanted to keep her safe.

“Or, that she’s incredibly brave and willing to make sacrifices for the people she cares about,” Peggy interjected coolly. “Sergeant, I understand your concerns, really, I do. I fact, I share some of them. But we are doing our best to train and prepare Miss Andersen for what lies ahead. It is fully understood that a few weeks of boxing and medical training will not be enough to consider her a soldier or an agent, but it should be enough to keep her fairly safe. And,” she added, in a ringing tone, “if you haven’t noticed, she’s quite an intelligent woman and fully aware of the risks she’s taking.”

“Hear, hear,” Falsworth agreed.
Bucky stiffened in response. Why was she putting so much emphasis on the word “woman?” It wasn’t as though he was treating Elle like a child, after all. But the thought of her out there, bullets flying, unsure of where to run, him unable to do a damn thing -- that raked at him. Burned him. He closed his eyes again, briefly, just to escape, as he remembered the way Lohmer had looked at her, the pretty thing he’d wanted to shatter.

Around him, he observed, the others were looking down at the table, or staring at one of the maps or message boards lining the walls. He knew he was treading on damn thin ice; in the regular service, he probably would’ve been scrubbing the corridor with a toothbrush right about now, based on the tone he was using in the presence of three superiors. But it mattered more to him that that woman, he thought bitterly, was safe and sound. He’d scrub every inch of the SSR headquarters with a kid’s toothbrush if he could be assured of that.

He was so lost in thought, in fear, in confusion, that he failed to notice Captain America slip from the room.

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Steve found her on a bench near the mess, cigarette smouldering in hand, eyes far off in the past or maybe the future, he couldn’t be sure. “Didn’t know you smoked,” he said quietly, settling down next to her, ensuring he kept a respectful distance apart. He still hadn’t quite forgotten the incident with Lorraine.

Elle looked down with some surprise at the thin curl of smoke from between her fingertips. “I don’t. Only I...rather bolted from the room and Agent Stark offered me hers. Said I looked like I needed it.” Uncertainly, she brought the cigarette to her lips, took a too-long drag, and then gave a rather violent cough, one convincing enough to cause her to stretch out her hand as though she were suddenly in possession of a rather unpleasant creature. “Goodness, now I remember why I don’t smoke.”

Taking the cigarette from her hand, Steve reached over to the communal ash-tray stand on his right. He stubbed it out and then turned to her with what he had been assured was his most winning (and persuasive) smile. “Elle --”

“He’s right, you know,” she said, as though he had not spoken. “Sergeant Barnes. You and Agent Carter are being very, very generous, but I should not be going with you all to France. What can I provide?”

“What can any of us do?” he asked with a deep sigh. “None of us knew this was coming, or that we’d ever be asked to do this in our lifetime. Fight. Defend our country -- hell, our world -- against this...these...”

“Monsters.”

He nodded. “Yeah, monsters. Bullies of the worst kind. You know what they are and what they’re capable of. And what do we bring to fight them?”

She glanced up uncertainly, as though answering an exam question she had not studied for: “Guns...?”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, guns. And tanks and planes and grenades. But we also bring what we already have in us. That’s the thing: everyone who’s been trained, who’s been made to run up a hill in full kit or run a bayonet through a sack of seed; anyone who’s had to practice and rehearse for the worst days of their life; who just heard the news and decided to pitch in however they could -- they’re all bringing something different with them to the field. It could be something as straightforward as Bucky, with his boxing and his brains. Gabe, with all his languages.”
“You,” Elle added shyly. “You brought your courage.”

He started at that: not “muscles,” not “brawn,” not “righteousness” or “patriotism.” Courage. Plain and simple. That she had focused so quickly, so kindly, on that simple notion -- that he was a brave man -- warmed Steve in a way he could not explain. It was praise of the highest sort: unadorned and genuine. He wanted to hug her, suddenly understood, clear as a day, why Bucky had fallen so swiftly.

“And you,” he said gently, “Elle, you brought your compassion. I’ve felt it. You care so much. And that’s amazing, it’s wonderful. We need it.” Steve glanced back down the corridor; the door of the debriefing room was still closed. “All of us do.”

“But I can’t shoot a gun,” she said quietly, looking down at her feet, as though that were something to be ashamed of.

“Neither could I until recently,” Steve nudged her shoulder slightly, in what he hoped she construed as an encouraging gesture. “Look, we can teach you. We can continue your training. You already know a whole hell of a lot more than you did about medicine two weeks ago. And I heard them say they’ve never heard anybody catch on to the communications lingo as quick as you did, for a rookie.”

His smile was earnest, but Elle could tell he was exaggerating. It was a kind lie, though, and he meant well, so she allowed it. She gave him a rueful look in return. “I won’t be any use. And what if I become a risk? A liability, like Sergeant Barnes said?”

It bothered him that she kept referring to Bucky by his rank and surname; it seemed far too formal for their previous relationship -- at least, how Steve had understood it to be. He recalled the faint flash of amusement he’d experienced at hearing “There’s my girl,” in the midst of that awful lab. Trust Bucky to snag a sweetheart in the middle of a warzone. No, something had happened that afternoon in the medical tent; Steve had heard her shrill cries, saw Bucky bolt from the tent, red-faced and visibly distraught. No more “Bucky;” no more “my girl.”

But now was not the time to question her. She was lost in thought, waiting for his reply or some reassurance, but Steve wasn’t quite sure what to give her. She did seem young, though, as he looked at her; that may have had to do with her civilian clothes in this military context. Steve wondered what she’d done before all of this, who she had been. Almost as though he’d asked aloud, she murmured, “My mother wanted something like this for me, you know. Before she died. She wanted me to have a purpose in my life always, to do something with the gifts I’d been given.” A slight accent of bitterness anointed the word.

“I gave moments of calm to men without it, Steve, that’s all. Some flowers, stories, jokes, songs. Foolishness, really. I couldn’t sew them up or carve out bullets. I couldn’t save them.”

Steve cleared his throat. “I’m not asking you to save the Commandos, Elle. I’m asking you to be one of them. This work...what we’re being asked to do...it’s gonna be hard. We’ve got dozens of facilities to knock out, and we’ll find even more, I’m sure.”

“I’m not a soldier, Steve,” she interjected passionately, turning to him with shining eyes.

They’d told him he’d never be a soldier, either. How many rejections had he gotten; how many attempts had he made? Each time, showing up at the recruitment offices with a different address and his hands heavy with the surprising burden of his own slim hopes, offering everything he had to the cause he was absolutely blazing for -- and they’d turned him down. Asthmatic, skinny, sickly, “you’ll thank me for this, son.”
And then he’d been pumped full of miracles and emerged from that cradle a new man, a better man, so they’d said. At first, Steve had assumed it was just the brawn they all wanted, the ideal of an American soldier; that he would be little more than an aspirational fairytale. Tall, strong, and dauntless. But Doctor Erskine had promised him, made sure he understood the truth: that everything he now possessed had always been within him; the serum had only brought it all to the fore, enhancing everything, making it stand out brighter and bolder than before.

He could not, though, give Elle any super-soldier serum, and he would not have wanted to, either. She just needed something like it, a pure and powerful substance to dash away this fear. A few weeks ago, he could’ve invoked Bucky’s name, and whatever they had between them, and that might have been enough to sway her, and that might have been enough to sway her, but now he was not so sure.

“I wasn’t either,” he admitted, deciding that this was the best he could offer for the time being: mere mutual affliction. “I was this scrawny 4F who just wanted to do his part. Now, I could’ve gone to work in a factory or taken a desk job somewhere, selling war bonds door to door. There’s no shame in that, if that’s what you can do.” He leaned forward slightly, hands steepled between his knees as he recalled the day Bucky had been called up, how the June air had seemed to compress and freeze around him when Steve had looked up and seen the crisp uniform; his visor cap set at a disarmingly cheery angle. Pride and jealousy don’t sit well together at the best of times, and his stomach had turned with them both in those first moments. “But I wanted to fight, be on the beach or in the field with the rest of them. And so when the offer...the serum...well, it gave me a chance.”

A chance, thought Steve bitterly. A chance and a renaissance born in blood and cyanide, when he’d felt the rush of pavement beneath his feet, the world giving way to his will. The keen, biting awareness of accomplishing something, anything. The utter freedom of simply running without having to stop. It had been intoxicating, his new life, but nothing compared to the feeling he had now, each and every morning – in the rather cramped safe house bedroom he and Bucky had elected to share, when he would roll over as the sun flooded the floor and alighted on that familiar face. Bucky was alive, safe and sound, and Steve had been a part of making that come about. His first mission -- his first true one -- grasped firm and fast, had been a blessed success. If nothing else, Erskine’s serum and Stark’s Vita-Rays had given him that.

He straightened, aware that he had said much more to Elle of his true feelings than he had to anyone else in a long, long time, and briefly wondered why had been able to do so. What was it about this woman that made her so...open? Receptive? Such things went far beyond a sense of politeness or charity; deep within her, Steve guessed, there was a profound and inimitable instinct to help, in any way that she could. She’d been damn fearless to go with him in the factory; brave to stay with him and Bucky when even hope had left them both. And in poor recompense for all of that, Steve wanted to help her now, even just a little. A new question sprang to life in her eyes, and when she asked it, it was trimmed by a brilliant smile: “Are they giving out more serum?”

“No for a while yet,” he chuckled, glad that the growing tension sitting between them on the bench had finally dissipated, as she visibly relaxed next to him. Humour did wonders to ease such unpleasantries. “Look, Doctor Erskine -- the man who did this to me -- he told me that the serum just kind of...enhances whatever’s already inside a person. Good or bad. And you’ve got a lot of good in you, Elle. You’re a great person, and people like you, a lot. People who seem to take a while to warm up to others. You make them feel peaceful, calm. You...you...” He struggled there; he’d known her for a while, but not well enough, it seemed, to fully articulate the true extent of what she provided. And then he recalled the forest, in the moments after their flight from the factory, when Bucky had taken her hand in his and pressed a kiss to the back of it; the look in his eyes in that moment, Steve had seen it plenty of times before. Not lust, not unbridled desire, no -- it was something a little more innocent. “Home,” he said softly, when it had finally hit him. “You’re like a piece of home, for everyone. When I talk to you, I think about my mom, and I’m home, and things
are okay for a little while.”

As his words washed over her, Elle tightened her grip upon the edge of the bench, swallowing hard around that awful lump growing in her throat. Home. What a lovely word. “What...what use is that in battle?” she choked, determined not to actually shed tears. She had done such a lot of crying these past several days.

“First off -- and let’s get this straight -- I’ve got no intention of taking you into an actual fight. I would never do that, put you at risk in that way.” Steve shook his head, ears still ringing with the rather brutal melody of Dugan’s threats from a few nights before. “Pretty sure they’d all kill me if I even suggested it. All of this training is just a precaution.

“Secondly, your compassion will be a hell of a lot of use, Elle. You help keep things calm and help people relax. You can keep up our morale. Falsworth told me the only reason he didn’t lose his mind back in Austria was thinking about you. Gabe said the same thing. And Bucky…”

Beside him, Elle stiffened, and Steve knew a rush of guilt. “Think about it, please.” He stood, sensing that perhaps solitude -- with his words ringing in her ears -- might be more persuasive than a continued lecture, however well-meaning. “Any questions, ask ‘em. Just...just don’t say ‘no’ because you think others want you to, okay? We’re going to need you out there.” Steve paused, waiting for a small nod, some sign she’d heard him, the slightest promise of agreement.

She took her time, avoiding his eye and focusing instead upon her own hands as they lay in her lap. Steve watched as she turned the right palm over; traced a finger down the length of the jagged scar, a memory from HYDRA she would have to hold forever. “I read your file, you know,” Elle said softly, finally. Steve stilled, momentarily bewildered -- had she read it here? Had Agent Carter given it to her? “Before I met you. When I was working for Zola, he had me in the lab, and I found an American folder. Project Rebirth, it said. Things didn’t quite come together until recently.” She looked up; Steve knew the capture of her hazel eyes, the warmth emanating from them. “Do you believe that, that you were reborn?”

He’d always hated that codename.

Steve didn’t consider what had happened to him a genuine “rebirth.” After all, he was still himself in the ways that mattered the most. He was still Sarah’s son, Bucky’s best friend. An artist. An American. But something new had crept through his veins with Project Rebirth, and whatever it was had rendered him changed in small and significant ways. Beyond the stamina and the muscles, there was a different edge to his determination he had never felt before: the knowledge that he could physically accomplish whatever it was he needed to do. But a “rebirth?” No. He may have been Captain America to many, but he would always be Steve Rogers.

“No,” he said slowly. “I think... I was remade.” Elle’s face softened, compressing into a tender half-smile as she stood. The fresh scent of soap summoned a deep, hallowed memory, and he felt every muscle in his body -- snapped taut by the tension of the meeting, by his worries for Bucky and Elle -- sink into the plush embrace of her comfort and touch, so gentle that if he had not watched her hand move to his arm, Steve wasn’t sure if he would have noticed at all.

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve been remade too many times,” she said quietly, eyes wide and earnest. He knew then that she was sharing a secret of her own, and that knowledge was somehow gratifying. “So many changes. What’s one more?”

She still didn’t seem to understand. Aware that he was taking a risk for both of them, Steve stepped closer; that she did not cringe away seemed a good sign. “That’s the thing, Elle,” he said earnestly. “No one is asking you to change. We need you. Just you.” A door creaked in the distance, and he
took a step backwards, hoping he had not been too forward.

“Just me?” Hope kindled between her words.

“Just you.” He breathed that hope to full, flourishing life.

The next days passed in a whirlwind of oversteeped tea and paperwork; Elle felt as though she had scarcely had a moment to herself since the few minutes in the corridor before Steve had turned everything on its head. His confidence in her had worked in combination with his gentle words, and she was utterly bewitched. Buoyed by his faith, she had begun to take in hand the various tasks and requirements necessary to be deployed on the official mission to France. On the day before they were to depart, Elle was called to Agent Carter’s office just after a tea break with James and Gabe. At the mention of it, her right hand began to smart; so many signatures in the past few days had irritated the old scar.

“Bit of grim business, I’m afraid, Miss Andersen.” Indeed, it must have been grim, if Peggy was going to call her by her surname, even though they were alone in the office. She’d swept in on a tide of busyness, slapping down a few folders and a rolled-up map before giving Elle the once over.

“Yes, that’ll do,” she said, nodding at the new outfit.

Just that morning, Elle had been supplied, courtesy of Agents Stark and Edwards -- who now insisted on Janie and Lila -- with a veritable treasure trove of necessities in accordance with her new position. Most exciting of all had been the SSR’s answer to an official uniform for the unranked communications liaison of the Howling Commandos: the charcoal slacks were practical, wide-belted and rendered somehow militaristic by virtue of the nautical-inspired buttons; likewise, the crisp white blouse made her feel both capable and comfortable -- her favourite combination.

Once they were both seated, on opposite sides of the desk, of course, Peggy reached down to pull a stack of papers from a drawer Elle could not see. “Final induction papers, another release form, and you’ll also need to draft a will.”

“Oh?” Elle’s head shot up. “Is that really necessary?”

Peggy looked at her with some amount of disbelief. “Yes,” she said gently. “It’s standard procedure for all SSR recruits, no matter the, er, department. You’ll need to ensure that this is prepared before you can go out on the mission. Actually, we were surprised to see you hadn’t prepared one earlier, with your work with the VAD.

“In any case, it’s my fault for leaving this all to the end,” she continued, standing and heading over to the door to press a small black button near the edge of the frame. “Mr. Dromgoole can see you right through it, and I’ll act as a witness. He’s reassured me he can fast-track it. Best to keep it simple.”

“Right,” Elle agreed, thumbing through the papers. They all appeared terribly official: typed and stamped and tattooed with the signatures of high-ranking strangers; as she read through, she felt as though she were eavesdropping on dozens of conversation not for her ears, though they chronicled the various risks and rewards posed by her new professional endeavour, as well as several ways in which she might perish in the serving of it. At the word “torture,” she closed the file. “Yes, well, just show me where to sign.”

Mr. Dromgoole (although sounding delightfully like a Dickens character) proved to be a rather amiable and rotund barrister who found the two women most impressive. He spoke to Peggy deferentially, commended Elle frequently on her service -- though, Peggy explained to her later, he had no real idea what that service actually was. “Phillips was somewhat hesitant to hire outside for
some of these services, but he was persuaded that having a civilian lawyer oversee and curate them will make the process easier, down the line.”

She put her pen to the page, and she began to weave the pattern of a well-known story. Her will was drafted simply, bequeathing a small number of worldly possessions and precisely no property to the people she thought would treasure them most. If she was to become a mere memory, she decided, signing swiftly on the dotted line, then she would want to be remembered by them. No matter what.

Sensing that some tension had joined them in the room following Dromgoole and the “rather grim business,” Peggy slipped off her heels and made a pot of tea. “I think I may have some biccies down here,” she said, rummaging about in a lower drawer until she had emerged with a battered tin of bourbon creams.

“Aren’t these well-rationed?” Elle asked, biting into the treat with relish. “Lovely, though.”

“Perhaps loveli- er, for the rationing,” Peggy suggested, dunking hers most unceremoniously into her mug. “‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder,’ and all that. Does that work for biscuits?”

“I think so,” Elle laughed. She would miss this the most during missions. For the most part, Peggy would have to remain at Headquarters, and though there was always the hope that between missions, during leaves, perhaps, the two would be able to snatch some time together, Elle had also prepared herself for the shelving of this particular friendship -- for the time being, of course. She enjoyed Peggy’s company too much to let it fall entirely by the wayside.

“Elle, is there anything you would like to see before departing?” Peggy asked after a moment of companionable silence, punctuated only by subsequent dunkings and nibbles. “Anyone you would like to visit?”

*The boy.*

No. She could not. She dare not. He would disapprove, she knew; summon her well and truly home. Against her mother’s wishes? He’d do that gladly. Ye gods, but she could hear him now. “*Oh, darling,*” he’d whisper, in that cool, crisp way of his. “*Off to play soldier?*”

“I --”

“Because,” Peggy said slowly, a slight trace of guilt playing in her eyes as she held out the tin once more. “And I’m sorry, Elle -- truly -- but I must ask you not to contact any friends or neighbours while you’re here. We’ve kept you here so far, asked you to keep your training quiet, and you’ve done very well with that. But this next part of your mission, going to France and infiltrating the facility, it will need to be kept entirely secret. We can provide you with a cover story, and indeed we’ve already begun placing certain documents about all of the Commandos that will make it appear to anyone poking into our business that you all have perfectly normal, even dull, positions within the SSR.”

*That* piqued her interest. Having a cover story seemed so pleasurable mysteriously, she could not help but ask, as though getting to know this other version of herself: “What’s my job?”

“You’re a mild-mannered typist, my dear. Delight of the debriefing room.”

The decision had been taken out of her hands. The boy could not know. It would be for his own good, not to know.

But there was one more question to ask, and Elle had been dreading the prospect for a few days
now. In quiet moments, the liminal world between her drowsy mind and dreamy sleep, the full force of the irony playing on her thoughts would nearly consume her. She had nearly lost her position with the VAD because of rumour and overreaction, and now here she was voluntarily wading into a position which would require her to actually travel with an all-male team across most of continental (and wartorn) Europe on dire, covert missions. How close she had come to losing her vocation! To take that risk again...was she mad?

“No, Elle,” Peggy replied firmly. “You are not mad. I understand your hesitation in this, really, I do. But you’ve nothing to worry about.” Propriety and clear communication would be key, the agent explained. “These men hold great respect for you, you’ve got nothing to fear there, as you well know. And more than that, you will be moving in and out of these locations very quietly; as far as anyone is concerned, you’re that mild-mannered typist, love.”

“I wasn’t suggesting --”

Peggy reached a hand across the desk to grasp Elle’s, giving it a comforting squeeze. “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just...this is a different game, you see. Back in Italy, you had so many levels of people above you, it was hard not to be judged for every action or interaction.”

“But it’s not as though I’m commanding this squad, though, is it?” she replied with a wry smile.

That was not the point, Peggy reassured her. What mattered most is that she now had a defined position within the SSR; she was no longer on the sidelines, the periphery of the action, as she had been as an aide. “Not to belittle your service there, please don’t mistake me. God, we wouldn’t have the barest chance in hell of winning this war if it weren’t for our aides and medics and nurses. Back then, you answered to so many levels of people, and you were one of so many. Now, there’s you. The Commandos’ communication liaison, the point of contact between Headquarters and the boots on the ground. Elle, you are so bloody essential here, no one will question how you spend your time with those men. No one would dare.

“Furthermore,” she added, reaching for another biscuit. “I won’t bloody let them.”

In the end, she would become some lines on an old piece of paper, tucked within a file and pushed to the back of a drawer. The lie they wrote for her -- of a mild-mannered typist, delight of the debriefing room -- would become her epigraph, she thought. Daughter of a nurse and a writer; child of Westminster. Secretary. Aide. Prisoner. Typist. Struck within the confines of those words, bookended by a beginning and an end, Elle Andersen would become a footnote to a footnote of a brief story. She would not, she comforted herself that night, become a hero, have a novel or a film written about her. There would be no songs, no poems, because she was a typist. And that, she decided with a smile, was just fine by her.

They went for another drink, and she was invited. Gabe and James made room between them, and it was almost like old times, gathered in the circle of their old cell. But, of course, infinitely more pleasant. She ordered the cider she had run away from nearly three weeks before, savouring the sweet rich glow of it as much as she did the notes of laughter and the rapid banter that sprang so naturally from their lips. Ages had grown between them in the matter of a month or two, and she could not help but treasure it -- though there still remained some slight trepidation about how Gabe’s nudging of her shoulder could be perceived; how James’ affectionate smiles and Dugan’s playful teasing could be construed. Though Peggy had assured her that the fictional past she had been, unknowingly, running from had been entirely purged from the record, Elle still feared those moments. Those horrid moments when everything she had worked so hard to provide had been turned on its head, made ugly and mean.
Eight times during the course of the night, she attempted to catch Bucky’s eye, to ask him a question, to smile, to explain, to purge, to beg for forgiveness. He was no longer waspish and cold to her, and nor did he deliberately attempt to pretend she was not there. He nodded at her when he and Steve had come in, had even gently pushed her glass closer to her when Jacques placed it an inch too far from her hand. But he did not engage beyond that. And if anything, that pained her far more than his cold rebukes in the debriefing room had.

Now she was a stranger.

Briefly, she considered simply blurting it out all out, but thankfully, the words would not come, stoppered by the last vestiges of self-control in her possession. She was grateful that the anger she supposed him of harbouring against her had seemingly dissipated, but there would be no more kisses, she feared, no more weighty declarations of love. They could be comrades, but nothing more.

And perhaps that was better. Harder, colder, but better.
The chill had settled in as an old, unwelcome friend hours before, and in the grey moments before
dawn, Bucky stretched out his right arm, wriggling the sleep and the cold from his bones as best he
could. Recon was no joke; he had known that before this mission, but somehow, being out here solo,
in a sloppily-dug foxhole, knowing that he had only a handful of men as backup -- well, that put a
different light on things.

Forty-eight hours, that was what Phillips wanted. Forty-eight hours of eyes on the distant HYDRA
factory -- a converted steel manufacturer, quite popular in this area surrounding Metz -- and forty-
eight hours of information and planning. Bucky himself had found an ideal vantage point a few miles
out on a forested hillside. It was a sniper’s instinct, he knew, that drew him to higher ground, and the
trees and slope behind the lookout provided excellent cover for the rest of the team, nestled behind a
protective and robust wall of brush. The gentle rise of the hill afforded the main pair of eyes a
stealthy approach, descent, and view. This was Bucky’s fourth and final shift in the foxhole, and he
was grateful for the prospect of a few hours’ uninterrupted slumber by the fireside. Jacques would
take over, just another ninety minutes...eighty-nine...eighty-eight…

A twig snapped behind him and Bucky’s eyes blazed open, muscles tightening and engaging for a
fight he was too tired to even think about. Hands taut on the trigger, he tried to orient himself to the
noise, repeating now with a kind of tentative insistency: behind him, certainly; coming from the
general direction of the camp, so odds were a friend was the cause, but what purpose would they
have? He still had a full hour and a half left on his shift -- unless, and he paled at this prospect --
unless something had gone wrong.

Shit. Bucky twisted slightly in the hole, inadvertently knocking aside the notebook and pen he’d
propped up on a makeshift shelf chipped away from a spot to his left. Each Commando had taken the
time to carefully record their observations: movements down below; orders issued on the
loudspeaker, echoing across the fields; shift changes, marching patterns, possible means of gaining
entry to the compound. Jacques had begun a rough sketch near the front of the book, and gradually,
the rest of the Commandos had added to it, as more information became clear. Bucky suspected that
they were nearly ready to finalize plans for infiltration and destruction, but that was for Steve to
decide, for Elle to ask of Phillips, and for the colonel to firmly decree.

He waited, noting that the cracks had ceased and been replaced by a shuffling sound; his ears perked
at the sounds of something -- was that water?

“Sergeant Barnes?” God, he jumped -- he had grown so used to her silence that her voice, that soft,
elegant lilt dancing on the December wind -- was jarring and startling in equal measure. Glad for a
moment his finger was far away from the trigger, Bucky exhaled and cursed lowly as Elle -- as Miss
Andersen -- came into view over the back lip of the foxhole, spots of red emblazoned on her cheeks.
“Christ.” She knelt cagily on the edge, peering down the length of the five and a half foot drop with
some suspicion. “Get down here,” he snapped. “You can’t be up there, exposed like that.” Leave it
to the girl to give away his damn position.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, her face falling as she stretched out a green Thermos flask, which he
accepted with a rather guilty expression. She crouched lower and swung her legs down into the hole,
landing with a light thud on the packed-down earth below. Bucky chafed under her concerned stare,
trying hard to quell the funny little heartbeat that seemed to appear only when she came around. If
Elle felt any sense of awkwardness at their being alone together for the first time in weeks, she managed not to show it, instead presenting him with a careful, cautious smile and an encouragement to “drink up.”

Coffee. She’d brought him coffee. Terribly strong coffee, he thought with some dismay, taking a second swig of the stuff, but warm and welcome. “Thanks,” he said roughly, looking down at his boots. “Sorry about…”

“My fault.” Elle’s voice faltered a little. “I should’ve…announced my position?”

In the days since they had left England for this mission, their first as a collective, official unit, Elle had waded tentatively into the military lingo and bearing employed so deftly by her compatriots, all in an obvious effort to fit in, to adapt. Steve admired her efforts, pointing out to Bucky late last night (as their communications liaison had stolen a few hours by the fire) that she certainly seemed invested in her new role.

For his part, Bucky still was not comfortable with her presence here. A fierce sense of protectiveness had burrowed deep inside his soul nearly two months ago now, when he’d been tossed into the lap of the prettiest dame he’d latched eyes on in far too long. Their time together in the Austrian factory may have been brief, but a bond had been forged, and the abrupt termination of that bond raked at him still.

That protectiveness had roared bright within him at the prospect of her joining them on actual overseas missions; he had scarcely been able to stomach the thought of her so at risk. But, he wondered now, biting back the urge to sit with her, to talk, to brush back that little brown curl escaping the knot she’d tied low on her neck -- was that protectiveness of a natural, expected sort? Just simply the instinct of a man with sisters? A man who saw a person in distress, at the helm of an onrushing fate they could not possibly hope to handle? Or was it something more?

Bucky had tried hard to convince himself he’d imagined their time together in Austria -- or, at least, that he’d overestimated its significance. That made her icy glare and that shrill rebuke so much easier to bear. If they were strangers who’d simply stood too close to each other, then her rejection did not sting so much. If they were two people who did not belong together, then he could not be in pain.

It was a child’s arithmetic, a messy tangle of ill-formed logic. And he was mired fast in its hold.

But he dreamt still of her hand on his chest, the feel of her against his back. The rightness of his lips on her skin. The music of her voice and the rather calm intensity of her part in their escape from the factory. How he had come to life again under her gaze -- stained and broken but firmly gripping the shards of the man he once had been. How he had allowed himself, briefly, in the forest, to imagine a world rotating around her. And that lovely little smile.

Part of him wanted an explanation; another shrunk from the possibility of her simply and coldly confirming his suspicions. She had made him feel so...so wrong. So small and so nasty and so furtive, as though he had crept into the tent to intentionally witness her vulnerability, as though there was something darkly pleasurable about it. Bucky had wanted to kick himself in those few seconds, when he’d swaggered into a private moment thinking he had any goddamn right to do so -- he felt the burn of it now, now in this strange, liminal space between words said and unsaid, ghosting away to nothing there in the foxhole.

He took another sip of coffee, watching as she leaned back against the firm press of the earth, eyes flicking to and fro and anywhere but his own face. He could just say it, couldn’t he? Once upon a time, Bucky had been bolder and smoother than this -- if he and a girl had a dispute, something wrongfooted between them, he would have simply come right out and questioned her about it, clear
the air. But he hadn’t yet been able to find the right moment, nor the proper words. Since Italy, they hadn’t been alone together, and he knew this was not a conversation for the ears of others. Just the thought of Dugan or Falsworth overhearing him as he stumbled through an explanation and those irksome questions...he shook his head to banish the preemptive mortification.

The thing that troubled him the most about the entire situation? Simply that he had not seen it coming. He’d kissed her hand and held her close already; he’d been there for the worst possible moments of her life. Bucky had just assumed that any relationship -- love or infatuation -- blossoming between them would proceed far more pleasantly once they had emerged from the flames and the forest. But in just a few seconds, she had upended every single expectation and replaced them with a bitter sense of disappointment, a searing regret.

Did she feel it, too, he wondered there in the foxhole, the dim promise of a winter morning breaking across the sky above them? Or was she relieved that the foolishness between them had ended? Had she just been waiting for a good opportunity to draw a line in the sand, remind him they were strangers?

Their lips parted at the same moment, discordant questions tumbling out in an unintelligible garble that made them both smile despite themselves. “You first,” Bucky said generously, raising the Thermos to his mouth once more. “Sorry.”

She coloured under his gaze with more than the cold, and hope leapt unbidden to his throat. He could still make her blush? Well, wouldn’t that mean…

Elle worried at her bottom lip, rubbed idly at the palm of her right hand. He could feel the tension rolling from her and wanted so badly to do something, to do anything. If they could just return to those first moments at the camp, before he’d waded into where he did not belong. Before he’d encroached on an intimate moment for which they were not prepared. An apology was a tricky thing, ephemeral even, dancing just beyond his reach and articulation. And yet it was what was needed. Desperately. He opened his mouth again, prepared to launch it into the tense space between them -- and in the same beat she stepped forward, the ghost of forgiveness on her tongue, and a balm of goodwill filling the hollowed earth around them.

But the ghost died again on her lips and her face fell as he jerked away, not entirely of his own volition. He was smarting still, she knew, and Jacques’ voice on the wind did nothing to ease the upset settled there with them. “Bucky,” the Frenchman whispered, shuffling into the hole beside Elle. “Oh, hello, ma chérie.” She nodded at him, offered a tremulous smile.

“Captain Rogers would like to see you, my friend,” Jacques continued, turning his attention back to Bucky. “He has some new information and needs your opinion. I will take over your shift a little early, yes?”

Elle arranged her features into a plane of calm detachment, as though Bucky’s departure meant nothing to her. She focused her gaze instead on the battered notebook by his foot, rather than the handing over of the gun, the Thermos on the ground, the blue of his eyes, the aching absence of words they should have said. In his wake, he left her raw and wondering, ensnared between good intentions and a misery deep in her heart that she could not, hard as though she tried, unseat.

“Nervous?” James’ face came into view; she rubbed at her sleep-crusted eyes self-consciously, keenly aware of the late hour. Nearly three days they’d been in France; their forty-eight hours of reconnaissance had been completed earlier this morning, and now Dugan was sitting in the foxhole up the hill, this time simply keeping track of movements and ensuring no HYDRA soldiers decided to go for a woodland walk.
Elle had wired all necessary information and observations to SSR headquarters hours ago, along with Steve and Bucky’s preliminary plan. The goal (indeed, the main objective of the Commandos) was to simply wipe the Metz facility off the map. Intel gathered through some coded networks a week or so ago had revealed that the place was being used mainly as a depot and distribution centre for weapons being shipped from factories further east and north. For two days, the Commandos had observed dozens of lorries, at the oddest of hours, entering and exiting the fenced compound, followed or preceded respectively by a flurry of activity near the large warehouse at the centre.

The time had come for action.

Was she nervous? She weighed the word for a moment, holding it up against the imbalance in her stomach, the flutter of uncertainty and the stern echo of what-ifs in her ears. Nervous? No. Terrified? Perhaps.

There was loss there, the possibility of it, settled in with them by the side of the low fire they’d risked for warmth. Having to land the plane a further eight miles afield had left them without much shelter beyond the two canvas tents they shared. Initially, Steve had wanted a separate one for her, to maintain some image of propriety, but Elle and Peggy had objected in equal measure. Elle because she did not want to make a fuss or cause extra concern; Peggy because she felt it was logistically excessive and impractical -- Elle would be kept warmer in a shared tent. In a sleeping bag of her own, of course.

But there, that evening, she wanted nothing more than for them all to retreat into the embrace of their small shelters, to sleep in peace and company -- not trepidation and promised violence.

Childish, she thought quickly. Childish, and foolish. She was a Commando now, a member of the SSR. She could not afford to indulge in slim hopes or silly notions of shirking the duty she had freely accepted. Things had been set in motion now that could not be undone.

A simple sign that she was one of them could be read in her position by the fire. On Steve’s right, with Bucky at his left. Notebook in hand, after having finalized the dispatches to London and prepared the Captain’s initial notes for their attack. In an hour or two, she would likely receive some sort of communication back from HQ, and would report the official, sanctioned plan to Steve and the rest of the team.

These facts warmed her more than the fire. She was needed; she was essential.

But she wasn’t nervous.

“Shift change at 0600 hours, right?” Steve glanced over at her, and she verified with a nod. “Good. Okay. So we need to be in position outside the fence by at least ten minutes to, does that sound good?”

There were a few nods and general noises of assent from the group. “We’re going in the path Jacques found, is that right?” Gabe asked, scraping the last bits of stew from his bowl while he waited for Steve’s reply.

On the first night, Jacques -- quite stealthy by nature and skilled at creeping about undetected -- had done some riskier reconnaissance closer to the factory. Skirting about the northeastern edge of the compound (giving it a substantial berth, of course), he had discovered not only a fairly well-shielded path leading from the furthest reaches of the forested area to the back side of the compound, but a corner near the back lot within the fence that was dark and seemed to be rarely visited by any of the dozen or so soldiers on guard duty during their shifts. When he had reported this back to Elle and Steve, it had seemed plain that that must be their point of entry.
Bucky was not overly fond of this plan, but Steve had suggested to Elle, privately, that this was possibly due to his sniper’s mind. “He’s used to having control of a situation, a real element of surprise and confusion. Just wading in, giving away your position after a couple of minutes, well…”

Despite her lack of military experience, Elle was not instinctively fond of the plan either, though she had yet to share that with Bucky. To her, it seemed so risky, so daring -- to leave their secure position, tramp through a mile of woods, then emerge as deftly as possible to cut straight across the easternmost side of the compound. There were so many points during just the travelling portion of the infiltration where things could go wrong: wet ground, holes, animals, scanning lights, a guard where they had not planned for one.

“Chokepoint at the end of the largest building,” Steve continued, pointing to the map Elle had laid out on the ground, anchored at four corners with rocks. “Here. We wait to make sure we’re clear, and then Jacques, you head out this way --” he traced a finger along a dotted red line -- “and go around buildings B, C, and D. Bucky will move back around the lot in case you need some cover fire.”

Elle listened with a cool detachment, understanding that she must be in full possession of all elements of the plan, but not wanting them just the same. As the Commandos went back and forth, accounting for as many unpredictable variables as they could imagine, she crafted a mental catalogue of all the moments in which any one of them might die. Jacques could be shot before making it to the first building; Bucky could be caught by a guard; Dugan or James could stumble or lose their grip on their guns or those weapons could jam or the shift change times could change or a rainstorm could disrupt their progress, or… or…

Dire prospects marched in an unending litany through her mind, and her heart clenched deep and painfully in her chest.

“You all right?” A hand reached over to loosen her grip on the pen, which indeed seemed at proper risk of being snapped in half. She observed the corded tendons rippling and shifting with their effort, and before she had even fully settled back into herself, she knew whose hand it was. Those fingers had once danced lightly across her skin.

They were alone by the fire now. Steve and the others had retreated into the tents; Elle had been only dimly aware of the Captain rounding off the explanation of the plan with a gentle order for them all to get some shut-eye before heading out at just after half past five the next morning. It was nearing midnight now, she realized with a quick look down at her watch.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Fine.”

He could tell, from the deep shadows beneath her eyes and the way she was grasping the pen as though it had personally offended her, that she was not fine. Bucky sighed, rubbing his knuckles across his temples slightly. He’d hoped to catch a nap before heading out; he had not slept properly in weeks. The nightmares were too vivid; the burning in his veins too potent.

“Doll” was just behind his lips, pressing against a last vestige of self-control. Couldn’t he just let it go? Couldn’t he just be honest? In case he died tomorrow, in case this all went south, couldn’t he just tell her he was sorry, that he’d be wrong, that ignoring her in London and saying she couldn’t come with them -- that that was all hurt, all wounded pride? Not him.

She was a story he could scarcely wait to read, a poem half-sung. And she sat there beside him in the dark of an enemy’s night, a girl equipped for parties and dancing and long days of dull work, and she was there with him, by the light of a dying fire, waiting for an hour of danger and a dawn of peril, and she would watch it all from a hole in the ground. There would be little he could do to keep her
safe.

That knowledge pained him worse than the poison in his blood, and he choked on the words again, leaving her in silence.

Once, Laurent’s was a veritable hive of activity -- one of the smaller steel manufacturers in the region, certainly, but no less busy. Each and every day, shipments had been dispatched around eastern and northern France, with a few contacts in Austria. It was a family-run business, thriving and successful, offering employ to dozens of men and women in the surrounding area. Monsieur Laurent was known as Grandpère around the community -- perhaps a rather strange nickname for a titan of industry, but he had embraced it all the same. He was everyone’s grandfather; in particular, he had been known to hire widows, single women, and unmarried daughters. In any other context, such a penchant would have been cause for whispers and dark rumours, but not for Grandpère, who kept his office doors wide open and entertained his “girls” with stories of his own dear wife, the real driving force behind the success of Fabricant d’acier de Laurent, hoping to inspire them to their own independent success. How he loved his Adrienne and her resolve.

They’d shot him first. Then her.

HYDRA had taken over most of the manufacturers in the area following the German invasion. Factories and large-scale facilities were perfect for their efforts in particular, as such locations had, typically, already been quite well-secured, housed sizeable buildings and warehouses, and came with supplies that simply bolstered anything brought in to sustain their workforces. Laurent’s was an interesting location in that it was small but important -- mighty enough to warrant a pin on Zola’s map back in Austria. Steve had memorized that map during his flight with Bucky and Elle, and then relayed the information back to the SSR in London. These locations would form the itinerary of their missions for the next several months (God willing); Laurent’s was just the first.

Based on their reconnaissance and some intercepted encoded messages, the Commandos knew the facility housed around ninety-five or so HYDRA soldiers and workers. “It appears to mainly function as a depot and transfer point,” Elle had explained just the day before. “Which accounts for the substantial number of vehicles in the two lots, I suppose.”

Phillips had chosen Laurent’s for two reasons: firstly, because it was a smaller facility with a manageable population, the challenge posed would serve as a sufficient “warm-up” to test the abilities of the fledgling special force; secondly, taking out a transfer point for weapons and supply? Well, that would put a bee in HYDRA’s bonnet, sure enough.

Had it only been a matter of weeks since Steve had stolen into the Austrian facility on his hare-brained rescue mission? He crouched now near the fence, flanked by Gabe and Bucky, waiting as James finished with the bolt cutters. During one of his reckless nightly patrols, Jacques had reported back knowledge not only of an adequate path to get them to the northeastern edge of the compound, but a funny little corner behind the larger paved lot where the guards tended not to go too often, preferring instead to allow the armoured vehicles to be pushed up quite close to the chainlink, and then to continue their patrol around the front part of the lot.

“Oh-five-fifty-six. Four minutes. Go.”

Jacques went first, creeping along the side of a few motorcycles before sidling up the length of the largest building, the one they’d been referring to as A, on their map and in their plans. Steve sent Bucky, James, Dugan, and Gabe after him; he brought up the rear. Quietly as possible, the Commandos pressed themselves back against the cool brown brick of the building, clutching their weapons and counting each breath.
Reaching forward with an impressively steady hand, Bucky tapped Jacques lightly on the shoulder, jerking his head in the direction of building B, which they suspected was some sort of dormitory or barracks. Two, he mouthed, and Jacques nodded, poised lightly on the balls of his feet. Two more minutes.

The air was cold, and Steve knew a rush of memory as the wind picked up and bit at his cheeks: he was twelve, school was finished for the day; Christmas was coming. His mother had finished her shift at the hospital early that day, and the spicy notes of ginger and cloves were rising around her in the kitchen when he and Bucky had come through, faces bright with chill and anticipation.

“Making you happy,” she’d murmured then, pulling his thin frame in for a hug. Cold was his enemy back then, and she and Bucky both had fussed over him that afternoon, plying him with quilts and cocoa and a quiet game of checkers, lest the bitter cold enter his lungs and bring him down with pneumonia again. “Making you happy.”

“Ready, punk?” Bucky’s voice was low in his ear; he’d moved back slightly to give Jacques more room to dash out in thirty seconds or so.

Bucky had eaten half a dozen cookies that day, Steve remembered now. Munching on them one after another as he let Steve win two rounds of the game. His mother had made far better cookies, but Thursdays were at Steve’s apartment. Always. No matter what. He could always count on Bucky. This time was no different, though the stakes had been raised astronomically -- they were still together.

“Ready.”

In the distance, reveille sounded bright and honest. A sputter of guilt grew in Elle’s stomach at the thought of those men in the compound below, stirring themselves and hopping to work. In three minutes, the average time it took for many of them to enter the main outside area of the facility, Jacques’ explosives would begin to detonate.

But then she recalled Lohmer’s voice and the cruel sight of poor, ruined, wounded Bucky on that stretcher -- the dark promises and Schmidt’s vicious red skull and the wicked secret of whatever they had done to him. And she remembered why they were there.

Elle was not the praying sort, but she whispered a wish onto the early morning air just the same, hoping someone would catch it.

And the first bomb blew.

One. Two. Three.

Panic, shear and consuming, erupted in the yard before them, and Bucky shoved a hand square in Gabe’s back at the rising of crimson flames. “Go, go, go!” he bellowed. He waited half a beat, watching as the rest of the Commandos fanned out from their self-imposed chokepoint, emerging as one broader group, firing off rounds and laying down enough fire to effectively befuddle the HYDRA soldiers and workers. Steve didn’t want them firing on anyone unless they were firing back -- the wrinkle he had not anticipated, however, was that most of these workers were also armed militia members, and HYDRA was nothing if not paranoid.

From this vantage point, he had a clear line of sight on the guardhouse down near the main entrance to the factory -- their intended exit point. Shit, come on. And then, as another knot of soldiers entered
his left periphery, he spotted what he wanted to see more than anything: Jacques, dashing gleefully,
revolver at the ready, into the guardhouse.

He could go, but not before spraying a volley of bullets in the direction of the group approaching on
his left. Shadow had been his friend; the soldiers did not know he was there until he had stepped into
the gray, struggling light.

Together, the Commandos laid down a veritable wave of fire into the disorienting crush of enemies,
working together so fluidly Bucky had to, inanely, remind himself they did not, in fact, possess one
brain. He cursed despite himself as they curved around the front of the building, the thunderous echo
of nearly one hundred firearms blazing hot and horrific in his ears; he’d be deaf by the time they
finished. “Formation!” Steve yelled, and Bucky rushed to his side, to his left, directly next to his
oldest and best friend. The boy from Brooklyn, that’s who he was following.

That boy may now be clad in star-spangled, vivid patriotism, but loyalty born of love dies slow, and
it drove him onwards. He screwed his face in contention, in something a little too close to hate for his
own comfort, and they entered the warehouse.

The watch Peggy had given her back in London plainly and coldly informed Elle that the
Commandos had been active in the compound for an entire twenty-three minutes. The heaviest and
thickest gunfire, heard first in the wake of Jacques’ explosions, had died and thinned away
somewhat. She allowed herself a peek through the scope of the rifle, resting it awkwardly against the
lip of the foxhole. Three buildings were ablaze, roofs and walls chewed away to form gaping maws;
she shivered at the sight.

Fear had left her the moment the Commandos had. Steve’s kind gaze had turned back to hers just
once; Gabe’s four times, and Bucky’s not at all -- but those flutterings of panic had misted away to
nothing, usurped by a dull ache, thudding in time with her heartbeat. Counting the possibilities for
disaster. Most surprising was the calm she felt sinking into her bones; even a faint ennui seemed to
have settled in the ground beside her, wrapping her in a limp embrace. She tugged her jacket a little
more firmly about her shoulders, jerking slightly when a particularly loud shot rang out.

Elle was faintly eager to see them peeling out from the main gates, mounting the rise of the hill in
triumph and good health. But mostly she was cold. Cold and tired. Cares were so distant; pain and
worry and early grief were such unpleasant company -- she ought to hold them off a little longer.

Flesh and bone were no match for vibranium, and Steve was grateful for it. He swung the shield
around again, this time knocking a fourth soldier from his feet and into the lower shelves of the
massive steel structure dominating this, the back of the factory floor. The space was quieter than they
had been anticipating -- certainly, the initial entrance of the Commandos had wrought quite a change
in populace, and those that remained standing -- perhaps near a dozen? -- had already held up their
hands in surrender, looking from one member of the ragtag band to another in blatant confusion.

“Line ‘em up,” Dugan said grimly, and Steve started -- execution was not on the books, not one
damn bit -- but relaxed as he saw that the man simply meant to restrain the group. Outside, the guns
had fallen silent.

Bucky gripped his Thompson in a threatening and yet simultaneously cocky stance, eyeing up the
last stand of the Metz HYDRA facility with cold detachment. “Wer bist du alle?” one of the men
croaked as Dugan snapped a cord tight around his wrists, pulled tight against his back.

Chewing at the inside of his cheek, Steve strove to project some sense of infallibility as he rapidly
tried to come up with an acceptable answer. Colonel Phillips had made it very clear that, for the foreseeable future, he wanted the Commandos to operate as a covert task force, unknown to the general public. While Steve could not see too much logic in this -- as he was still encouraged to dress as Captain America, an actual film star -- he had to accept the orders of his superiors. But Phillips had not prepared him for this.

As he tended to do in times of confusion, he looked to Bucky, who simply shrugged, leaving it up to his captain. Pride prodded at him mischievously -- oh, what the hell. He couldn’t say it in German, but that didn’t matter. With a wide, triumphant grin, Steve Rogers sketched the blueprint for HYDRA’s newest nightmare: “Us? We’re the Howling Commandos.”

“And then, we just head in, go hard, fan out, give ‘em hell!” Dugan slammed down the frothy mug of ale to emphasize his point. Four young and rapt SSR agents jumped back in collective delight at this climax, spilling their own drinks in the process.

Smiling, Elle shook her head, cheeks blooming with tipsy roses. “Is this the seventeenth or eighteenth time he’s told this story?” she asked Gabe, who just grinned in response, guzzling the last of his lager.

“Thirtieth, pretty sure.”

In the days since their return from France, the Commandos had been kept firmly occupied with a maelstrom of paperwork, reporting, and interviews as they presented the results of their first mission. Phillips was impressed with their work; more so with the rather strident manner in which Miss Andersen presented her concerns for subsequent missions.

“I feel Captain Rogers should be given more agency,” she’d explained during her interview with both Phillips and Peggy. “It took nearly seven hours for us to relay messages back and forth to London, including deliberation time. That was seven hours we could have spent otherwise preparing for the mission.” At an encouraging nod from Peggy, she’d added, somewhat deferentially: “I understand that we cannot simply be deployed on free-for-alls, sir, but surely we should be able to implement our own plans without waiting for full deliberation?”

After a tense moment’s silence, the colonel had assured her -- not unkindly -- that he would take the matter under advisement when considering the logistics of the next mission.

She glanced down at her watch as Gabe stood to refresh their drinks, leaving her alone at the table for a quiet moment she intended to enjoy -- ye gods, she realized dimly: in just six hours short hours they would all be required to show up for their debriefing. Elle itched at the pins holding her victory curls in place, anticipating the morning’s headache. “Gabe,” she said waving her hand to indicate he ought not to order her another cider. “Gabe, we really should be going. All of us.” She narrowed her eyes at Dugan in particular, who just laughed. Her mother-henning, he liked to say, was pretty damn cute but wholly ineffective.

Who else? She tapped her watch in Steve and James’ direction, jabbing her thumb to alert them to the fact that Jacques was already slumped sleepily over the piano keys. And now for Bucky. Who was nowhere to be found.

Through the smoky, convivial haze of the pub, Elle caught the briefest glimpse of a streak of blue heading out the main door to the street. Bucky had taken to wearing his Commando jacket even during civilian hours, preferring it against London’s cold wind far more than anything else he owned. She’d noticed, of course, because he looked so bloody, infuriatingly handsome in it.
Elle retrieved her own coat from the hooks nearest the door; she needn’t worry about paying the landlord, as Steve had opened a tab for them all long ago.

Really, she did not have to walk as quickly as she chose to once she’d emerged out onto the street. If he’d left, Bucky had obviously realized the lateness of the hour and was heading back to the flat in the safehouse he shared with Steve. Furthermore, she reminded herself firmly, trying to orient herself to his retreating figure a little ways up the pavement -- Bucky Barnes was a grown man, a sergeant, a soldier. He did not need some girl trying to mother him into going to bed at a decent time.

And yet, and yet…

Just as she applied the phrase so liberally to recollections of the boy, now Elle found herself adding it to her thoughts of Bucky on an increasingly regular basis -- for he occupied her mind so often these days. Following the attack in Metz, he had retreated into a sort of stubborn, stunned silence, refusing to relate stories of the events, as Dugan did, or even to simply compare notes, as she and the others chose to do. On the plane, travelling home, after securing their prisoners and greeting the representatives from the 107th who had arrived to secure the factory and load up the conquered weapons and soldiers -- during those quiet, exhausted moments she had tried to draw him out, to no avail.

Her heart broke for him. Fractured and shattered along the fault lines of her own aborted attraction, she ached at the tide of realization that he was suffering. Hadn’t she known it the moment she’d seen him on that damned stretcher? When she’d felt the rapid staccato of his own breaking heart as he faced the possibility of Steve’s death, as he begged her to go, determined to stay with his dearest, oldest friend until the very last moment? He was suffering so, and she had only added to that.

Elle picked up the pace, shoving aside the memories of her behaviour back in the medical tent. Oh, she’d been frightened, sure enough, of damaging him or one of the others by association. But it had not warranted such anger, such fire. “Bucky,” she should have said, calmly and sweetly. “I’ll be out in just a minute.”

But she hadn’t -- she hadn’t! And since those blazing, burning moments when she had torn asunder the fledgling attraction they had both been so contentedly adrift in, they had been lost, lost and separated, and only she could bridge that gap now.

If he never kissed her hand again, that was fine. If he never danced with her or paid her pretty compliments, she would survive. After all, she had not joined up in order to fall in love. But to see warmth in his eyes again, to watch the tension leave those hunched shoulders, to do one small thing to ease his burdens -- she would give anything.

The aching, hollow silence of the destroyed compound had left her ragged, suspended between weeping and laughter, until those familiar faces had emerged over the rise, brightened by victory. A sob had caught in her throat, and arms had slung around her before she commenced her medical inspections. That hope -- that brief, shining moment of hard-won peace in a world of conflict -- had been tarnished somewhat by the cold reception Bucky had given her. “Not hurt,” he’d said gruffly, continuing towards the campsite without so much as a glance in her direction.

The night before the attack, though, he’d offered some sort of truce. “You all right?” he’d asked. And the few minutes in the foxhole, when she’d brought him coffee -- something had thawed then. Those memories, and the sweet flutterings of possibility she’d felt in those moments -- they gave her the confidence to reach out to him now, to grasp his shoulder ever so gently, to speak his name on the London air, soft as a lover might.
Chapter End Notes

If you are able to provide some feedback or a quick comment, I would really appreciate it. I’d love to hear your thoughts about this story!
Brighter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A wave of pub patrons parted around them, an island amidst a sea of quiet revelry. Christmas was coming; a faint whiff of joy was on the air. Elle watched with some trepidation as he turned slowly, causing her hand to slip from his shoulder as though it had no real right to be there. Moonlight made a stranger of him, casting his weary face into sharp relief, so that a little flicker of doubt struck through her; he looked so stern. Cold rejection was one thing, but she was risking anger here.

The rosy glow of the cider within her was beginning to fade, replaced by worrying questions: had she simply ridden a ride of this warm buzz, as the Americans would say, completely devoid of logic? Or was it truly a wise decision to be confronting him so, after weeks of such tension? His eyes searched her own face, hands shoved deep in his pockets and brow furrowed, a query hot on his lips: “You all right?”

He never used her first name anymore. No “dolls” or “sweethearts” either. When he did have to address her directly, or identify her in some way, she was strictly “Miss Andersen.” In turn, she now referred to him aloud by his rank and surname, though the jolly syllables of his nickname danced still in her head despite her best intentions.

Several curious glances were shot their way as the thinning crowd was forced to move around the pair. Elle fiddled with the hem of Peggy’s borrowed coat, wishing she’d thought to bring a pair of gloves or had been able to catch him the relative warmth and privacy of the pub vestibule. Snow fell lightly about them, resting lightly on the shoulders of his jacket, on the curve of his lip. Any other evening, with any other conversation ready to be initiated -- it would have been a lovely night. Part of her refused to say it, to give shape to the words hanging colder than the snow between them. Another simply wanted it to be done, to return to the ways things had been.

“I just want us to be friends again.” The words outstripped her self-control, and she flushed, bright and painfully, in the pale light of the moon.

For a moment, a new kind of silence sat between them, different from anything they’d known before. In Austria, much had passed unsaid, but those were barriers of fear, of inviting lovely knowledge into a vale of terror, of death. Their touches and interactions -- the curl of hair between her fingertips as she’d fairly pressed him into the railing; the calming circles he had danced upon her flesh -- had been far more verbose than their conversations. Whether Bucky’s confession in the truck -- “I think I’m falling in love with you” -- had been honest or merely the product of a battered mind searching for light in the dark, she was unsure. And yet even in her own pause, there had been promise. Full and ripe. She was not typically of the mind that love could grow so quickly; likely it was a physical reaction, on both of their parts. He had not seen a woman in weeks; he was handsome. In a film script, they would have been married by now.

But her feelings for him now, as she allowed her dignity to dangle on the winter air in his hesitation, were not cinematic. Rather, her chest squeezed tight in a vice of anticipation; she hoped more than anything else to simply be his friend again; to hear terms of endearment from his lips, in the light rumble of his voice. Elle had no desire to be swept off her feet (not anytime soon, at least), but she did want his friendship. The ease of his company and the delight of his teasing. More than anything, however, she wanted him to smile, to be relieved of at least some part of the burden that had driven his cheer away. And if her confession now could bring him that...she could rest easy in the knowledge that she had done her part.
That same instinct had driven her to hold a crying man in his hospital bed; to bring flowers and sing songs and recite poems to comfort broken souls. Sometimes, it seemed she could actually feel the moment they let go, leaned into her care. But so much shame had become inextricably bound up in those past actions that Elle was now unsure of how to proceed here. Best, she thought wildly, scanning his face for some sort of reaction, to just simply blurt it out. Coyness had no place in moments like these.

Finally, Bucky sighed, his shoulders sinking only slightly as he closed his eyes against her own plain discomfort. “Look,” he began, voice hoarse from disuse and drink. “It’s not --”

“In Italy,” she continued firmly, honesty railroading over her inhibitions. “I was so horrid to you, and you’d been so kind, and I just…” A man and a woman passed them by; Bucky had opened his eyes and reached over now to gently guide Elle to the side, closer to the glossy, darkened face of a blacked-out shop window. “I just wanted to apologize. For being so terribly rude,” she finished lamely, eyes finding his shyly. Full of penitence.

His cheeks were chapped and red with the cold; some impulsive desire made her fingers twitch slightly with the urge to warm them, to touch his face and feel the faint scratch of that day-old stubble at his jaw. God, she’d been far more forward in Austria. But that was the problem, wasn’t it? Fear of impropriety had gotten her into this mess in the first place; now was not the time to ponder the precise origins of these desires and sensations. She’d been dancing a thin line, or so she’d thought, in the HYDRA facility, risking her own reputation and employment, as well as those of the men she had come to so deeply respect and -- dare she say it? -- cherish. Elle had grown so used to their touches and embraces: falling asleep in James’ arm; gripping Gabe’s shirts or hands when overwhelmed; allowing herself to be pressed along the length of Bucky’s body, in a way that made her blush even now, with far more than the cold.

She was a grown woman -- she understood lust. The boy had brought it out in her more than once, with his secret smiles and promises, those compliments that nearly brought her to her knees. But with Bucky, she understood something different had been sown between them, something she had never known before. And that confusion had tangled most unpleasantly with an old fear, leading her to wrench herself from his side lest he kiss her in front of the triumphant POWs, bringing her fear and her questioning together in a fierce collision.

She had not meant to hurt him.

Bucky had been about to kiss her, in those victorious moments; she just knew it. After all, it was what a man in a film would have done next. She had pulled away and greeted him with icy disdain rather than risk sullying his name with her tarnished, if fictitious, history. At the time, without the knowledge that those records had been destroyed, Elle had assumed it would be a far, far better thing for a glacier to slide between them, rather than the bubbly infatuation they had both been so pleasantly lost in.

And now? Now, in those moments on the snowy pavement, joy and contentment flowing through her veins, she simply wanted him to share that with her. To drink deep of the same cup. To smile. To lay down whatever was weighing so heavily upon his shoulders, turning his blue eyes downcast; rendering his lovely, charming face so terse. Elle just wanted him to breathe.

As her mind rapidly sorted through these options, he was weighing his own words carefully, she could tell. And in the set of his mouth and the way he stepped back from her, she read a keen reluctance to do this out on the street. But he knew well enough there was nowhere else to do so: the foxhole had been ideal, but that was so far away now; back in the pub, there were too many familiar, curious ears; in their safehouse flats, there was innuendo and impropriety. They were, though, she
wanted to remind him, surrounded by strangers, strangers who would not really think twice about an American serviceman and an English girl chatting late at night. A common enough sight that was, these days.

“When I went in there,” he said slowly, roughly, scraping a boot against the icy concrete beneath them. “When I went in there, I wasn’t trying to...I didn’t even stop to think you’d be…” Bucky fumbled there, memory catching for a moment on the ivory slip, the worn lace at her collarbone.

“In a state of undress?” she offered, aiming for “helpful” and not “blithe” in her tone.

Despite his tension, a smile tugged at the corner of Bucky’s mouth as he looked down at her, and she sensed the tiniest bit of thaw, akin to the slight openness he’d displayed during the mission. As though he was warming, as though she was chipping away at whatever hurt and discomfort she had caused. “Yeah, that.”

He broke their gaze, choosing instead to scan the street around them -- the hotel across the way; the shops and other pubs lining the street behind her, fixing finally on the red postbox to his right. When he spoke, it was to that: “I shouldn’t have just barged in there. It was dumb. I was dumb. A big old meatball, that’s me.”

“Beg pardon?”

Her polite confusion unlocked something in him; to Elle’s delight he ceased his study of the postbox and turned back to her with a faint grin, just the briefest flash of his old cheeky self. “An idiot, I guess. In English.”

Oh, she wanted to laugh. Properly. To toss her head back and catch a snowflake and have him pull her closer in a veritable dance of absolution. She wanted this to be the end. He was a meatball, he was a big, grinning meatball, and things were better now.

But it could not be the end. Because that was not the problem. That was not the glacier.

“Nevertheless,” she continued, “I shouldn’t have reacted that way. It was...unjust, and excessive, and I’m so, so dreadfully sorry. After everything we -- everything that happened, I should have been more calm.” She glanced upwards again; his gaze was steady on hers snow, postbox long forgotten. “We were friends before, weren’t we? And I spoiled everything, Sergeant Barnes, and I’m so sorry.”

He regarded her coolly for what felt like ages; she coloured under his gaze and her knees fairly knocked as she waited. His mouth, she realized inanely, was bloody perfect. And it was about to deliver either clemency or heartbreak -- which, she could not be sure. “You made me feel like a goddamn pervert,” he muttered, looking away again. “I’m sorry to say it like that -- God, that’s awful; my mother would kill me if she knew I was talking to a girl like that, but I just…”

“I deserve it.” Elle took an earnest step forwards, keenly aware that such proximity was precisely to blame for the rift between them in the first place, but not caring -- he needed her to show him there was trust there. “It wasn’t you. It wasn’t anything you did.”

She told him the story, hands growing numb with the cold and hours ticking ever closer to their return to responsibility and propriety. Knowing that it was far, far too late for an unmarried pair to be out together on the street, but relishing his attention just the same, his acknowledgement, the piercing focus of his gaze. Privacy was such a rare commodity these days, and it was exactly what they needed.

Pat Hemming’s tragedy came first, and Elle explained how the pain had wrought something spiteful
in the woman, something that grew venomous and barbed; how she had lashed out at Elle and the ease with which she was able to connect with the soldiers. “It frustrated her, I think,” she said quietly, “that she was there doing her job perfectly, and I was just gadding about. I don’t blame her.”

The rumours had been rotten from the start, she added, noting that his lips had flattened into a thin line, that his jaw had set more firmly. She told him about poor Fredericks and his awful, angry nightmares; she had embraced him before thinking of the consequences of their pose if caught. How the stain of suspicion had spread, flooding her name and James Falsworth’s, intertwining them in torrid tales. “They said I was...that he had...” She could not seem to get that out. She’d heard the rumour herself, that she was pregnant with James’ child. How ludicrous. How mad. But Bucky needed to know, to know full well the fear that had risen up within her the moment they were together in an official, documented world: “They said I was expecting,” she blurted, eyes shining. “That we’d...”

Bucky exhaled sharply. Judgement wasn’t on his mind, not at all -- no, he was just angry now. Angry at the series of faceless bedpan commandos, all stiff upper-lip and holier than thou, reducing this woman’s empathy into something sordid. And even if she had actually fallen in love with a soldier, made promises in the dark, who were they to judge? War made hearts beat fast, lives seem shorter -- it was inevitable that two people could go from meeting to married in just a few weeks. Hell, thoughts of that nature had been swirling around in his head for days when he’d first met her.

But this sexual favours, hands under the blankets, all in exchange for a good report? That wasn’t Elle.

And so as he heard the tears crowd her throat, as she laid her whole shameful fear in front of him, he let that anger go in a cold breath, and despite a niggling little awareness that he ought not to, he grasped her cold hand in his, entwining their fingers so fluidly and naturally that it was as though they had been doing so for years. His frustration could go nowhere now, and besides, she needed him more. And just once, just once, he wanted to touch her without the looming risk of death bearing witness. When he allowed his thumb to glide over hers, she shivered, and an old kind of pride swept through him. “You were trying to protect me?” he asked uncertainly, because that was certainly what it sounded like now. She must have been damned scared of retribution when she’d made it back to Allied lines. She’d probably figured Phillips and Carter and the others would be looking pretty closely at some of the relationships she’d formed.

Elle nodded slowly, savouring the feel of him against her own skin. How had this happened, she wondered? How had this bloomed so quickly between them? That he could reduce her, with one touch after weeks of silence, to a weeping mess? How was it that she could feel so damnably wretched without the sound of his voice, the gentleness of his touch?

A scant two months before, Bucky Barnes had been nothing to her; an absence she had not known needed filling. And now...now his hand was on hers and her knees were going off-duty and her cheeks were blazing with half-shame, half-delight. Forgiveness was such a heady drink. But doubt and shame made for a sobering draught, and she took a step backwards. “It wasn’t true, what she said. None of it was true.”

“Of course it wasn’t.” His reply was heated, buoying. “Of course it wasn’t, sweetheart.”

It burned him. Burned him deeply that he’d been walking around in such a bitter funk for weeks, pushing her away in childish resistance without ever pausing to consider why she had treated him so, after they had become so close in such a short amount of time. “I didn’t want to be dismissed,” she whispered, eyes fixing on her own hand in his. She made no move, however, to pull it away. “Or for any of you to be disciplined. My service, you all -- mean everything to me.”
Bucky had only had the one drink, but he felt intoxicated, almost giddy. Weeks of tension, of that sick, slithering, rueful guilt in his veins -- memories of wide, round eyes and probing hands; the taste of iron and old screams on his tongue -- they slipped away as he stepped closer to her again, as he noted the sweet cloud of her perfume on the night air; the scarlet swipe of lipstick he’d never noticed before. Had she been wearing it that night, he wondered? The night he’d firmly pushed her away, been so awful and cold to her in exchange for the hurt she’d inadvertently caused him?

“Can we, then? Be friends again?”

Back home, Bucky would have said something cute then, something fast. He would have let her know that, despite his better judgement, he’d meant what he said in the forest all those weeks ago. But now, now he was standing with a pretty girl in a snowy street, the notes of some carol he could almost name drifting down from the pub further up the way; the faint glow of a streetlamp and the moon were working in tandem to reflect the burnished shine of her curls and those hazel eyes he could not get enough of -- Bucky realized that they could not be more than friends, not just yet, so his answer was inevitably going to be “yes,” with an asterisk she would not be able to hear. He was going to do this the right way, take it slow, get to know her. Build something stronger between them than hurried, romantic confessions and stolen kisses.

He smiled with the hope of it, and she beamed in the face of his relaxation, even as he slipped his fingers from hers. “Yeah,” he said smoothly. “I’d like that. Truce?”

Elle looked askance at the hand in front of her. She hadn’t been expecting this. Bucky was enough of a flirt that she’d been anticipating a cheeky remark and her own pink-cheeked response. A handshake? She took it all the same, allowing him to enfold her hand in a grip entirely unlike the one he had held it in only moments before -- solid, affable, missing any sensual undercurrents. “Truce,” she agreed.

He offered to walk her home, if she was not interested in returning to the pub. Elle slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her, rather dazedly, through the winding London roads, making small talk as though nothing emotionally upheaving at all had occurred recently between the two of them. Elle found herself taken slightly aback: his tone was light and humorous, a return to his carefree joviality at the HYDRA facility. Hadn’t she just cracked open her own heart and laid bare to him a deep fear? Hadn’t he just murmured his own hurt to her, how she had wounded him? And now, there he was, walking her up to the door of her flat, wishing her a goodnight and waiting until she’d managed to fumble sufficiently with her key to turn the knob. As though nothing had happened. As though those weeks of ice had not existed at all.

Bemusedly, Elle made to enter the small, bare room that was to be her refuge during leave, thinking only of preparing a hot water bottle and drifting off to a ponderous sleep -- but a pause in Bucky’s stride up the hall and towards the stairs (he and most of the others were housed two floors above her) made her turn, one foot home and one free, to catch a glimpse of that sly, eye-crinkling grin. “Hey, Elle?” he said, voice rich and dulcet and full of knowing. “You looked pretty that night.”

What night? When had she looked pretty recently? Even tonight, she had been so tired from a day of training that Peggy had practically had to apply her makeup for her. Looking pretty was the furthest thing from her mind these days. “Pardon?”

He leaned casually against the wall, just five or six feet away, and her heart definitely should not have begun beating as quickly as it did at the sight of him crossing his arms. From downstairs, she could hear the raucous approach of the rest of the team. Bucky heard them, too, glancing over his shoulder to the staircase they would soon be mounting. “The night you joined the Commandos,” he clarified. “That yellow dress. You looked swell in it, doll. You were waiting for me to tell you that.”
“I was not!” Elle replied indignantly, face flaming. How much time tonight had she actually spent with red cheeks?

He laughed at her expression, rubbing his hand slightly over his chin. “I can tell when a dame is looking to be reminded of how good she looks. You already knew it; you just wanted to hear it from me.”

Actually, she had been waiting for a glance, for some small sign that she existed still for him, teasing be damned. But because this teasing was such a familiar return, however abrupt, she wanted to keep this moment airy and sweet, and she decided two could play at his game: “Sergeant,” she said lightly, inching further into her flat, “I gave up waiting for compliments the moment I saw Agent Carter in her dress.”

If there was any pithy remark to follow, she did not hear it, because she’d learned this lesson well enough from the boy: always have the last word, and leave them unsteady and bewildered in your wake.

Within the beige confines of the officers’ mess, holiday cheer struggled to find purchase. There was a rather battered-looking wreath on one wall; red cloth draped over the main table. But the sandwiches were dry and the music tinny, and Elle found herself tempted to scratch an itch in a rather indelicate location due to the purchase of a new pair of winter stockings.

“All wild party, eh?” Jim Morita appeared at her elbow, joining her in surveying the lackluster dessert spread. Colonel Phillips had managed to nab the most attractive of the egg tarts, and rationing inevitably made for a poor set of remaining options. All the same, he plucked a biscuit at random from the plate, popped it into his mouth, and flashed Elle an expression of such disgust that his next words were wholly unnecessary: “I wouldn’t bother, miss. Not if you’re fond of your own taste buds.”

During the debriefing just a few days before, the morning after she and Bucky had finally buried the hatchet, Morita had become the newest addition to the Commandos. He had been imprisoned by HYDRA in Austria as well; Elle now had vague recollections of his face during line-ups and on the factory floor. After several weeks’ recuperation in a hospital just outside of London, Colonel Phillips had approached him to discuss the prospect of joining the team. He’d distinguished himself during his service with the Nisei Squadron prior to his capture; he worked as a radio operator and code-breaker, an Phillips wanted him on the team. Elle was technically proficient with the communication tools, but Morita had plenty of experience and the goal was to have the two of them working together as communications liaisons.

To her surprise and relief, Phillips had emphasized to Elle that he’d been impressed by her work in the field during the French mission; hiring Morita was not intended to impugn her abilities, but rather simply to bolster the team numbers and increase the diversity of their collective skillset. Because of these changes, Elle had spent quite a bit of time with Morita over the past seven or eight days, working together to adapt their portable communications technology and design some sort of priority system or procedure for themselves. Phillips wanted to further support her medical training, so the hours she was not holed up in one of the debriefing rooms with Jim, she was downstairs in the clinic learning more sutures, answering endless questions, and practicing correct triage procedures.

They shipped out in less than a week.

But first, they were being permitted to enjoy something of a Christmas break, even if it was a few days early.
The Commandos milled about the room, wearing civilian clothes for the first time in weeks and trying their hardest to relax into the hollow festivities. Christmas so far away from family, friends, and tradition made for a grim celebration, and Elle’s heart fairly ached for them. Dejection and loneliness was clear upon their faces; even the promise of another opportunity to best HYDRA and vanquish Schmidt’s horrific regime was not lifting their spirits one bit.

“If I were home right now,” Gabe said dully, sipping at his eggnog in the far corner, flanked by Steve and Bucky, “everything would smell like cinnamon and nutmeg. My mom makes these huge loaves of gingerbread. So much you’d think we could never eat it all.”

“Ham,” Dugan interjected, gently tugging Elle and leading Morita along with him over to join the knot. The corner of Bucky’s mouth lifted slightly at her approach; she’d worn the yellow dress again. “My sister makes this ham every Christmas Eve -- God, I’d pay more for that than a genuine porterhouse.”

Morita offered a few of his own family’s recipes, and then James -- though more and more frequently he was being referred to as “Monty” by most of the team -- chimed in with a funny story about a few of the scrapes he and his cousins had gotten into as children during Christmas dinners with his family.

As a tide of nostalgia swept over the lot of them, retreating together into the corner, away from the eyes and ears of various SSR officials (Peggy had a cold and had not been able to make it down, much to Steve’s ill-concealed disappointment), including Phillips -- Elle found herself sinking into a chilling dismay. Loneliness was evident in their voices: it curled out, unpleasant tendrils gripping at memory and constricting attempts at good cheer. Even as the men related stories of the amusing antics of nieces and nephews; the delicious recipes served on groaning tables; the best gifts they had received through the years, Elle knew they were sad, achingly so. Steve and Bucky’s silence worried her most of all: didn’t they have any happy memories to share?

Her throat tightened at the gasping press of homesickness present in the room, dimming the lights on the scraggly Christmas tree near the door. Everything, it seemed, was simply off-kilter, a note or two wrong. Though it was probably rude, she moved away as Dugan launched into yet another holiday anecdote; sorrow thrummed through her, chilled her, and she could not bear the thought of these men, these good, good men, so far away from everything that brought them joy during the season of love and giving. They had already given so much; now they were being asked to risk everything they had left.

“Elle?”

Across the room, someone put down a new 78 and the lonesome notes of the season’s saddest song, introduced just a few months before, began to fill the air, shattering Elle’s last vestiges of reserve. “I’ll be home for Christmas,” Crosby crooned. “You can plan on me.”

Bucky’s face tightened as the lyrics rose between them, and it was all Elle could do to simply swipe at the tears threatening to overflow as she turned to face him properly, appreciating for a moment the novelty of seeing him dressed in anything other than khaki or blue: the suit fit him nicely, and he’d shaved, even swept his hair back from his forehead in a way that made his eyes seem brighter, if that was possible.

“If only in my dreams.” That was it; she was going to cry. A unborn sob hitched in her throat, and he knew what was happening before she truly did. Bucky wrapped an arm around her shoulder and marched her, subtly, gently, into the corridor beyond the mess, empty this time of night.

“Hey, there,” he said softly, pressing her into his chest. “It’s all right, sweetheart, it’s just fine.”
But it wasn’t, it wasn’t fine. Having a friendship with him again was a blessing, a regular Christmas miracle, but that pleasure did not change the fact that those men she had grown to care for so very much were thousands of miles from home and peace. “You miss your parents?” he murmured against her hair, arms winding tighter around her as her own hands smoothed against his shoulder blades.

Yes, her parents. Her poor parents. The boy. Such a season brought memories rising to the surface in an acute, almost painful way, particularly when the subjects of those memories were not present. But her tears were for more than her own loss. She whispered this in his ear, shared another kind of pain with him.

He pulled back slightly at her words, to better study her face. Eyes gleaming with tears, lips trembling against borrowed grief. She was hurting for them. “You’re all so far away from your homes,” she murmured, nestling her face back against his chest. “And your families, and I’m so bloody tired of this, and I know we can’t stop until HYDRA and Hitler are done, but I just… I just…”

If she felt his kiss against her hair, she gave no indication. For days now, ever since the letter from home, Bucky had been chafing under the demands and the loneliness of his service, longing for the flurry of festivities back home with his mother and siblings. It had been just over two years now since he’d been drafted; his life since then had been training and paperwork and then finally, warfare. Looking back, he could hardly remember the man he had been before all that. But Christmas? At Christmas he remembered. With Steve he remembered. And now, with this girl in his arms and her big heart swelling for him and the people he cared so much about, he remembered who he had been. Before signing up. Before the war. Before HYDRA.

Bucky was a man who could make a girl smile even when her heart was breaking, even when a sad song was playing and she was lonesome and blue. But Elle was not the type of girl who could laugh when things were like this, so he didn’t bother with jokes or flirting, not right then. Instead, he held her close as the soldier’s mournful pining faded away, offering quiet words of comfort as, within the officers’ mess, someone realized that such a song -- however popular -- might not be most sensitive one to play during a Christmas party for about-to-be-deployed service members. A jaunty version of “Jingle Bells” drifted out to them instead, and she relaxed in his embrace, neither making a move to part.

Just friends indeed.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Your feedback and comments are so appreciated -- they encourage me through the writing and editing processes; I absolutely love to hear your thoughts. Thank you for reading!
Newlywed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Date: 4 January 1944

Re: OPERATION NEWLYWED

HC Mission #2: Charleroi, Belgium (24-30 December 1943)

HQ Commander: Col Chester Phillips

Joint SSR-BAF-AAF coalition

SSR Personnel Deployed: Cpt Steven G. Rogers; Maj James M. Falsworth; Sgt James B. Barnes; Sgt Timothy Dugan; Pte James Morita; Pte Gabriel Jones; Mr Jacques Dernier; Miss Elle Andersen (civilian attaché)

Note: Report compiled by Miss Elle Andersen under the advisement of Pte Lorraine Dormer

START MISSION REPORT

On 18 December 1943, Mr J. Dernier of the Howling Commandos made contact via an encoded message with Mlle Ines Lecomte of Charleroi, Belgium. The two were previously known to each other as international contacts during Dernier’s time with the French Resistance, operating primarily out of Marseille. Mlle Lecomte’s sister, Mme Louise Richard, worked with her husband and brothers-in-law to conduct covert resistance operations until April 1943, upon her capture by Gestapo operatives.

This encoded message was addressed to a M Julien Dubois, the intended alias of Dernier while undercover during OPERATION NEWLYWED. See attached for details.

Gleefully, Jacques brandished the just-arrived letter aloft in the dim recesses of what was rapidly becoming known as “Howling Central,” the Commandos’ affectionate nickname for the grimly taupe aspects of their main debriefing room. A general sense of camaraderie, and a percolator that was never off-duty, however, did little to ease the chill earned in this basement portion of the building. Self-consciously now, Elle tightened the cardigan a little more about her shoulders, knowing it clashed most horrifically with the crisp lines of her Commando uniform underneath. She glanced over to the far wall, where Bucky and Steve stood, engrossed still in their perusal of a series of maps. He hadn’t appeared to notice her cardigan.

“Come along, chaps,” James said heartily, steering the two of them towards the larger group. “Monsieur Dubois has received an invitation.”

Gabe pushed a cup of coffee in her direction, and though she’d been rather craving some tea, Elle accepted it with a grateful smile. The intensive planning necessitated by their second mission was beginning to wear on her; dark circles traced under her eyes, she’d seen them herself this morning. And a small ache in her right hand meant that she would need to rewrite her meeting notes once the
session was concluded. Likely another late evening for her, then. On the most inopportune of nights, since they shipped out at 0400h.

Two days had elapsed since Bucky had held her outside the Christmas party, allowed her to weep against his shoulder and let slip her shuddering despair. They had parted after the final song, after the sounds of boots scraping and glasses clinking had faded, jumping apart as the double doors to the mess had opened. She recalled now the way Steve’s eyes had scanned the pair -- a pink-cheeked Elle tucking a loose curl behind her ears; Bucky rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, pretending to be rather absorbed by a recruitment poster on the far wall. There was nothing wrong, she tried to remind herself, in what they had been doing -- he had simply been offering her some comfort in a blue moment, that was all.

But the thudding of her heart -- she was certain Steve Rogers, with his serum-enhanced hearing, had been able to hear it.

“Ready, ma chérie?” Jacques asked, touching her shoulder briefly, jolting her from the shallow reverie. The other Commandos had settled around the table now, and at some point, Peggy had entered, choosing a seat directly between Elle and Bucky.

“She must go on, Dernier,” she instructed briskly, shuffling a stack of papers into a neat pile before her. “We have quite a lot to discuss today.”

Indeed they did. Most of the elements for this mission had already fallen well into place, and today’s meeting was largely to finalize plans and ensure everyone was on board. This was to be a more involved, longer-term operation than their first deployment as the Howling Commandos, necessitating a bit of subterfuge and at least four or five days of reconnaissance. The first part of the plan? Accepting the generous invitation from the sisters Lecomte to spend the holiday season with them in their cozy Belgian home.

‘‘You and your wife are most welcome to attend our holiday celebrations, old friend,’’ Jacques read with much aplomb and a substantial wink in Elle’s direction. ‘‘We cannot wait to meet her and hear all the news of your recent adventures together. We shall supply the wine and bread. Bring only yourselves.’’

24 DECEMBER 1943:

The Howling Commandos departed for Bouffioulx, Belgium at 0400h, with the express intention of making landfall and launching a covert operation from a temporary base established there.

SSR operatives stationed in Mons had already supplied an automobile to be waiting there, at the edge of a treeline in the northeastern quadrant of the designated base area, well-concealed from passersby. Pte Morita worked to set up a communications station in the temporary constructed for the ground team’s use during the reconnaissance portion of the mission, while Cpt Rogers and Sgt Barnes aided Miss Andersen and Mr Dernier in assuming their false identities for the purposes of OPERATION NEWLYWED. This involved ensuring all papers, compiled by SSR intelligence agents, were in order and ready to be shown at the entry checkpoints in the town of Charleroi (approximately 6.52 miles northwest).

She looked like a new wife, she thought -- or, at least, what she supposed a new wife ought to look like. The outfit was not flashy or expensive, consisting of a simple wool skirt, blouse, and a
charmingly-patterned blue cardigan that she rather fancied keeping once the mission had concluded. Elle turned in front of the mirror and poked awkwardly at her hair. She’d simply brushed it out from the confines of her usual curls and allowed it to sweep against her shoulders. The style was nowhere near as elaborate as the ones she had been indulging in back in London, nor as practical as the plait she was wont to adopt during training or the previous mission.

But the goal, Peggy had emphasized, was to have official eyes simply slide by her. “Anything that makes you stand out,” she’d explained, “too-bright lipstick or a hairstyle that looks like you spent hours constructing, an outfit too new -- observing or focusing on any one of those things could make you memorable, and thus, suspicious.”

To this end, Sophie Dubois was not born to be a fashionable woman. She and her husband were travelling from their small, simple country home to visit old friends in the city for the holidays. Sophie did not even own any jewellery -- save, of course, for the band of gold winking on her left hand. The band of gold, it seemed, Bucky could not tear his eyes away from as she emerged from the tent.

“Well,” she asked, shrugging into the gray coat Agent Novak had found for her at a church rummage sale back in London. “Will I do?”

Through the slight gloom of the crisp December dawn, Steve grinned at Elle. She certainly looked the part, and already, he thought privately, she had begun to carry herself differently. A little taller, perhaps; a little prouder. And why shouldn’t she? Elle Andersen was an official member of the Howling Commandos, if listed as “civilian attaché,” and she’d proved herself capable of fulfilling her duties on their first mission, sufficiently so that it had seemed a natural leap to bring her along on their second, this time in a much more directly-involved capacity.

“Tu es très belle, chère femme,” Jacques said effusively, clapping his hands with delight. His hair had been swept back differently, tucked beneath a cap; this changed his looks only subtly. They did not want their faces remembered too closely after they had departed.

He was terribly excited about this mission, Elle knew. Though the notion of espionage and the inherent pressures therein did not precisely thrill her, she could share in the delight at simply having some real, true identifiable purpose within the team and their mission.

Additionally, there were the official concerns that troubled her: Phillips was happy to have an opportunity to take advantage of some of her language skills, but he had firmly impressed upon her that Operation Newlywed (the title she found herself jotting down and referring to with a rather teeth-gritted acquiescence) was going to be her deciding role. If she could conduct herself effectively, she could literally earn her wings -- the chosen symbol for the Commandos’ unit. She would continue to be deployed on overseas missions as communications liaison, medic, and secretary.

If, however, things did not go well, she would be relegated to a desk job back in London.

There was nothing strictly wrong with such a position, Elle reminded herself firmly, trying to pay keen attention as Bucky held open her handbag and stuffed a few of Sophie’s identification papers inside, explaining how she should offer them slowly, handing them to Jacques first once they were in the car unless a guard came to her side first. No, a clerical position might be nice, actually. If you got shaky hands as a clerk or personal secretary, you simply made yourself a cup of tea or stepped out for a cigarette.

Of course, he noticed, snapping the bag shut firmly and leading her by a trembling hand to the other side of the tent, their feet crunching in tandem through the scant inch of snow. The structure was to be the remaining Commandos’ base camp for the next several days. Despite the frosty weather, the
green canvas should blend in well with the expansive copse of spruce trees selected as their temporary home. Bucky stopped between a few of these now, glancing over her shoulder to ensure they had not been followed, then looked down at her. “Everything’s gonna be fine, Ellie,” he said softly, taking both of her hands in his now, rubbing to ease the tension and tremors from them. “You’ve got the papers; the worst that’ll happen is they’ll refuse you entry. If that happens, you come back here and we reevaluate.”

Bucky’s eyes were focused, earnest; he was telling the truth. She knew full well there were other ways of attaining their objective on this mission. Undercover reconnaissance was only the most appealing, not the only option available to the team. Elle was nervous, but not terrified, and this brief exchange was enough to relieve those slight nerves. He had noticed her discomfort, and sought to ease her mind. She could not help but smile up at him now.

He was cold, she could tell -- lips grown quite red, cheeks just as wind-bitten. His mouth quirked into a half-smile, eyes shining with some excitement. Bucky loved a mission, she had come to realize. Having a purpose, a task before him, seemed to content him more than anything else. “And I’ll be just six miles away, okay, doll? Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.”

There were things to worry about. Plenty of things -- a list of possible disasters bloomed behind the seam of her lips, and she wanted to share them with him. But then his gaze drifted down to her left hand again, narrowing at the band of gold about her ring finger, and she found herself flushing under the implications of the look, suddenly self-conscious of what that meant. Holding his hand with her own bound in gold seemed such a weighty, intimate state for the two of them to be in, and she suddenly wanted to be apart, to dwell on this later.

Bucky seemed to share her abrupt discomfiture, dropping their shared grip and stepping away with a small smile. “Better get going, Madame,” he said smoothly. “You’ve got a dinner to get to.”

Pink-cheeked, Elle wound her arm through his proffered one, realizing that, if he wasn’t clad in his Commando uniform, they might have passed for any newlywed couple themselves, out on a quiet Christmas stroll. How lovely a possibility.

Maj Falsworth and Pte Jones departed for London HQ after aiding in the establishment of Commando Base 1 (CB1), at approximately 0600h. An aeroplane supplied by Stark Industries had been camouflaged prior to the mission to allow it to be perceived as a civilian, German-standard aircraft. Cpt Rogers, Sgt Barnes, and Pte Morita remained behind at CB1 to support and offer reinforcements to the undercover team.

At 0830h, Mr Dernier and Miss Andersen, now officially undercover as “Julien Dubois” and “Sophie Dubois” respectively, arrived at the northeasternmost checkpoint of the city of Charleroi. Dernier and Andersen were detained by Nazi border guards for approximately 14 minutes. During later communications with Cpt Rogers, it was suggested that the delay was perhaps caused by a lower-than usual stream of traffic through the checkpoints, owing to the holiday. After some interrogation regarding their purposes in the city, as well as being required to provide not only their identification credentials but also the communication between Dernier and Mlle Ines Lecomte.

Dernier and Andersen then proceeded to 41 Rue des Rives in the southeastern portion of the city, arriving at the residence of Ines and Adele Lecomte.

“Tea?” Elle could not possibly imagine how the poor table was going to hold one more thing. Cakes and biscuits, bread and cheese -- somehow all brought to fruition despite months of rationing -- and
two bottles of wine retrieved from the cellar, had been spread like a true, mouth-watering bounty across the surface of the dining room table. Adele had assembled most of the treats just prior to their arrival at the door, not twenty minutes prior, and had continued to bring out all manner of trinkets to add some colour and sparkle to the display, as well as additional food.

To look at the cheery table of Adele Lecomte, one would not think the Nazis held sway just outside her door.

“I --” Elle tried to formulate a polite refusal, but a rose-patterned cup and saucer had been placed before her and milk was being poured in a delicate stream from a matching creamer before she could even begin the second word.

Conversation rose and fell around the three, building up into a contented crescendo, so robust and so pleasant that, by the time she’d finished her second cup of tea and had actually considered accepting a glass of wine, Elle could almost have convinced herself that they were indeed all old friends, enjoying a Christmas Eve feast together.

Not as though they were poised resolutely at the starting line of a four day reconnaissance mission. Not as though, less than ten miles away, Captain America lay in wait. Not as though Schmidt was due to arrive at the local facility, just across the Sambre, in two days’ time.

“You look pale, my dear,” Adele said warmly, her own cheeks blooming with wine. “Tired? You are more than welcome to rest upstairs.”

The prospect of a nap was inviting, but Elle was loath to leave so soon after the operation had been initiated. After all, they had intended to spend the twenty-fourth planning out their movements and observations for the next few days. A walk by the river was their first idea, tomorrow morning; then a country drive, then a trip to the market…

Adele and her sister, Ines (who had yet to make an appearance) had planned most of the mission themselves. They and a small team of resistance operatives had been working (as quietly as possible) to gather more intelligence regarding the mid-sized HYDRA facility just across the river. There were rumours, Adele told them, through the network of operatives, that this facility was going to replace the one the POWs had destroyed in Austria.

“Schmidt intends for it to expand,” she explained quietly, adding another sugar to Elle’s tea, though she had not asked for it. “Originally, it was simply a few warehouses, but in the past seven weeks they have added four more buildings, and brought in dozens of vehicles and shipments. They are relying heavily on barges in the river to transport huge crates, probably from somewhere on the North Sea.”

Jacques swallowed another biscuit, licking the raspberry jam from his fingertips. “How many workers?”

“They are not so much workers as mindless slaves to a mad cause.” The three occupants of the dining room turned in surprise at the emergence of a rather hoarse, sardonic voice. Tall, with a sweep of golden hair, a woman who could only be Ines Lecomte stood now in the doorway of the room with a wry, terse smile upon her face. Both women were beautiful, but Ines’ beauty was colder, a little harsher than her sister’s.

“Ma cher soeur!” Adele stood in a flurry of lace and skirts, rushing to her sister’s side with a series of overly-effusive kisses. “Our guests have arrived. You remember dear Julien, of course? And this is his darling wife, Sophie.”
“Please, must we really?” Without offering any true form of greeting, Ines joined them at the table, reaching over in front of Elle to grab a wedge of bread. “I know we must keep up the pretence outside of the house, but I’ve no interest in performing so in my own dining room. What are your real names, then? You are Jacques?”

He nodded. “And this is Elle, Elle Andersen. From London.”

“London?” Ines shot her a steely, suspicious look. “Yet you speak French?”

“Oui, mon père m’a appris quand j’étais enfant,” Elle replied primly, already having decided she did not like this woman very much. Far too brisk, too blasé. Peggy had impressed upon her and Jacques the immense importance of remaining in character, even when at home. Any possible slip-up could spell disaster in a matter of seconds.

Ines frowned. “Good. But you are an agent, yes?”

Ah, there was the rub. Elle had been waiting for it; so, evidently, had Jacques. “She is a Commando, an attaché with the SSR --” He paused as the elder Lecomte sister held up an elegant hand.

“I asked her, monsieur.” Cool green eyes fixed upon her own -- they were the same shade as Adele’s, Elle could not help but think. But where welcome had emanated from that gaze, there was only brewing disdain here now. “Are you an agent, Elle Andersen of London? Or are you a soldier? What brings you here, to fight HYDRA?”

Every doubt she’d shared in the corridor with Steve Rogers came rushing back, but his kind face was not here now to smile at her worries. There was only this piercing, knowing gaze, from a woman who understood very well that Elle Andersen was no agent, no soldier.

“I was an aide,” she said quietly. “Before I was captured by HYDRA. Now, as Julien --” and here she bit tersely around the name, seeking to remind Ines of the importance of secrecy “-- said, I am a member of the Commandos and, by extension, a civilian associated with the Strategic Scientific Reserve.”

“And why are you here?”

Doubt was cold and sneering at her neck, and Elle flushed with the tide of it. Titles and demure recitations of purpose were all very well and good, but Ines was now probing at an answer much deeper and possibly more revealing than Elle was willing to provide. The “why” of her presence in Belgium, was quite simple -- because the SSR had ordered it so -- but the story of how she had become a Commando began in pain and fear; the origins of her enlistment were even murkier and more painful. She had no desire to tell those stories.

By the jut of her chin and the attending smirk, Ines had been anticipating this silence. “Bah,” she said lightly, exchanging an inscrutable look with her sister. “No matter. It is most likely that the hallowed forces of the British military have just found a pretty enough girl to star in the newsreels. Tell me, Miss Andersen, what is your code name, then? Are you to be Captain America’s leading lady? Perhaps Lady Liberty, or is that too on the nose?”

“Ines!” Adele interjected sharply. “Enough. Our guests are tired after their journey.” Her sister slumped down in her chair with the precise air of a chastised child. Adele turned to Jacques and Elle, squeezing the hand of the former gently, in apology to both. “Upstairs with you then. There is a bedroom on the landing, the first door to the right, where you both may sleep. If, my dear Sophie, you would prefer privacy, you are more than welcome to take my room. It is just off to the left, facing the river.”
Mortification would make sleep impossible, and from the twitch of Jacques’ hands at his sides as they made their way upstairs, he was not interested in a rest either. In unspoken agreement, they both entered the small room behind the first door to the right, each settling down on one of two narrow beds, cheerfully adorned with mismatched quilts. “Sorry about that, ma chérie,” Jacques ventured quietly, observing Elle’s firmly clasped hands and stiff posture. “I’m sure she meant no harm. This is a tense time and a tense operation.”

She glanced up at him with a tremulous smile. Ines Lecomte was certainly a force to be reckoned with, but Elle was more ashamed that she had not been able to formulate a response to the question. Of course, she understood quite clearly why she was “there,” why she had signed up in the first place. It beat within her, a simple, pulsing, honest rhythm -- but she could not articulate it. Was it possible for something to be so true one could not frame it in words? A promise to her mother had initiated the entire affair, so long ago now, but her mother was dead. Dead and gone where Elle could not follow and so why was she still here? Heaving against waves of doubt, cresting higher each time, threatening to pull her down into disuse, into memory.

Why was she here? She wanted to “do her bit,” as everyone did these days. Be a part of something bigger and greater. Elle had mounted the gangplank of the St. Vincent with every intention of bringing peace and calm to men without either, to ease weary, woeful minds as best she could. To let them dream in a nightmare, if only for a moment.

Becoming a Howling Commando -- though the association was tenuous at best -- had not been a part of her plan. She had only intended to give what she could, the strengths she knew she possessed. At the recruitment office she’d visited, nearly two years ago now, the main tenor of their lectures and speeches had revolved around individuals providing only the best of themselves to the war effort. “Intelligence, organization, compassion, courage -- gifts of valour are hidden in our daily lives!” a beady-eyed man had exhorted from the front of the church hall. “Offer them to your country, and reap the rewards in the inevitable peace!”

Inevitable peace. As though it were neatly scheduled, a train to arrive on time; the entire world waiting impatiently on the platform, checking their watches and tsking at the hours creeping by.

“So should we send a message?” Jacques had stood, and begun rummaging through their bags. They’d each brought one suitcase, along with a small canvas bag concealing a few presents. Those were small, wrapped in brown paper, and yet the Nazi guards at the city limits had of course seen fit to tear into them, taking a rosy jar of jelly destined for the Lecomtes’ table. They left a French translation of a recent German novel, however, and the yard of fabric bundled up for Ines. Another, one that Elle had not seen, had earned a scoff and a rough tossing back into the boot of the car. She was tempted now to pull back the rest of the paper from the rather long box, but Jacques had a good, urgent point: they really should make contact.

With a sigh, Elle reached for her cosmetics bag.

25 DECEMBER 1943:

At approximately 0945h on the morning of the second day of OPERATION NEWLYWED, the occupants of the house departed for a stroll along the Sambre River, beginning just outside the Lecomte residence, and proceeding northeast along the riverbank until reaching a bridge crossing (50°23’47”N, 4°28’50”E) guarded by 4 Nazi officers.

Dernier, Andersen, A. Lecomte, and I. Lecomte were requested to provide identification materials and were subsequently ordered to return to their residence. During the walk,
A. Lecomte debriefed Dernier and Andersen as regards the general layout of the nearby HYDRA facility located near Charnoy. In the seven weeks leading up to the initiation of the operation, dozens of shipments had been delivered to a newly-installed dock to the eastern side of the bridge. It was posited by the small network of resistance operatives working with the Lecomtes that these shipments were arriving from HYDRA facilities along the North Sea. Huge crates were seen being pulled from these barges on multiple occasions, and were then transported southeast towards Charnoy.

Intercepted reports and transmissions show that Col Johann Schmidt had planned to have the Charnoy facility replace the recently-destroyed production factory in Austria, destroyed in October 1943 during the escape of POWs liberated by Cpt S.G. Rogers.

At 1150h, Andersen made contact with Pte Morita, still situated at CB1 outside of Bouffioulx.

---

1200h, no new shipments. E.

Sipping at her tea, Elle waited for Jim’s response. The perfume bottle was a clever trick of Stark’s, concealing a radio transmission device allowing her to send a series of short, Morse code messages to a receiver located at the temporary base in the woods, six miles away. Nearly seven, she thought glumly.

The guards at the checkpoint had not suspected a thing. Certainly one had rummaged through her suitcase, a leer evident upon his face as he lifted out dresses and frothy bits of faded lace. When the guard had gotten to the ratty cosmetics bag, he’d simply clinked a few of the bottles together and confiscated a tube of lipstick. “Painted whore,” he’d spat under his breath, in strident German. Jacques, who did not speak it, could only look over quizzically, and because she did not want to give herself away, Elle had to pretend to be unaffected by the insult.

Thus far, Elle’s experience in espionage was proving to be somewhat disappointing (and thus, a relief). There appeared to be quite a lot of waiting around, and though the walk along the river’s edge had severely intensified her nerves (Nazi patrols seemed to be pacing everywhere, even though it was Christmas Day), she could admit to being almost bored. Ines was constantly busy, arranging meetings with the rest of her connections throughout the city.

Downstairs, Adele was preoccupied with roasting a small chicken she’d been saving up to purchase for weeks. The occupiers had connections with some farmers across the river -- “Collaborateurs,” Ines had spat last night, explaining how the meal was to come about -- who were able to sell their yields in the market once a week. The smell of rosemary wafted through the house, and the hum of some old French country ditty danced up the stairs.

Elle leaned back on the bed, waiting for the light clicks of Jim’s response. It usually took him a minute or two to receive, translate, relay to Steve or Bucky, and then to respond. She’d been trying to keep CB1, the base camp, apprised of all developments, even the ones that seemed to actually be quite uneventful.

Of all the lessons and training she had received back in London, Elle had truly enjoyed her instruction in Morse code the most. Unlike the physical defensive training, she had shown some promise during those lessons, readily earning the praise of her instructor. That success had translated into some feelings akin to confidence, and such sentiments had been in short supply of late.

Ines’ reception had not thawed even slightly. The four of them had spent a rather frosty Christmas Eve together the night before, sitting about in the parlour unsure of what to say to each other after
carefully reviewing the plan for the next several days. Jacques had tried to keep things jovial, but even he could not brush away the grim shadow of war and occupation just outside their door. They had not even opened the gifts beneath the tree.

The opening notes of an answering transmission began; Elle leaped from the bed and began jotting down the dots and dashes from across the river. Once she had the lot of them, she set about translating, and then could not help but give life to a sunny grin which burst instantly on her face.

*Copy. Merry Christmas, doll.*

Jim did not call her “doll.”

Either Bucky had typed in this message himself, or he had dictated it to Morita.

Just the sight of the familiar word brought his voice to her ears, warm and soft and low, and for a moment, she was in his arms again, clasped in an unmoving dance to the saddest song she’d ever heard. How safe she had felt. How known.

What the bloody hell was happening to her? Reduced to a blushing, smiling mess over the sight of just four letters, an offhanded endearment that he’d probably tossed at a dozen women before her. And yet, and yet.

She sent back her own holiday greeting, wondering how the three men were passing their time in the forest. Before departing, Gabe had ensured their provisions included some powdered cocoa and some of Peggy Carter’s illicit biscuits -- small comforts in the snow. At least, she thought guiltily, the Lecomte house was warm and cosy, filled with good food and a robust, sweet-scented tree in the parlour.

Satisfied that her transmission had been received and she would now have some more time to herself, Elle decided to see if Adele needed any help in the kitchen. She was not the most skilled cook -- something about stoves and pots and cooking times seemed to absolutely boggle her mind -- but perhaps even just an offer of company would be welcome.

However, she realized, stopping just in the doorway of the kitchen, someone already had that job well in hand. Jacques was peeling carrots at the table, relating some amusing anecdote that had Adele lost in a torrent of floury giggles. Elle did not have the heart to interrupt; she retreated instead to the quiet of the parlour, thinking that she might even have a chance to look through the sisters’ rather extensive library.

It was a warm retreat, smacking of homely contentment, and Elle allowed herself the reprieve of sinking into the softer armchair, directly next to the fireplace, which afforded her not only an ample view of the Christmas tree, but also of a series of photographs standing upon the mantel. In pride of place was a wedding picture -- three beautiful girls standing in a row, the middle one arrayed in a frothy confection of silk, flanked by her smiling sisters. The groom stood off to the edges of the family, squeezed tight by his new mother-in-law.

Ranged alongside, in a hodgepodge of frames, the saga of a family unfolded in snapshots and candid smiles. A pair of toddlers, watched dutifully by a solemn-eyed girl of perhaps seven or eight; a summer day by the beach; Ines, uncharacteristically joyful, laughing at the antics of a blurry shape Elle suspected might be a dog bounding by. As she stood to get a better look at some of the furthest ones, a she bumped her shoe against one of the parcels still under the tree; a quick glance down, and she realized it was the mysteriously narrow one from their car. The one the Nazi had smirked at. The one, she saw now, which bore her name, neatly scrawled on one end.
She knelt, folding back the paper from where it had been already opened, curiosity getting the better of her. Biscuits, perhaps, from Gabe? A tiny part of her hoped not; she’d eaten so much already. Adele had a passionate affinity for stuffing her guests full.

It was not biscuits nestled in the box, but roses. Six of them, soft and red. Silk, she thought breathlessly, brushing a finger lightly across the petals. Six silk roses, just for her. And a card. Merry Christmas, Elle. Someday soon I’ll get you the real thing. B.

Her heart fluttered and something new crept up her spine. How delicious a taste was this felicity, this simple, pure happiness at being thought of, cared for. Being sent a pretty thing in the middle of a warzone. Carefully, she lifted one from the box, holding it up against the afternoon sunlight shafting through the parlour window, watching as golden flecks danced merrily upon the petals. They were beautiful, a kiss of spring in this winter, and they were just for her.

“Pretty. From your beau?”

Elle started at the voice, cringing backwards as though anticipating a slap, watching as Ines strode to the armchair opposite and flung herself upon it, glaring down at the flower in Elle still held aloft. Though her question was complimentary, her tone was anything but.

Beau. The word held risk. “No,” Elle said stiffly, resting the silken bloom back down into the box and replacing the lid. “A friend.” Gently, she nestled the parcel back underneath the tree and returned to her seat, resolving not to let this intimidating woman frighten her away yet again. During their recon walk that morning, Ines had pointedly ignored Elle the entire time, only levelling a quiet scoff at the way Jacques had wound her arm through his, to better project the image of a besotted newlywed couple.

Where this contempt had come from, Elle was not sure. Only that from the very first moments of their association, Ines had treated her with this crisp disdain, dislike dripping from her every word. She was civil enough to Jacques, and to her sister. What had she done to offend this woman?

Quickly, she attempted to sort out a possible escape route, wishing Adele would call for help from the kitchen -- some sort of potato emergency would be most welcome. But before she could even begin to formulate an excuse, Ines spoke again: “From Jacques then? Oh, pardon me -- Julien?”

Deciding that two could play at this game, Elle arched an eyebrow as elegantly as she could muster before responding. “No, another friend. He’s at the base camp.” She bit her lip against the instinct to lie, irritation winning out over subtlety. But there was nothing too romantic about this, was there? Nothing to misconstrue -- just pretty flowers to brighten her room back in London, a Christmas gift from a friend, a colleague. Nothing more, nothing to suspect.

Ines, predictably, disagreed. “Ah, so you have a little wartime romance on your hands, do you, Sophie?” She played a little with some tinsel on a branch near her shoulder. “How sweet.”

Her sardonic, twisting tone suggested she felt it was anything but sweet. A wave of protectiveness rose within Elle then, at the thought of Bucky finding these flowers for her, buying them, placing them in a box so that she could have a bit of Christmas cheer during these grim, tense days. The instinct to defend his generosity flickered brighter and more angry than she could have predicted, and she found herself snapping out her response: “We’re friends.”

“Bah.” Ines waved a hand dismissively. “I know girls like you. Convince themselves they’re falling in love with a soldier. He’s American, I suppose?”

“Yes, but what does that --”
“When is the last time you bought roses for a friend, you child?” Ines scoffed, leaning forward in her chair. “He’s toying with you, nothing more. These soldiers are all the same, you know. He will tell you you’re pretty and make you believe it, toss a gift or a kiss in your direction every now and then, and because he’s handsome and looks so nice in his uniform, you’ll be panting after him in no time. Do you know what will happen when the war is over? He’ll give you a cheap ring that will turn your finger green and he will tell you he’ll send for you. And then your precious soldier boy will marry some good American girl and push you and your tawdry love to the back of his mind.” She turned away from Elle’s stricken face. “If he even survives the war, that is.”

“Oh.”

It was the worst thing she could have said. All the air was knocked from Elle’s lungs and she nearly dropped the box of roses to the floor. Bucky.

“See? I told Adele you were useless. Have you forgotten we’re fighting a war, my dear? That just outside our door, our enemy marches by six times a day? That if they even caught a whiff of what we were plotting in here, what your precious boy across the river is going to do, they would line us up by the canal and shoot us each in the head? You are no soldier. They’re using you, the SSR.”

“I --” Elle tried to speak, tried to defend herself, but her mind had caught most painfully on those earlier words: If he even survives.

“What have you risked? Hmm?” Ines was standing now, her voice growing shriller and shriller with each syllable, looming over Elle, who simply shrunk back further into the chair. “What have you lost? My sister is dying in a fucking Nazi prison. My best friend was shot right in front of me two months ago. Women, good women, brave women, buying peace with their blood and no one cares! They only want the showgirls, the dancers with their stupid hair and lipstick. You are a token, Elle Andersen, a little mascot.

“You just wait, you just wait -- they’ll plump your lips and fix your hair and put you in front of the camera, and you’ll be a newsreel star before you know it. They’ll pull you back from these missions and they’ll get one of those men to put a ring on your finger so they can sell your romance. You’re an actress, ma chérie, and they’re just using you. Are you truly willing to spill your own blood in pursuit of this? There’s one madman with a red skull running about Europe, intent on destroying this world and everything we hold dear, and there’s another in Berlin who is just getting the world ready for him. And you think you’re allowed to fall in love?” Ines spat the final words with a deep, stinging venom. Elle could only will herself not to cry; there was so much pain.

Ines was in agony; grief and shock seeped from her, rolled from her, enveloping Elle in the acrid scent of another’s anguish. This woman was aching with it, with unshed tears, a deep stream pressing against her steely self-resolve. Knuckles white against the black of her dress, she looked as though she would sorely have loved to slap Elle, and for the briefest, maddest moment, Elle would have let her. Anything to relieve the pain.

“Your sister --”

“Shut your mouth,” Ines seethed. “Don’t speak about things you don’t understand. You are nothing but a stupid little girl. You’ll get yourself killed. I can’t...I can’t…”

A soft arm wound about her shoulders, and Adele slowly turned her away. “I’m so sorry, Elle -- Sophie, just give us a moment…”

The crackling of the fire seemed less merry now, in the absence of Ines’ ire. Rather, it was much more akin to the sound of breaking bones, broken hearts.
27 DECEMBER 1943:

Intercepted transmissions obtained at 0300h showed that Col Schmidt’s intended visit to the Charnoy facility had been cancelled, ostensibly due to poor weather conditions out of Norway. There being no other evidence of any intelligence re: OPERATION NEWLYWED having been discovered, it was presumed that HYDRA had chosen to increase security in light of the Howling Commandos’ assault upon the Metz facility earlier in December 1943.

Andersen made contact with CB1 at 1440h to arrange a face-to-face meeting between Cpt Rogers, Sgt Barnes, and two associated resistance operatives known to the Lecomtes. These operatives (Peeters and Remy) were to meet Rogers and Barnes at a concealed location 1 mile south of CB1. During this meeting, the possibility of an attack on the facility was suggested.

28 DECEMBER 1943:

Following the meeting between local resistance fights and the Commandos, it was decided that the attack should wait until a delivery attempt to the facility was in progress. Doing so would initiate an altercation on the forested road leading to the base, thus ensuring that the attacking forces would enjoy a surprise advantage. Additionally, it would draw the fight out further afield from the base.

Following the attack in Metz, due to the destruction of much of the base and warehouses, much of the weaponry, materiel, and documents retrieved were damaged beyond accurate study. The aim of the attack on Charnoy was to ensure that the storage facilities within the base remained as intact as possible, so that SSR agents would have the opportunity to investigate the extent of HYDRA’s research, technology, and innovations.

Andersen and A. Lecomte proceeded to consult the extensive notes compiled charting shipments docking in Charleroi, with the aim of anticipating a viable delivery within the next seven days, a suitable time period to assemble the entire Commando force and prepare for an assault on the Charnoy facility.

Elle flipped through the maps and photographs, knowing that she was in possession of such incendiary material that one glance from an enemy’s eyes would see a bullet between her own.

Their daily walks by the river, combined with the long country drive she, Adele, and Jacques had enjoyed the day before, had enabled Elle to build up a significant store of information regarding the converted inland-shipping yard. HYDRA had indeed constructed additional buildings and brought in dozens of armoured vehicles.

She even had a chart -- the breadth and detail of which she owed to Adele and Ines -- stretched neatly across Jacques’ bed which showed every single shipment (arriving or departing) the Charnoy facility in the past six months. Adele had uncovered a few potential patterns in the shipments, which tended to be heavier towards the beginning of each month. Those deliveries, she noted now, though, tended to be smaller items. Crates of middling size, likely carrying firearms or small-scale explosives, she reasoned; or perhaps even rations and other supplies for the workers at the base.
Larger shipments tended to arrive daily between the twentieth and thirtieth of each month. In the last four months, at least seven or eight out of ten deliveries included vehicles of some sort. She had confirmed this pattern during the past four days. A lorry had arrived on a barge just the day before -- HYDRA, it seemed, did not stop for Christmas.

If her assumptions were correct (and both Adele and Jacques were supportive of this theory), another shipment should indeed be arriving the next day, the thirtieth of December, at approximately half-past eight in the morning. This, she’d decided, would be the most opportune time for them to attack. After consulting with Peeters and Remy, two resistance agents working in the city, who had arrived last night under pretence of an early New Years’ dinner, Elle had transmitted the message to Jim back at CB1. Early this morning, at just after five, she’d been woken by a message that made her smile.

_Commandos all here. Waiting for Dernier._

At the moment, Jacques was downstairs, enjoying a hearty breakfast courtesy of Adele’s generous housekeeping. He was certainly going to have a difficult time re-adjusting to the food at the mess back in London, she thought with some mischief, bundling up the paper he would be taking with him to Bouffioulx. On it, she had neatly written all of the pertinent information for the plan: that the Commandos should arrive in the forested area by no earlier than 0715h, thus giving them time to get themselves in formation in order to surprise the returning lorries.

Elle had written as clearly as possible in the limited space, including a map she’d drawn of the area around the facility. During their country drive, she and Jacques had not been able to get too close, but enough that they’d made it halfway down the road leading to the factory before being sternly turned away by guards. Adele had some maps and photographs taken in the early days of the occupation, and Elle had used these to help her design the updated, fairly detailed sketch she had included on the bottom of her page of encoded instructions.

She had composed most of the plan in a code designed by the SSR, affectionately referred to as _Lehigh_. Huddled together in the chilly bowels of London headquarters, she and Jim had developed quite an essentialist fluency in the code, enough so that she felt confident in submitting these plans to him.

Folding up the paper as smoothly as she could manage, Elle pulled the battered copy of _La Princesse de Cleves_ towards her, and guiltily proceeded to slide the tip of Adele’s penknife under the sealed edge of the paper lining the book’s back cover. It pained her to mistreat the thing so, but she felt certain Madame de La Fayette would understand and be appropriately empathetic.

“Did it work?” Arms crossed, Jacques stood in the doorway, peering curiously at her ministrations.

The glue gave way beneath the blade, and the paper curled back obligingly. “Nearly,” she replied, slipping the folded note between the board of the cover and the endpaper. “Can you pass me the card, please?”

Adele had done up the card the night before, pilfering the small envelope from the back of a library book she had not had the opportunity to return before the Nazis had closed it down a few months before. The paper was a bit tattered and faded, with a few inky drops from a less-than-fastidious pen, and as Elle glued first the endpaper back to the edge of the book, and then the envelope overtop where the thin, almost imperceptible bulge of the plans beneath poked out, the result was almost seamless. Holding the book up to the light and turning it this way and that, one could scarcely see the bump, especially when Jacques reached over to slip in the well-worn index card Adele had also created. She was a dab hand at changing the style of her own writing, so that the final result made it appear that the book had indeed been checked out a nearly two dozen times since 1939.
“Well?” she asked with a proud smile. “What do you think, husband?”

Jacques kissed her effusively on both cheeks. “C’est manifique, my clever wife!” He took the book from her with some reverence, promising to stow it carelessly in the front of the car, half under the passenger’s side of the seat. Ines had requested this: if Jacques were to be pulled over or searched thoroughly at the checkpoint, a dusty old library book abandoned on the floor of his car would not draw too much suspicion. Likely they would flip through, shake it loose, look for hollowed pages and the like, but, Ines pointed out, they would be more interested in the seats of the car, any boxes in the boot, and Jacques himself.

He had packed a small lunch for himself and a pack of cigarettes. Often, guards could be appeased with a handful of these. His purpose in exiting the city, leaving his wife behind? He was going to visit some old friends at their farm near Bouffioulx, to wish them a happy New Year. Why was his wife not accompanying him? Well, with her delicate condition, the bumpy country roads could be resisted for another day (Jacques had planned to wink knowingly at this stage) in preparation for their return journey homeward later in the week.

“Good luck, darling,” she said warmly, allowing him to press her into a firm hug. “Give my best to the other lads, will you?”

“Of course,” he murmured against her ear, mischievous grin playing about his lips. “Any special message to Sergeant Barnes?”

Elle pulled back, an admonition ready to be fired, but her gaze fell first on the silk roses she’d placed in a borrowed china vase on the vanity at the far end of the bedroom, tucked under the eaves. The crimson promise of them dispelled her embarrassment, and her expression softened. “Could you tell him, ‘thank you?’” she asked shyly.

He agreed, and then made his downstairs, visibly excited at the prospect of events finally falling into place. Their week with the Lecomte sisters had been cosily productive, but rather dull in its slow pace and indulgent days. Even Elle would be glad to find herself en route back to London; after a few days’ leave, she could expect to resume her training and then, she hoped, begin preparing for another mission.

*If they survived.*

The darkness of the thought struck through her, and she sat heavily back down on the bed, dumbfounded by the sudden turn in her mood. Only a minute or two ago, she’d been elated at the prospect of a successful mission. How could it be anything but? Their plans were simple, flexible. On their way to Steve and Bucky and all the others. The returning Commandos had brought a robust weapons cache with them, and they were all highly trained soldiers capable of intercepting the small caravan of lorries, and then battling the remaining HYDRA forces. Weren’t they?

Worry crept up her arms and legs, and she could do nothing but gaze resolutely out the window, at the street below. Such a quiet, peaceful place, this city. Nothing like the pained hustle-and-bustle of London; Charleroi had been shocked into their own submission, but the quiet courage of its citizens, so like that of Londoners, was some balm to her soul in those moments. If they could plod on, hope in every step, so could she.

“Tea?”

Adele must have been British in another life, for she possessed an uncanny knack of knowing the precise moment someone was in need of such a treat, and arrived both punctually and well-supplied. Elle nodded, making room on the bedside table for the tray. “This will be a tense afternoon, my dear,
and I’m sorry for it. But they will contact you when he arrives, won’t they?”

“Yes, and when he departs.” She watched as Adele expertly poured the perfect cup, sans sugar, of course. “I’m sure things will go smoothly.”

“Of course they will,” Adele concurred with a beam. “Your team seems a capable sort.”

“They are indeed.” Elle sipped at the tea lightly; it was piping hot. “I appreciate your hospitality, you know. Everything you and...your sister have done for us, it’s remarkable.” She meant the compliment, truly. The opportunity to work from within the actual city, to drive so close to the facility -- well, Operation Newlywed held the promise to be a great success, and it was down to the opportunity provided by the Lecomtes, especially considering the risks they were taking in housing two escaped HYDRA prisoners. If she and Jacques were to be identified…

Adele set down her teacup and reached over to squeeze Elle’s wrist. “We’ve enjoyed your stay, my friend. And, of course, my sister and I will always answer the call when there is an opportunity to help our allies.” Fiddling a bit with a few loose threads at the edge of the quilt beneath her, Adele’s tone changed slightly as she continued, lowering and tightening in equal measure: “I’ve been wanting to speak to you...about Ines. And her outburst that day.”

Ah.

Elle had tried her hardest to avoid the other Lecomte sister in the days following the incident in the parlour. The words had stung, but not nearly so much as the tangible, oppressive shape of Ines’ suffering. She’d said her best friend was dead, shot by the enemy; her sister was in prison. Elle had not been able to bring herself to ask any further questions of either woman, lest she give fulsome life once again to that pain.

But Adele was ready to talk; Ines had gone to meet with another one of her numerous connections, to discuss the upcoming attack. The house was quiet, the afternoon empty. And the story needed to be told.

Their eldest sister, Louise, had been employed as a travel writer for a magazine in Brussels. “She got the job when she was just seventeen; my parents were horrified,” Adele laughed sadly. “But Louise took to it so naturally. She rode trains all over Europe, while you still could. Wrote about cathedrals and galleries...she made friends wherever she went. Her column was extremely popular.”

In Marseilles, Louise had fallen in love with a photographer hired to help her take snapshots for her article. “They knew each other a week and she was wiring home to tell us she was getting married. We weren’t surprised; already things were brewing in Germany, and war, even the promise of it, can tend to inspire people to make significant decisions very quickly.” Following their wedding, right there in Charleroi, Louise and her new husband had begun travelling together, the magazine having hired him, too.

Her husband was a part of the French Resistance; it was through him that the association between Jacques Dernier and the Lecomtes had begun. Louise, and in turn her sisters, had become attached to the cause as Hitler’s clawing, grasping hold started to ravage Europe. “Our parents died soon after Louise was married, in an automobile accident,” Adele added. “We had nothing to lose.”

Louise and her husband continued to operate out of southern France, relaying information back to Adele and Ines, who were primarily associated with Belgian groups. “We were part of a vast network, though the three of us quickly became invested with monitoring specifically HYDRA developments and movements.”
When they were captured, early in the spring of 1943, Adele and Ines had been forced to assume the worst. “The Gestapo had been watching them for months, we heard later.Spying on their house, intercepting their communication, documenting their every move.”

By this time, Elle had joined her on the bed opposite and had wound her arms about the weeping woman’s shoulders. She had absolutely no idea what to say. “D-do you know where they are being kept?” Elle asked hoarsely, for lack of anything more inspired.

“No. We were assuming a prison somewhere in Germany, but it’s possible that...that...” Adele swallowed, stiffening in Elle’s arms. “Ines has taken it all very hard, you see. A year ago, she never would have said those things to you, she could be quite charming, but...since Louise and then Sabine, she has not been the same.”

The friend. “My best friend was shot right in front of me two months ago,” Ines had said.

Adele wiped away a few tears, sniffling before replying. “Sabine was a lovely girl. She and Ines had been friends since school. But she was headstrong, and so, so angry. One evening, she got into a very vocal disagreement with the wrong patrolling officer and he...he shot her. Just right there on the street.” Elle closed her eyes against the grief. The grief she could not help but share.

“My sister had been holding her hand, trying to pull her away, and Sabine’s glove pulled off in Ines’ hand when she fell.”

So there it was. A litany of pain and suffering, simmering constantly under the surface. Ines was moving through a new world, a lonelier one. A world of injustice, one in which sisters could disappear and best friends could crumple dead upon the cobblestones. A world in which a naïve young woman could flit into your parlour as though covert operations were nothing to worry about, so long as there were handsome soldiers to buy you flowers.

How foolish she had been.

“Adele, I --” A loud bang from downstairs stole the words from her mouth and the breath from her lungs. They froze in their maudlin embrace: Jacques should not be back yet, and neither he or Ines would have cause to open the front door so violently.

“Stay here,” Adele hissed. “They’re probably here to verify Jacques’ story. I’ll tell them you’re pregnant and lying down.”

Brusque, German-accented French came striding up the stairs, met and halted by cautious, deferential questions. And then the groaning scrape of furniture being slid roughly about; the slam of cupboard doors. They were conducting a search.

And her bedroom was strewn with secret SSR plans, codes, maps, and names.

No.

Elle dove for the papers, scooping up the lot of them carelessly, hands shaking and stomach roiling. No, no, no. This would not happen. This could not happen.

Terror licked with devilish delight up her spine as she scanned the room, desperately trying to recall all the hiding spots Adele had pointed out during their first night. Floorboards -- no, they’d bloody well check them first. One of the paintings on the wall concealed a sizeable hideyhole, but for the life of her now, Elle’s panicked, racing mind could not recall whether it was behind the seascape or the little boy blowing bubbles.
Oh, please, please, please.

The world slowed then, lurching forward in glacial increments. From downstairs, the demands echoed, hollowed out by time and space and a strange, fluttering clarity. Cares were distant now; there was only the wardrobe in front of her. Elle dashed to it, wrenching open the doors and lifting the false bottom of the floor of it. Within, there were a few pearl necklaces and a rather stunning set of sapphire earrings -- but she lifted this tray too to reveal the secondary false bottom underneath. She shoved in the papers haphazardly, wincing at the audible rips and tears.

A pair of boots advanced on the stairs just outside her door.

Running a hand first through to intentionally muss her hair and kicking off her slippers, Elle crawled back on the bed, laying on her side facing Jacques’ bed near the door, desperately wishing he were there with her. Gently, she nestled her left hand atop her belly, as though cradling a nonexistent bump.

And she waited. Closed her eyes against anticipated horror. She thought of blue eyes.

“Se lever et briller, madame!” The voice was not unfriendly, but malice often lurks beneath a cheery mask, does it not? Elle visibly cringed at the intrusion, opening teary eyes to the sight of a tall, tow-headed SS officer, arrayed in full, terrible uniform; a satisfied smile upon his face.

“Sir?” she asked, awkwardly sitting up and pulling the cords of her dressing gown a little more firmly about her. The busyness of the morning and the early transmissions with Jim had prevented her from getting properly dressed. “How can I help you?”

The officer began to pace the room, grin widening as he took in the tiny space. “You are Madame Dubois, yes? Wife of Julien?” Idly, he picked up a small jar of her cold cream, examined it as though it were an important clue. “Newly married, I understand?”

“Oui monsieur.”

He picked up her lipstick next, the one not confiscated by the checkpoint guards. Less whorish a shade, perhaps. “I see, I see. You are not feeling well, madame? Your friend downstairs told me so, and I was very sorry to hear it.”

Elle froze as she realized where his hands were headed next. She had failed to put the perfume bottle away. The perfume bottle designed for her by Howard Stark. The perfume bottle which, at any moment, might be clicking out a message from the Howling Commandos, in simple Morse code.

“Oh!” she cried, and he jumped closer with an expression of genuine concern. “Oh, my goodness!”

“Madame?” His fingers barely grazed the glass bottle. “Are you alright?”

Hand on her forehead, Elle tried to channel every desperate starlet she’d ever seen about to faint in a film. “Oh, my goodness. My head aches so. My dear Adele tried to make me some tea, but it didn’t help,” she explained weakly, gesturing to the still-warm cups and pot on the bedside table. “Sir, you must excuse me, but...but...” -- she bit her lip and gazed up at him with the closest thing to a doe-eyed stare she could muster -- “this is my first child, you see, monsieur. I am so tired because of it.”

She had not thought it possible, but his grin became even more unpleasant, tripping dangerously close to salacious. A shudder ran through her, though that seemed only to excite him more. “So newly married and already expecting? How scandalous of you, madame.” He took a step closer, and Elle rose from the bed, instinctively desiring to put some real space between them now. “And here you are now, nearly noon, still in your nightclothes.”
His smile was wolfish now, as he took another step closer, caging her in between the beds and his body. “Madame Dubois, what are we going to do with you?”

She swallowed. What could she do? What could she do? Jacques was not here, nor Steve, nor Bucky -- Elle had to solve this for herself. For all she knew, poor Adele was downstairs in a similar predicament. The officer followed her gaze to the vanity table behind him, to the jars and bottles, and the little china vase of silk roses.

“Pretty things,” he said, abruptly stepping away and returning to the table to brush one finger down the length of a petal. “Just like you.”

His hand was an inch away from the perfume bottle.

“A gift from her husband.” Cool liberation rushed into the room with Ines, who simply appraised the situation before her with an arched eyebrow. “You know how sentimental newlyweds can be. Sophie, my darling, how are you feeling?”

Elle could only lick at dry lips, dawning horror having snatched away her voice. She could not form the words, and now her eyes were shining, tears of relief threatening to spill over. Ines took advantage of her silence to wrap her arms about Elle’s shoulders in an uncharacteristically tender gesture. “Oh, you poor thing. Sir, might we have permission to take a walk in the garden? Perhaps you could come with us? I think my friend is in need of some fresh air.”

Visibly bewildered, the officer led the two women down the stairs, seemingly bowled over by Ines’ calm frankness. As the trio passed the parlour, Elle caught sight of Adele in serious conversation with two other officers, who merely flashed a curious pair of glances in their direction. They must have looked a strange sight indeed, Elle thought inanely. As though they were either being accompanied on an afternoon stroll or about to be executed in the garden.

The officer did not stay long with them; there were no flowers to look at, and a light blanket of snow had fallen sometime in the night. Elle shivered in only her dressing gown, but she dared not disrupt the spell that Ines seemed to have woven, the one keeping them both safe from the officer’s predatory ire. After only a few minutes of their slow procession, the officer took his leave, and from the slam of the front door, Elle could only assume the others had as well.

She hoped they had not found anything -- but logic plainly reminded her that, if they had, she would not be alive to question it.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle Lecomte, but I should go back upstairs,” Elle said softly, after another few minutes. “I’m waiting on a transmission from my team.” She made to disentangle her arm from Ines’ embrace, but the grip at her elbow merely tightened in response.

“Just a moment, please.” Ines’ eyes flashed a brilliant, desperate green. “Please. I need to...to apologize --”

“No, you don’t.” Elle gave her a rueful smile. Those words and accusations, while treading a little too close to the problems she had endured in Italy, were in the murky past now, as far as she was concerned. They were of so little consequence in the light of this day, this day in which she herself sat poised on a precipice of risk and danger and loss. She could mull over them later.

“But I --”

Elle turned, taking both Ines’ hands into her own. “Stop, please. I don’t want to talk about all that. Adele told me of your losses, and I am so very sorry for all the pain you have endured. I wish I could
take it from you.”

More snow had begun to fall now, drifting lightly and prettily enough to put Elle in mind of a snow-globe, delicate and perfect; a refuge from the real world, which could only press fruitlessly against the glass.

“The day we met, you asked me why I was here. I could not give you an answer then, but I have one now. I am here for them. Not to fall in love with one of them, not even to earn a paycheque. I’m here because those boys, hundreds of thousands of them, have signed a piece of paper and left their homes and risked their lives for a vaulted, incorporeal notion they can only grasp at. What is peace, Ines? What does it look like?”

A question for the ages, that one. And Elle knew, even as she gave her impassioned speech, there in the occupied garden of an oppressed household -- she knew they were just words. She herself could only grasp at the meaning, fingertips scraping the tendrils of possibility. “Battles may be fought on beaches and in fields, but peace is won in small moments of calm and recovery. If all we have are treaties and broken men at the end of this, do we really have peace?”

Flowers and songs, brief snatches of friendship and fantasy in the midst of creeping terror. Elle had learned that well a long time ago, that comfort can steal through the cracks of even the most seemingly-impenetrable blockades. There in the snow, Ines Lecomte learned it, too. Her pain was hers; it had hitched itself to her soul most resolutely -- but there was room for calm. Moments for her own peace. And in that way, in forgiveness and fleeting joy, she could find the strength to fight on.

**30 DECEMBER 1943:**

0640h: Dernier and Andersen departed the city limits of Charleroi, following the impromptu search of the Lecomte residence the day before. They were detained for approximately 8 minutes at the checkpoint, and were then permitted to cross the bridge and head towards their alleged home near Bouffioulx. Dernier drove a mile down the main road, passing out of sight of Charleroi guards, then looped back to drive towards Charnoy. He and Andersen left the vehicle in a heavily wooded area and then proceeded to walk the remaining 0.5 mile distance to rendezvous with the rest of the team.

0715h: The entire force of Howling Commandos assembled at a pre-designated formation points within the 1-mile radius of forested area just outside of the Charnoy facility (see map for reference). Pte Morita was stationed in a concealed position about ten yards past the turn-off from the main road, allowing him to signal when the approaching HYDRA vehicles had arrived.

0743h: Morita signalled to the assembled Commandos that the vehicles had turned onto the forest road. At the signal, Mr Dernier approached the first vehicle in the small convoy, a tank. He rolled out into the road and attached an explosive device to the underside of the vehicle, which detonated approximately ten yards up the road.

0745h: This explosion alerted the second and third vehicles in the convoy to a disturbance. Morita was able to neutralize the driver of the third vehicle, while Sgt Barnes managed to fire a direct and fatal shot to the cab of the second as it approached the middle of the road.

0750h: Forces from within the Charnoy facility approached. Total engagement lasted
approx 23 minutes. Barnes had gained high ground on the southern side of the road; from there he was able to dispatch, at his count, 18 HYDRA soldiers.

**0813h:** The Howling Commandos took 42 prisoners and were able to secure the Charnoy facility by this time. Sgt Dugan sustained a minor head injury during the engagement; Andersen administered basic first aid. Morita sent a transmission back to London HQ, who dispatched two stealth planes to retrieve the Commandos and samples of weaponry found in the facility.

**ADDITIONAL NOTES:**

- 42 captured HYDRA agents were relocated to Ashton Court, Somerset, between 31 December 1943 and 3 January 1944
- Intercepted messages show that Col Johann Schmidt has been made aware of the attack on the Charnoy facility
- Adele and Ines Lecomte were not taken into custody, although their home was searched (along with 17 other households) following the attack

**END MISSION REPORT**

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter. It's the longest one yet! I would really appreciate some feedback on this chapter and/or the story as a whole -- especially regarding the "mission report" format of the chapter, given that it's a little different for this story. Thank you to those of you who have done so; it's very encouraging and helpful. And thank you so much for reading!
“Just there, Sergeant Barnes, thank you.” The photographer pointed to a spot near the far corner of the ruined church. Grass had begun to reclaim the space, poking up eagerly through the remaining snow-frosted rubble -- a faded, hopeful shade of green on this January day. Elle watched as Bucky took his place and posed for what must have been his hundredth portrait of the day, adjusting his feet at least half a shoulder width apart, resting his hands against his belt buckle with a stern expression as the photographer volleyed another round of instructions at him. From the abrupt clenching of his jaw, Elle knew he was irritated.

Not that she blamed him. The whole affair did seem rather foolish, coming as it did on the heels of their most recent mission, and her official instalment as a Commando, complete with a capitalized title (Communications and Reporting Liaison) and her own set of wings for the sleeve of her jacket. “Good work, Miss Andersen,” had been Colonel Phillips’ gruff commendation.

“Excellent,” had been Peggy’s.

She’d basked in the warm glow of her subtle success for four days worth of leave, settling into the embrace of a slow-paced domesticity that they were all enjoying. Each morning, she and James enjoyed a pot of tea together; she and Gabe had emptied the shelves of a few nearby bookshops; and in the evenings, the Commandos would dine together around the borrowed kitchen table piled high with mismatched crockery and disappointing rations. Those moments buoyed her the most -- for so frequently during the past few nights she had woken again in that bedroom in Charleroi, the Nazi’s hand just an inch away from the clicking perfume bottle.

But evening in the sitting room -- flipping through a novel or simply luxuriating in the notes of Glenn Miller’s latest; watching a card game unfold in the corner; catching Bucky’s eye and sharing those quick smiles across the room, hoping no one else was paying attention -- was her favourite time of day. Waves of conversation crashed pleasantly about her, and she could only grasp at snippets at a time: Steve reminiscing about Brooklyn, trying to draw a quiet Bucky into memory; Dugan reeling off joke after joke, a magician’s endless scarf of humour a proper girl really shouldn’t be hearing, let alone laughing merrily at. She cherished those hours, more than she ever thought one could value a space of time. Their peaceful little bubble of coexistence, untouched by war and cruelty. Until the night. War reclaimed them in the night.

Silence was punctuated by groans and the occasional scream. Footsteps hurrying across the floorboards. Sheets twisted in fists of fury and engrained trauma. Bucky’s were the worst, though he always denied them. Steve, she knew, had already had to go to him three nights in a row. Gabe had them, too, and James. But there was nothing she could do. Each and every one of the men were highly conscious of the precariousness of her living with them. The line they were treading was gossamer-thin, and she would be the one to lose, if they crossed it.

Phillips and Carter themselves were still unsure about the logistics of the living arrangements. Twice now, Peggy had brought up the possibility of the SSR actually renting a separate, civilian flat for her, and Elle had demurred on both occasions. She had no inkling of the task she had taken on -- indeed,
as far as he was concerned, she was still employed as an aide, deployed far away.

The falsehood, then, she reasoned, was for the best all round. Just as the white lies they had been weaving all morning for this American film crew were for the best. According to Agent Novak (who had been introduced instead as a private), the Howling Commandos were all housed on an American base just outside of the city, where they were treated merely as a special force within the 107th.

“Very nice, Sarge, very nice indeed,” the photographer crowed, interrupting her reverie. “Just a few more then. How about a smile? The girls love a smile.”

At Bucky’s responding grimace, Gabe could not help but let loose a chuckle, nudging Elle lightly with his elbow: “Well, are you gonna give him something to smile about?”

She ducked her head. The teasing had gotten worse since the Christmas party -- they had all seen Bucky and Elle scurrying towards the corridor, and Jacques had spread the story of the roses far and wide. Steve had tried his damnedest to reign in the ribbing, especially in front of Elle (since all the fuss just seemed to make Bucky grin).

The problem was, Elle had never flirted. She and the boy had been each other’s, tenuously so, for years -- any wooing had been entirely on his part. And so Bucky’s advances, though respectful and gentle, left her completely at a loss when she considered how to reciprocate. Certainly she thanked him for the gestures and compliments, but the patterns of their interactions had been firmly put in place by his own well-honed instincts, not hers. The boy’s way had been more forward, less sweet. He’d left her aflame in his wake; Bucky left her blushing, giggling.

Now, he stood just a few yards away, trying to fix a natural smile upon his face for the legions of Allied women, they were reassured, would be clamouring to get a snap of Sergeant Barnes. “Good, good, good!” the photographer gushed. A deafening series of clicks announced the grand finale, or so she hoped, for Bucky’s sake. “Now, give me those eyes!”

A fleeting darkness flooded his face at the words; under his breath, he grumbled something mutinous about Lana Turner, and though she tried quite hard, Elle could not restrain the answering peal of her laughter. Bucky looked so very disgruntled, almost petulant -- until he heard the notes of her mirth.

His face relaxed, his eyes softening and crinkling with the upward tug of the right corner of his mouth as he found her.

Ah. Those were the eyes.

The photographer was more than mollified, and continued snapping away. “Fantastic!” he praised. “Great, just great, Sarge!”

But little did he know, those eyes were not for him, nor for his camera. Elle understood, in those moments, that the smile was for her. The tender privacy of it all -- the boyish, knowing grin; the deep blue promise of his gaze; the conspiratorial wink he flashed in her direction -- was just between the two of them, despite the crowd. Despite the press of strangers and friends alike. Despite the nightmares in the dark. And a smile unfurled upon her own lips; a new heat entered her eyes.

Lana Turner had nothing on Bucky Barnes.

“We can control the story,” Peggy had explained just a few days before. She and the SSR planned on capitalizing on Steve’s previous career as a professional war bonds hawker and film star. “There is no way that we can keep Captain America dashing about Europe a complete secret, but if we release information as we see fit and lay the groundwork for your positions, we can keep others from
prying too closely.”

There was logic there, Elle tried to remind herself, as she was poked and prodded into position by the crumbling remnants of what had once been the main entry of the church. Their identities would not remain secret for very long, and their espionage activities would have had a stringent shelf-life regardless of their best efforts to remain incognito. Steve Rogers was a well-known figure, globally recognized by this point. Even if he did elect to forgo the star-spangled uniform, his face and voice would give him away every time.

The photographs and interviews would be circulated to as many Allied newspapers as possible; the newsreels were sure to be a hit Stateside, and the director had already personally reassured the Commandos that the footage could be translated or even entirely dubbed for the benefit of any unoccupied foreign language Allies. All quite impressive. All in an effort to boost morale.

Morale, however, was hard to find in such a sorrowful place. The idea was that the bombed-out stone chapel could work as a stand-in for the European countryside, thus projecting the notion that the crew had actually followed the Commandos on a mission. Hours that morning had already been lost to the preparation and taking of these official photographs, all in a dizzying array of poses and facing in so many different directions that Elle was sure Steve had the entire surrounding area fully mapped out.

Mr Freeman, the director, had saved her for last. A steady green gaze scanned her figure as she adjusted her low-heels on the slick front step of the church doorway. “Very nice, Miss Andersen, very nice indeed.” He did mean to be complimentary, she could tell -- there was no licentiousness in his stare or words, though Gabe and Dugan visibly stiffened in her eyeline.

She knew the coat was lovely and elegant; she knew the shoes were fashionable, the hat sprightly. Her hair had been curled within an inch of its life, and brushed luxuriously against her shoulders. Though the air nipped and bit at her legs, despite the stockings, the wintry ensemble was “picture perfect,” according to the director. That did little to assuage the fact, though, that she was simply chafing at the injustice of not being permitted to wear her Commando uniform.

The others were all attired properly, in preparation for the newsreel footage to be filmed later that day. A tank had been brought in, as well as several lorries on loan from the American base which the team supposedly called home. “We’ll make it look just as though you were hard at work on a mission,” Freeman had explained upon their arrival. “Poring over maps, plotting movements, that sort of thing. It’ll really reassure viewers you’re the real thing. Give them someone to root for.”

“Yeah, because the entirety of the Allied forces just isn’t enough of a good cause,” Bucky had muttered sardonically, close to her ear. And she’d laughed.

As the photographer began snapping away, calling for Elle to adjust her position here and there, to move an arm or brighten her smile -- she allowed her thoughts to drift, casting back to the last time she had been called to pose like this. A family portrait, long ago. She’d been quite young, still a little mischievous. Too silly to sit quietly for any length of time. She recalled now the tight line of her mother’s mouth; the boy’s gaze glinting in the shadows at one end of the room. He had come to whisk her away the second the ordeal had finished, off to some adventure or another. In the present, her heart clenched.

“Smile, Miss Andersen! Nice and big, now! Think of your sweetheart!”

Elle jerked slightly, back to reality, aware that her expression had slipped in her reverie. The photographer was looking at her expectantly, and not a little impatiently, waiting for her to resume her cheery pose as “Ellie Andersen, the Commandos’ Number One Gal.” She hated the epithet.
Loathed it with every fibre of her being -- but could not think of a way to vanquish it.

The boy would know. The boy would have done it for her.

He was occupying her thoughts more and more these days, since the Christmas party and the roses. She could feel herself dancing a line with Bucky, both of them poised to fall over the edge into a new state, something far more tangible than those hurried, heated confessions in Italy. Those words had been born of panic and fear, nursed to fruition by the honeyed relief of survival. His gestures in the interim, following her apology in the snow, had grown more traditionally romantic in nature, the sure sign of a man courting a woman.

And she relished it.

Ye gods, but it was sweet to be wooed. Elle had never known that kind of pleasure, not rooted in lust but simple intentions. But slithering there amongst this pleasant bewilderment was a tendril of a thought, a dark thought, a guilty thought: she was betraying the boy.

In every smile, every blush, every covetous stroke of a plump, silken rose petal; every time she woke from a dream that left her warm and wanting; very time she clutched her pillow at the sound of Bucky’s groans, stomach wrenching in utter frustration, longing to give comfort but knowing she could not -- her small acts of infidelity, building up gradually and resolutely to something far too close to a personal kind of treachery.

The photographer was finished with her; apparently, he believed her image would sell far less morale than the handsome Captain, sergeants, and privates -- and, of course, the dashing Major. Elle was invited to have a cup of tea while they prepared for the interview portion of their day. She returned to her dark, troubling thoughts.

The boy had never been cruel to her, nor unfaithful, so far as she knew. Of course, their relationship was tenuous at best. Ill-defined. Oscillating between fiery ardour and deep friendship, but always balanced on a sturdy axle of loyalty. But there she was, a grown woman, having known him for most of her life, having indulged in secret kisses and stolen moments of passion, supporting him through his own dark times, buoying him constantly, defending him when injustice clawed at his door -- and she had nothing to show for it. Silence. An empty ring finger. Hollow promises.

Bucky was offering her something far more corporeal. At times, it was as though she could clutch his affection in her own two hands, soft and silky as the flowers he had given her. And though she was still a bit dazed by the idea that a kind, brave, intelligent man like that was interested in her -- well, the whole thing was far too enjoyable to be ignored.

With Bucky, Elle sensed a brightening horizon; with the boy, a cold and distant dawn. Would he one day soon realize he had outgrown her, the companion of his childhood and the love of his youth? And when he realized this, where would she be?

Here there was identity and purpose. She was Elle Andersen, Howling Commando. Civilian attaché, but needed just the same. Potential sweetheart. There, she was someone else entirely. A second name. An afterthought. A footnote to another’s tale.

How could she bear to leave?

The interview questions proved to be short, clipped, and predictable. Bucky and Steve had a chance to talk about Brooklyn, about the friendship that had followed them across the ocean. Dugan made the terse reporter laugh, and Gabe sent a message to his family.
And then a beady eye was turned upon Elle, and she shifted uncomfortably in the rickety chair; an inevitable chill had joined them in the ruined church, sweeping in through the cracks the Luftwaffe had left behind. She wished for the warmth of her Commando jacket -- not to mention the cheering addition of her wings. Just like the others. That was all she wanted.

“Miss Andersen,” the reporter smiled, in what he must have thought was an encouraging gesture, but which really just served to make Elle feel slightly more discomfited. “You’ve been billed as the Howling Commandos Number One Gal -- how do you feel about that? Proud? Pleased?”

Beside her, Steve stiffened. The title was ridiculous, and far from accurate. She hesitated before replying, at a loss for how to address and redirect. “I’m quite honoured,” Elle said gently, deciding to soften the blow. She had no wish to insult the man by rudely deriding his question.

“Excellent!” He scribbled that down. “And our readers have to know -- what does Captain America’s best girl like to wear to battle?”

Elle blinked.

Bucky exhaled harshly.

Steve’s jaw slackened.

Morita prepared a blistering retort.

“I...I beg your pardon?” she asked. Foolishness can be so difficult to translate; she sincerely hoped she had misinterpreted the question, or that the man was actually jesting.

The reporter simply glanced back down at his notes, pen poised above the pad ready to record her answer. “Lipstick colour? That’s always a big hit.”

Elle glanced over at James, hoping for some inspiration, but he had simply flattened his mouth into a terse line, uncertain of how to proceed. This line of questioning was flimsy and frivolous; the men had been asked more probing queries than this, and even their respective portions of the interview had only taken up a few minutes each.

She found herself bristling at this impudence, fully resolved now to put paid to these inane questions. But how to accomplish that politely? Though she was miffed, Elle had no real desire to hurt the man’s feelings -- she gathered he wasn’t intentionally trying to hurt hers. Or, at least, she hoped.

“How about your colleagues, then, Miss Andersen?” Beady eyes fixed upon her before she could speak, flickering over the line-up of men ranged along either side of her. She deflated somewhat, relieved -- here was a question she could answer. One that might give her the opportunity to make a small joke, cut the brewing tension in the church. Elle smiled, framing a reply, but before she could verbalize it, the reporter had fired off another question: “Which Commando is your favourite? Maybe a boyfriend? Or do you have one at home?”

“All right, sir.” Steve’s voice was cool but firm, cutting across the blooming protests from the others. He placed a reassuring hand on Elle’s arm, easing where her grip had tightened on the chair. “How about we just focus on Miss Andersen’s work?”

Her cheeks were on fire. To her further mortification, childish tears threatened to escape the corner of her eyes, and she squeezed them shut rather than have the reporter write that down, too. “May I...” She cleared her throat, tried again. “I just need...just give me a moment, please, I’m sorry.”

Instantly, Bucky hurried to his feet, clearly intending to follow her out of the church, but Steve held...
him back with a gentle squeeze to his shoulder, shaking his head as Elle looked back apologetically -
- if he left with her, the magazine article would simply get quite a bit more interesting.

She took a deep breath in the brisk air, striding towards a small alcove where, it was possible, in the
days before the monasteries were ransacked and the idols hidden, a holy statue might have stood,
nestled in from the rain and the wind. Cold stone at her back, even through the coat, shocked her
back into the present, and out from the surging storm of embarrassment and guilt.

The boy was not her sweetheart, not her beau. Certainly not her “boyfriend.” Such words did little to
encapsulate the depth and breadth of their bond, twisting and complex as it was. And the absurdity of
choosing a favourite Commando -- that was simply outrageous. How could she even begin to fathom
such a thing? They were all lovely, each and every one of them, and she respected them all so very
much. But, of course, the reporter wasn’t interested in how much she respected them, Elle reasoned.
He wanted to know which one she wanted to kiss.

“Oh, bollocks!” She pressed gloved hands against her eyes, thoroughly confused -- how to contend
with this? Likely, she’d already sacrificed some of her credibility in stepping out of the interview.
*Emotional soldier’s girl cannot handle questions regarding lipstick,* something like that (how
fortunate she had not become a journalist; her headlines left much to be desired). She should have
stayed, should have stood her ground, should have planted herself like a tree and…

“Elle? Everything all right?”

Peggy Carter stood before her, attired in full dress uniform, hair perfectly coiffed and with an
encouraging smile fixed directly on Elle, who had not known the agent planned on bearing witness
to today’s chaos, though she was responsible for organizing it.

The story took a scant five minutes to tell. Self-consciously, Elle related how the trouble had begun
first thing in the morning, when the hairdresser and stylist for the photography session had ordered
her into the fashionable clothing brought straight from America, rather than the Commando uniform
she had donned in the privacy of her bedroom before departing. “I didn’t protest because...well, I-I
wasn’t quite sure if I was allowed,” she admitted ruefully. “And that’s not to say these clothes aren’t
lovely, but...they just aren’t what I wanted to wear, and I didn’t want to make a fuss.”

Peggy’s face fell as the tale continued, leading up to the brazen interview questions and her current
state of mortification. “I didn’t think it was going to be like this,” Elle finished weakly. “I know I’m
not a soldier or an agent, but I --”

“Enough,” Peggy snapped, but not unkindly. Her sense of efficiency could be brutal, but elegantly
so. She placed her hands on Elle’s shoulders, gripping firmly to ensure their eyes met. “I won’t have
you thinking this way. Now, Elle, listen to me: all your life, the world is going to put a few doors in
front of you and tell you to pick just one. They’ll want you to be one thing at a time, with no shades
of grey, no purpose beyond that which they deem acceptable.

“Right now, that interview and that director want to turn you into an Allied sweetheart, a mascot, or
a bloody fashion plate. It’s your job to redirect them, to advocate for yourself. Show them who you
are and tell them what purpose you serve here. You’ve got just three doors in front of you now, Miss
Andersen, and they’re the only ones the crew wants you to go through. What are you going to do?”

Elle had known this tide of earnestness once before, back in London, when she had been trying to
sort out whether or not she actually wanted to join the Commandos. Peggy’s impassioned speech had
swayed her, inspired her, and it did so once again. “I’m...I’m going to go through a window,” she
said slowly, a smile dawning upon her face. “I’m going to do it my way.”
“Good girl,” Peggy grinned. “Now -- what’s first?”

The crisp, strident lines of her uniform formed a smart contrast to the golden burst of the Commando wings at her shoulder, and she’d had the hairdresser scrape her curls back into a sensible bun. She sat back down in the chair she’d vacated not twenty minutes before, pleased to see that the interview segment of their day had not yet ended.

Bucky shot her a curious and appreciative glance, and Steve looked at her with mild concern -- of course he’d been worried, the absolute love. In response, Elle merely flashed the Commandos a reassuring smile, and turned back to the reporter, who had stilled in surprise, pen hovering uncertainly over the page. She took a deep, fortifying breath, knowing Peggy was listening just outside of the church door. *Make me proud.*

“*Mon rouge à lèvres préféré est fabriqué par Elizabeth Arden, dans la couleur Montezuma Red,*” she said crisply. “*Lorsque je suis déployé, je porte ce même uniforme.*”

Beside her, Steve chuckled.

“*Selvfølgelig har jeg ikke en favorittkommando. Det er ikke som om de er samleobjekter, er de?*”

The reporter nearly dropped his pen.

“*Nu cred că este politicos să întreb dacă am sau nu un prieten.*”

By the final word, the Howling Commandos were all beaming and it was all they could do to resist clapping her on the back. Sitting there so primly and properly, hands folded innocently in her lap as though she had not delivered a subtle but scathing indictment of the flimsy picture this man had been proposing to paint.

“I’m not sure he can write that all down, doll,” Bucky laughed. “Maybe give him the English version?”

She smiled, hoping there was no venom in it. Truly, she did not intend to insult this man, though he had, admittedly, wounded her more soundly than he perhaps realized. Her tone softened, therefore, as she translated: “My preferred lipstick is made by Elizabeth Arden, in the colour ‘Montezuma Red,’” she explained. “When I am deployed, I wear this very uniform. Of course I do not have a favourite Commando, sir -- it’s not as though they are collectibles, are they? And finally, I do not think it polite to ask whether or not I have a boyfriend. Do you have all that?”

Doing rather a marvellous impersonation of a shocked goldfish, the reporter began quickly scribbling down her responses. “Furthermore, I am not Captain America’s best girl, sir, nor am I the Commandos’ -- what was it? -- ‘Number One Gal.’” He nodded jerkily, adding that to the page.

Elle glanced from side to side, clocking the pleased and, dare she say it, *proud* expressions borne by her fellow Commandos. In particular, Bucky wore a grin so wide she feared he was in danger of doing real damage to his face. She rather hoped not.

Emboldened by their response, she ploughed on: “I am the Communications and Reporting Liaison for the Howling Commandos. I am an active duty non-combatant deployed with this unit and affiliated with the 107th Infantry Regiment of the New York Army National Guard. I speak five languages. In fact, I just answered each of your interview questions in a few of my additional tongues.” Daintily, she ticked them off on her fingers: “French, Norwegian, and Romanian.”

“How do you have that, sir?” Gabe asked, tossing her a conspiratorial grin. “Because the rest of us can
talk for hours about our Communications and Reporting Liaison, you know.”

Morita stood, stretching his arms high above his head. “Yeah, we’d be lost without her.”

“You can say that again,” Steve agreed. “Unless -- are we done here? Don’t we have some photos to retake, just to make sure we were all in uniform?” He offered Elle his arm. “Ready, ma’am?”

She caught the reporter’s eye; he offered a meek nod, full of apology. “Of course, Captain,” she replied, leading him out from the church, breaking into the cold sunlight together, their pace precisely in step.

Hours passed to film seconds -- brief moments of martial playacting, in which they were each encouraged to adopt stern expressions and walk quickly and look at each other meaningfully. Snatches of their history, set against the backdrop of a wartorn countryside, strangers in uniform milling about them. She caught them briefly, for they passed fleetingly -- and she clasped them tight, lest she be forced to let them go again:

She leans across the hood of the jeep next to Bucky, pretending to point out a position to him on the map stretched between them and Steve. He murmurs a joke in her ear, under pretext of discussing the ”mission” before them: “You know, doll, there’s this evangelist who says that fifteen million people a year die and go to hell. Sure sounds like a hell of a lot people, doesn’t it? ” She has to bite back her giggle; after all, they are on a mission.

The director instructs Bucky and Steve to act as though they are friends. “We are friends,” he laughs, exchanging a look with Steve before ducking his head down to hide his grin.

Soldiers they do not know, dispatched from the 107th, surround them, clapping them on the back and laughing heartily at wartime jests. Steve checks his compass, then snaps it shut when the camera catches a glimpse of Peggy Carter’s beautiful face within.

At first, Elle could not see how such footage, preceding the Hollywood films people were truly interested in watching, was going to help that much. After all, wouldn’t the images simply remind civilians of loved ones across the ocean, fighting their own, very real battles abroad? How could one man in a suit of stars change the course of a broken-hearted world at war? How could the colour of her lipstick, Morita’s stories from home, Dugan’s hearty laughter, Bucky’s piercing gaze -- how could any of that combine in any way, shape, or form to ease the tattered, weary minds of mothers without sons, wives without husbands, fathers without hope?

But by the end of the day, as they settled themselves on the train taking them back to the city, as Dugan suggested they go round the pub for their supper rather than fix anything themselves; as Gabe invited her to play checkers before bed; as Steve commended her on handling the earlier issues -- she realized that yes, courage could come in small moments, brief images of strength, of peace, of kindness. Of family.

_Bucky's joke comes from the 19 July 1934 issue of The Tribune, from Coshocton, Ohio._
Honour

Like a knife in the dark, the scream cut wide, slashed deep, and Elle found herself sitting bolt upright in fear. She was used to the sounds of nightmares from the floors above: groans and curses, and yes, the occasional scream, but this was different. This was a new brand of pain, raw and bloody, and for once, she could not leave it be, not for the sake of damnable propriety.

Another burst from above, and then another, and somewhere amidst the notes of this keen agony, she realized who was suffering so -- somehow, in a show of a plaintive kind of intimacy, she heard his voice, and hurried as quietly as she could manage up the stairs, hastily tying up the sash of her dressing gown as she approached his door. “Bucky?” she whispered, brushing her knuckles uncertainly against the wood. “Bucky?”

A wrenching groan was the only reply, followed by a pleading series of Nos that nearly broke her heart in two. But she could not do this without permission, could she? Would this be Fredericks all over again? As much as the press would adore a Commandos romance, she doubted very much Phillips would approve. Then again, none of their housemates would report them; she felt quite confident on that front. The teasing, though, would be unaccountably merciless.

And yet, and yet…

Elle called his name again, slightly louder this time, fairly pressing her body against the door. The attending silence distressed her more than his cries had. Perhaps he would be upset she had heard him so overwrought -- perhaps she should have knocked on Steve’s door first. Was there any protocol for the Communications and Reporting Liaison having come to comfort a soldier after a nightmare?

When the door finally creaked open, she was sure every pair of ears in the house would be able to hear it -- that the others would begin pouring out from their rooms and see her standing there, eyes absurdly fixed on the small glimpse of chest hair rising above the sloping neck of Bucky’s undershirt. “Doll?” he asked blearily, and the clinking of his belt as he tried to sling his trousers more respectfully about his waist broke Elle from her vacant reverie. “Everything alright?”

Faze blazing, she struggled to meet his eyes. “I, er, heard you…from downstairs. That is, I...well, you sounded upset,” she explained, not wanting to offend or embarrass him. Male pride was a tetchy pool to fish from; she knew from experience. But the word “upset” did not even begin to encapsulate the real tragedy she had heard, that had torn her so roughly from her own dreams. His pain had marked her now, she thought dimly -- she could feel the icy tendrils of his deep misery staining her own flesh, binding them both to this moment. This moment of ragged vulnerability, wherein the soldier before her inched too near a precipice: one false step, and he would fall. It was all she could do to hold herself back from embracing him.

As though he could actually hear her silent pity, Bucky abruptly stiffened, glancing down the hallway to ensure no one else had decided to pay a visit. “Sorry to wake you,” he said lowly, rubbing one hand over his face. Heat, brief but searing, snaked up her spine at the sound of his stubble grating over the skin of his palm.

This acute awareness of him had increased tenfold in the past few weeks. The Christmas roses and their unmoving dance in the corridor had decidedly put paid to any lingering sense of awkwardness following their apologies in the snow (for which she was immensely grateful), and slowly but surely, it seemed to her, Bucky had been working in small maneuvers to chip away at her anxieties. Elle was desperate to avoid trouble, fearful of any sense of unprofessionalism. But he was a perfect
gentleman, coy as he was -- offering her kind compliments about her work, and occasionally the coffee she prepared in the mornings. He never commented directly upon her appearance or clothing, a sign of tactfulness that she appreciated.

Despite his polite -- even formal -- warmth, Elle knew she was yielding to the promise of something else, something *more*. That the scratch of a growing beard against his hand could elicit such a response in her -- not least because of the intimacy of their present state -- hinted at that “something more.” When he leaned close by her ear as she typed or when his fingers brushed her wrist as he adjusted her grip upon her newly-issued pistol -- ye gods, the mere sound of her name on his lips these days -- all of those moments seemed to collide in a heart-fluttering, blushing conflagration the likes of which she had never before known. Her time with the boy had run both hot and cold, but never this keenly wonderful, this blazing sort of discomfiture.

After a full minute, she managed to find her voice, and then fairly tumbled over herself in an attempt to reassure him that he had not woken her; she had been up reading. Given that it was half three in the morning, that did not seem likely, and the familiar quirk of his grin appeared as he looked over his shoulder to check his clock. “Really? Must be some book.”

Elle laughed, but it was a weak thing, flimsy and unsure. As Bucky’s gaze travelled the length of her figure, she suddenly gave a thought to how much a fright she must look, having dashed straight from bed. She’d done her hair up in rag curls the evening before, and the wrinkles and seams of sleep impressed upon her hands were likely traversing her face as well. Now, Elle Andersen did not think herself a vain woman, but there was something to be said, in the early stages of a little love, to be steady on one’s feet, appearance-wise. Self-consciously, she smoothed down her hair as best she could, tugging a little at the sash of her gown to ensure things were straight and tidy.

Bucky observed these actions with a curious gleam to his gaze. Just as with his daytime advances, there was nothing untoward or covetous in his eyes or in the way he leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. Only...well, yes, he seemed curious. As though to see her in this state, to catalogue these moments was a new experience he had never before considered likely. He tilted his head, smile blooming wider, eyes crinkling with amusement.

“I was worried,” she continued, softly. Again, the word seemed horrifically inadequate. She had not been merely worried: every nerve in her body had been alight with borrowed fear; her heart had been near to breaking in her chest. His pain had rocketed through the floor, ripped her from an uneasy sleep, held her captive until she’d stood before him. But she could not tell him that.

Whatever darkness had him mired so fast in this misery, guilt for making her feel so intently the edges of his torment was not a burden she wished to add to his load. He shrugged at her concern, and told her that everything was just fine, that she did not have to worry. “Thanks for checking on me, but I’m alright. Really,” he added. “Go back to bed, Ellie.”

Bucky meant the words to be tender, kind -- but a curtain had fallen in his gaze, shuttering down to conceal the curiosity he had displayed just minutes before, and the smile slipped from his face. There now in the blue, she thought she saw a soldier’s stare, one that seemed to look far beyond the hallway, beyond their home, beyond her. An eager resolve to avoid causing him more distress was the only guard against the questions she longed to ask, to draw him further into a realm of honesty, where she could share her compassion more clearly.

He needed her; she needed him. But thrust between the two was a veritable minefield of rank and expectation, war and indecision. Unshared history loomed there, too -- all of these factors working together to make it entirely impossible for her to take another step forward, to wrap her arms around
him and whisper gentle words of comfort in the privacy of his bedroom. Bucky’s pain was raw tonight, pulsing and bleeding, and she feared now that any sudden leaps in their level of familiarity would upend their progress entirely. And she wanted the progress. They both did, she hoped. But this soldier’s stare left her cold and uncertain, and much as she hated to, she understood that it was time for her to go.

Though there was already a foot between them, the creak of a distant floorboard forced her to take a quick step backwards, and the soldier blinked, face softening at the sight of her so unnecessarily, visibly flustered.

“Goodnight,” she whispered, deciding that she had done all she could reasonably allow herself to do, under the circumstances. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

A friendly enough parting, she thought. Impersonal, but not coldly so. Elle could have offered it to any of the Commandos, could have said those words in any other context, public or private, without fear of reproach. But his parting, that was another story entirely.

She could not help the shiver that passed through her at his touch, as a gentle finger reached over to tweak at one of the rag curls near her cheek. His smile widened again at the way her eyes scanned up to calculate their proximity, now that he had taken two steps closer to her -- his face was close enough that she could smell the minty scent of Pepsodent on his breath, close enough that, if she were braver, she could have reached up the two or three inches to feel the stubble of his faint beard upon her own palm, to hear the scratch of it against...well... her. Elle’s eyes flickered down to his mouth, to the full promise of his lips, and she looked away.

“Goodnight, doll,” he said, and then softly shut the door, leaving her to wonder, alone in the hallway, if the rasp in his voice was only the fault of his nightmare, or if perhaps had even a little to do with her.

Winter grasped the landscape in a tender embrace, and for a moment, the world was a Christmas card -- brick houses, frosted white; affable curls of chimney smoke twisting away to skirt over the curves of the rolling hillsides. The village, nestled as it was within the heart of this pastoral picturesquerie, seemed to Bucky the sort of thing he really should be asking Steve to sketch, or even take a photo of: something kinder to send home to his mother. His sisters would be sure to fawn over the idyllic European scene, not yet ravaged by bombing or battle, and he could include a lengthy description of the little peculiarities inherent in an ancient settlement, including the foreboding well that Morita had discovered the day before, or the crumbling signpost promising, mysteriously, a road to Spain. Dugan had found that. Yes, Bucky could write this up, offering his family a charming letter of wartime adventure, whetting their appetite for news with the mention, for the first time, of a girl named Elle.

He shook his head at the thought of his mother’s reply, wanting to know every detail of the Commando he’d tried not to talk about yet. Until the article and newsreel had come out two weeks ago, he hadn’t even really told his family he was part of a special unit -- they had simply assumed that he was back in the field after recovering from his ordeal in Austria. Now, though, the cat was out of the bag and Elle Andersen’s existence could not be avoided.

The questions, though. His mother would want to know every detail: was she married? Pretty as she looked in the pictures? Where was she from? How had she ended up with the team? Was there anything between them? Was he behaving himself?

Maybe it would be better, though, to just write about the countryside spread before him.
Leaving out, of course, the fact that, in just a few short hours, he planned on blowing most of it up.

The hamlet had been evacuated nearly a year before, when HYDRA tanks and trucks had rolled in and pushed the Czech residents from their homes, farms, and shops, making room for the grim encroachment of another of Schmidt’s production facilities. This one, however, was plainly intended to be far larger than any other: the entire village had been commandeered as billeting for workers and researchers, as well as the few officers placed in charge of supervision when the Colonel could not be present. Recon and a few connections through the Resistance grapevine had given the Commandos enough information to plan their attack.

In the distance, about a mile away from the village proper, Bucky had the factory in his sights: it was a new build, not yet finished. There were only three buildings within the compound, the largest of which, they’d guessed, housed the actual production line. This factory was known for mass producing most of HYDRA’s assault rifles. Doctor Arnim Zola, Schmidt’s leading scientist and the mastermind behind the mysterious energy source Stark had given them a debriefing on just a few days before, had arrived last week and this was of troubling interest to the SSR.

Morita and Elle had intercepted and translated an encoded transmission from Schmidt’s personal secretary to the officer in charge of the Czech facility, a Major Wagner. The message had announced Zola’s pending arrival at the factory, and the general tone had implied that the doctor would be there for an extended period of time in order to apply some recent research to a new batch of guns.

Given that the energy source Stark was studying (which Steve had helpfully swiped during his rescue mission back in November) posed such intriguing, if frightening, possibilities, that Zola may have something new to offer HYDRA meant that the Commandos needed to infiltrate the factory as soon as possible. Once again, their goal was to neutralize the location and bring back samples for further research.

Phillips had thus immediately dispatched the Commandos to the area, and they were presently camped out about two miles away. Their attack was scheduled for mid-morning the next day. “Why then?” Gabe had asked earlier, after Steve had laid out the basis of their plan.

It was Elle who’d answered. At the time, Bucky had taken a seat quite close to her -- the sides of their knees had touched once or twice, and he’d relished both the tiny smile playing about her lips as well as the rush of heat through his own body. He’d never get tired of those little sparks.

“They work odd shifts,” she’d explained, fidgeting with her pen and tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “Ten to ten. From what we can tell, Schmidt has now picked up on our penchant for attacking during shift changes, and has ordered that all of his facilities stagger their timings now.”

Bucky and Dugan had been doing reconnaissance shifts from the old church just outside of the village, the one which had provided him with such a charming vista these past two days. They had indeed been able to clock the strange timings of movement within the village, as well as the basic layout and structures within the community. At about five minutes to either ten in the morning or at night, a stream of factory workers began their progress up the main street to the factory; ten minutes later, another group headed back towards their billets.

The Commandos, then, planned to attack in two groups of their own, striking at about twenty minutes past the hour, after the mid-morning shift change. “They’ll be anticipating action right on the hour,” Gabe had pointed out, to Elle’s enthusiastic nodding. “So if we go in just after that…”

“...they’ll be settled into their work or rest and we have the real element of surprise,” she finished brightly, smiling around at them all. “Not only do they not know we’re here, but they won’t be expecting to be at any risk for several more hours.”
That was the plan. Pure and simple. And Bucky liked it. With the backup from London due to arrive soon and the combination of ground and aerial recon, they knew where they were headed, understood their objectives -- it should be a successful mission.

Bucky shifted -- the February chill was beginning to creep into his bones, settled as he was on his stomach in the belltower. A window cut about three quarters to the top of the structure had afforded him the clearest vantage point to both the village below and the factory further up, and though he was armed with his M1941 Johnson (which Stark had had custom-fitted with a scope), he wasn’t really supposed to be doing any sniping. Steve had requested that he and Dugan simply observe the movements and layout of the area.

The problem with recon like this? It left a soldier plenty of time to think.

There were darker corners to his mind now, places he had no desire to probe too deeply. Within them, memory lurked, a history that, months on, burned him still. Flashes of those days came to him in the night, when he could manage to snatch at a few hours of sleep, and he would claw his way back to consciousness from the disjointed horrors, waking in sweat and tears and flannel sheets bound tight in his grip -- the ghost of a throat he should have, rightly, ripped out.

Such monstrous thoughts frightened him more than the nightmares itself.

Steve would sometimes come to him, but Bucky instinctively tended to downplay the situation: “Nightmares, punk, you know how it is,” he’d say. And then he would head downstairs for a glass of water and a few minutes’ reprieve, standing at the kitchen sink, looking out into the backyard -- or “back garden,” as Elle called it. She was waiting for spring, she’d told him idly one day, as she washed the dishes and he scrubbed them dry beside her.

“Won’t it be lovely to read out there?” she had asked dreamily, suds dripping from her fingertips. “When the weather is warm and the sun is back?”

Bucky smiled at the memory: there was a brighter corner to turn to. Elle. The brightest he could find.

Just a few nights before, she had come to him after a nightmare, woken by the sound of his groans. He called the sight of her, the sweet sight of her, illuminated by the trickling of moonlight from the window at the end of the hallway. Her hair had been a storm, twisted and coiled into tight little curls, bound by mismatched piece of cloth -- a method his sisters were fond of; his heart had fairly clenched in response -- and she’d been wearing a robe, a goddamn robe. Silk, maybe? Or something lighter? Pink and blue flowers, with a sash the precise colour of a ripe peach.

God, he’d never been one to notice a woman’s clothes that much.

She’d stood there, eyes gleaming with unshed tears, fingers playing uncertainly at the edges of her robe -- and he’d wanted nothing more than to extend a hand and invite her in. Not into his bed, no, but just to talk. He longed to be in the presence of someone who simply cared, someone quiet, someone who eased his mind in a way he could scarcely comprehend. Elle’s was a gentle soul, and kind in her lovely way. She calmed him, brought him to a brighter plane. And while Steve’s presence buoyed him, the length and breadth of their years together often simmered away between them, urging Bucky back to his suaver days, when Steve had needed him, not the other way around.

With Elle, it was as though he could let go for a few moments, could breathe. With Steve -- well, he still wanted to be the old Bucky. The Bucky that Steve needed him to be. Bold and brave. Unafraid. Innocent.

But the mere thought of her had always banished the nightmares. Sometimes, when he was leaning
against the sink, trying to rid his mind of those dark, dark corners, he’d think of her: the sound of her
laugh; the way she chose the same teacup every morning (the one with the hummingbird painted on
the side); the way she had looked during that damn interview, Montezuma-red lips curling expertly
around those foreign, poetic words…

To see her there, right in front of his bedroom, when he was still tugging on his own pants, was
almost too much. And the clean scent of her on the air, Nivea cream so fresh and so close he hoped it
would be on his skin, too --

A hand clapped roughly on his shoulder. “Hey, pal, ready to go?”

“Fuck, Dugan!” Bucky wrenched back from his stance, neck aching with the abrupt shift in
positioning. “Why in the hell would you do that to a sniper? Jesus.”

“Rogers wants you to head back.” With an air of amused indifference, Dugan leaned down to poke
his head out of the window. “I’m taking over for the rest of the night, then we head out at just before
ten. Sound good?”

Shooting him a stony glare, Bucky handed over the rifle and prepared to head back down the rickety
steps to the church below. He hated walking through there -- all the trappings of the worshippers
long since driven from their homes remained, scattered around the floor. A few days ago, he had
tripped over the remains of what might have been a lost and found box of sorts, stored in the
vestibule: gloves and hats, a few toy airplanes; a tiny doll with hair made of yarn. Things loved and
forgotten.

He didn’t like looking at those things, wondering where their owners were now -- if they had simply
been waiting until next Sunday to retrieve them, not knowing that Sunday, for them, might never
come.

Of late, sleep had rarely come easy to Elle. She and Morita had stayed up until well past midnight,
replying to the last few transmissions from London, until Steve had ordered them both to turn in. The
Commandos were all sharing a tent now, a sturdy canvas thing complete with enough cots to keep
them all off the cold ground. Peggy had run them through several drills during their last leave, setting
up the tent as quickly as possible, and practicing how to prioritize during an escape. They were not
encouraged to bring too many personal items on missions, of course, but they were under strict
orders to set alight anything referencing SSR headquarters, as well as personal names and addresses,
in the event of an attack. Communications equipment was to be either retrieved or destroyed first --
depending on the predicted outcome of the aggression.

Despite those grim plans, the soft snores of her companions were of some comfort to her, and the
gentle shifting of their sheets and even the occasional sleepy word or phrase warmed and soothed her
rapidly-beating heart. Her own cot was tUCKed away at the furthest end of the tent, so that Steve was
at her feet (across the gap in the middle of the tent, of course), and Monty (in spite of her best efforts,
she’d begun referring to Falsworth thusly, pressured into it by good-natured ribbing from the others)
slept soundly to her left. The perceived intimacy of the arrangement, much to her surprise, did not
cause her to blush and worry -- there was something so simple about it all. Soldiers must sleep, and
they were safer and more efficient together.

Rolling over after at least two hours of restless movement, Elle found herself staring up at the wide
expanse of the tent’s ceiling, fully and frustratingly awake. They were due to rise at 0500 hours; the
contingent from the 107th was scheduled to be arriving an hour after that. She had to get in her own
position by at least 0700 hours. Breakfast, at some point between now and then, would be most
welcome.
But first, she wanted some sleep.

“You okay?” Steve’s voice rose in the velvety dark, gentle and kind. Slowly, Elle worked her way up to her elbows, blanket shifting from her shoulders, to see that he was wide awake, illuminated in slivers and shards by the soft glow of his camplight. A notebook was propped on his knee, and his face looked pensive, heavy. He was a man with a burden, and no mistake.

“I’m fine, Steve,” she whispered, glancing over to check on the others briefly as she struggled to sit up all the way. Her mind may not have been ready for sleep, but her limbs had already begun to loosen and slip away, and it took her a good while to strike a sufficiently comfortable position, adjusting her pillow behind her.

Dugan was out, on recon, and Gabe had taken watch just outside the tent. Everyone else appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Happily, she noted that Bucky was still and breathing evenly on his cot, curled facing away from her. She’d been concerned the nightmares would follow him there, and he had been quite terse and silent after returning from his shift in the church.

“Are you sure?” Her eyes slipped from Bucky’s form at Steve’s probing question, meeting his gaze as best she could, given the limited lighting. She forced a smile and reassured him that, of course, she was entirely well. Overtired, perhaps. Nothing for him to worry about.

But she worried -- often and passionately, about the wellbeing of these men. These strong men. These brave men. These good, good men who only wanted to do their duty in a time of injustice and cruelty. Every action they took against HYDRA, as a collective force, served to undermine the grasping, creeping intentions of evil from spreading to another corner of the continent. But at steep cost -- blood stained their hands, nightmares plagued their minds, and the risk of death accompanied each man wherever he went. And her, she supposed. She had some blood on her hands, too, didn’t she? In participating and organizing these attacks, people had died. People on the side of evil, of course, but how far apart, really, were their goals from those of HYDRA? Each side thought they were doing what they ought to, weren’t they?

Muddled thoughts like these had been stealing her sleep recently, forcing her mind to race through the options: was she a good person for joining the Commandos? Was she strong? Was she brave? Did her code work and strategizing make her complicit in the deaths of other human beings? Or was this simply the steep price of peace her mother had once warned her they must all pay? Elle took no real pleasure in the conquest of the bases and factories -- she was often proud, of course, that the team had accomplished their goal and vanquished another of Schmidt’s horrid hellholes, and more often than not, simply relieved that the job was done -- but how far apart, really, were their goals from those of HYDRA? Each side thought they were doing what they ought to, weren’t they?

The question tumbled from her lips so quickly that the words scarcely sounded like English, and Steve asked her to repeat herself, discarding his notebook and padding softly over to sit on the foot of her cot.

“People die, Steve,” she whispered earnestly, tears stinging in the corners of her eyes. “People who might simply think they’re doing their duty, just like us. People are going to die tomorrow, because of what we are going to do. And it’s just...I just…”

She was no Athena, no shield-maiden, no Joan of Arc. A quiet girl with an instinct to help, she’d found herself lingering on the edges of battlefields, keeping the home fires burning -- reaching out across a melancholy plane to embrace men who, mere months before, had been strangers to her. It was her duty. But Elle bore scars now, too, and memories and old fears had hitched themselves resolutely to her mind, so that she could still see the Nazi’s hand reaching for her perfume bottle; could hear still the mad peppering of gunfire; the cruel staccato of Bucky’s rifle, measuring the incremental loss of his innocence, his peace of mind.
Steve inched a little closer on the cot, visibly distressed at the tears trickling down her cheeks now. “Elle, you...uh, I know this is rough,” he said firmly, clearly deciding to take a more gung-ho approach to this encouraging speech. “But you’re doing your job. And you’re doing it well. We meant what we said in that interview -- we’d be lost without you.” He reached over to squeeze her calf beneath the blanket with a respectful brevity.

Swiping at the wet under her eyes, Elle swung her legs out and around, swivelling so that she and Steve were sitting side-by-side, facing the rest of the tent. Their sleeping companions did not stir at her movements, nor their conversation; she felt safe enough to continue. “Peggy gave me a gun,” she said quietly, hands twisting in her lap.

Steve stiffened at her words. Elle’s weapons training had become a bone of contention the past few weeks -- Phillips and Peggy wanted every member of the Commandos armed and prepared to fire at any given moment. As a soldier, and their captain, Steve agreed with this logic: but Bucky and a few of the others resisted, at least until Elle had demonstrated herself fully capable of handling the weapon. “Jesus, punk.” Buck had complained just a week before, “if she’s out there with a gun and she can’t bring herself to shoot it, HYDRA won’t give a damn. They’ll shoot her first.”

To this end, Peggy had intensified Elle’s training, and even Bucky had taken her down to the range at the lowest level of SSR HQ. Last Friday, Elle Andersen had been considered officially qualified -- Steve had received notification in the form of a hastily-scrawled note from Agent Carter.

But he had never stopped to imagine the achievement could cause Elle so much distress.

“Hey.” Gently, cautiously, he took her right hand in his own, engulfing it wholly -- months before, hers might have done the same to his. “It’s okay, Elle, really. The gun is to protect yourself if things go south, but they’re not going to, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Steve --”

“Just a second,” he sighed. “Just a second, okay? Look, I know this is confusing and frightening. Believe me. But we’re all here for the same reason -- you and I have talked about this before. HYDRA, the Nazis -- fascism is wrong, Elle. It’s so, so wrong. And you and I are here because we know that’s true. Right?”

She nodded, sniffing slightly. A few beds ahead, Bucky shifted in his sleep, and, in unison, they both snapped their heads up to ensure he was still sleeping. When he remained still for another several seconds, Elle and Steve relaxed back into each other. “It’s not about killing them,” he continued, voice heavy and sad, “it’s about making sure they don’t kill anybody else. A lot of innocent people are going to die -- a lot of them have died because of Schmidt and HYDRA. All those weapons. Those plans. I have to believe there’s honour in what we’re doing, ending this.”

Honour. Her mother had spoken of it once, a long time ago, in hushed tones and with a gentle force that had impressed upon Elle’s young mind the significance of the moment. Honour was right, true. Pure. Hard-won, but eternally worth the effort. Honour was sacrifice, and risk. Honour was love.

Steve loved freedom, justice. He, who had lived for so long under the crushing tide of bullies and illness, battling against a world that told him he was not enough for his own dreams -- he loved the simple arithmetic inherent in these times: HYDRA was wrong, evil, and he would need to use everything he had, both innate and enhanced, to beat them back.

What did she love? As the thought formed in her head, gathering strength and insistence, her gaze flickered over the forms of the sleeping men ranged before her, resting finally on the thatch of dark hair peeking above the sheets at the far end of the tent. She closed her eyes for a moment, memory
stroking back longingly over the sight of his strong shoulders, the corded backs of his hands struggling to secure his belt. The rough timbre of his voice in the early morning. His relentless patience at the range, as he’d shown her how to cock the pistol again and again, steadying her arm (always with her permission), and praising her effusively for the most marginal of hits.

She loved love, she supposed. Or the potential for it. She loved the heady pleasure of a simple life, a peaceful life. Tea in the mornings, ale and cider at night. A gaze that left her wondering whether he’d been about to laugh or kiss her. The sense of purpose that thrummed through her as she handled all manner of tasks for the team, as agents nodded to her in the corridors and Peggy extended grim-faced invitations to her office that made Bucky and Steve exchange looks of concern -- never knowing that the two more often than not were happily ensconced with a tin of biscuits they had no intention of sharing.

Elle wanted to preserve those things, those experiences -- the flashes of contentment and blazing joy that made the darker moments of life seem manageable. Elle wanted to fight for those flashes, those wonderful little victories. HYDRA -- or rather, simply the advance of cruelty, of evil, of death -- wanted the opposite. They wanted conquest and craved calamity.

Love was her honour. And honour was love.

She whispered this to Steve, looking anywhere but at him, her eyes again settling upon the slow and easy rise of Bucky’s shoulder in the distance. Steve’s gaze followed hers, and he smiled. Once again, he could not help but be amused by the fact that Bucky had found himself a little romance in the middle of the war. Figured. Here he was, Captain America himself, too intimidated by the woman he was sweet on to say two words in her presence -- and Bucky had wooed a dame in a prison cell.

“It’s not about killing,” he repeated, gently extricating himself from their grip and gesturing towards her pillow. “It’s not about winning. It’s just about doing what’s right. And sometimes that’s hard. Horrible, even. But it’s what we have to do, Elle, to protect what and who we love.”

Her eyes had grown heavy, her limbs unsure, and she fell asleep with his wisdom alighting ever so tenderly upon her skin, sinking down into her, stepping in tune with the beat of her heart: Love was her honour. Honour was love.

The simplest logic she could find, and her sleepy, lovesick mind decided it was worth clinging to. For good or ill.

Things were going well, Bucky decided the next morning, at about quarter to twelve or so. He didn’t exactly have time to check his watch.

“B company, forward!” Steve bellowed, shield glinting in the sunlight. From his vantage point on the top floor of a former sweet shop, Bucky watched as the next group swelled towards the third building, beating back another wave of HYDRA forces. Down below, the fight in the village proper was beginning to wane. He trained his scope down the cobbled street, spotting Dugan and Gabe’s group still engaged with the remnants of the main force they’d been battling for the better part of an hour. Surprisingly, the bastards were putting up a good fight -- despite the support from the 107th. Granted, the Commandos hadn’t yet faced a force this large.

Okay, okay. He swivelled slightly, a pinch sparking somewhere near the base of his neck. He’d spent too long in the first position; he’d be paying for this later.

Or so he hoped.
Down below, Dugan was engaged in a hand-to-hand fracas with two HYDRA soldiers. Gabe and some familiar faces from the 107th were preoccupied with another half dozen, and even the medic (Carlton? Charleston? Something like that) was firing off a few rounds from behind the safety of the side of what had once been the only tavern in town.

Good for him.

Because of the way Dugan fought, Bucky was struggling to get a good sight line on the goons to actually take a helpful shot. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath. Be patient. He’d told Elle that a million and one times just last week, as he’d run her through a few trials in preparation for her certification. God, that had been a good damn week. Just the two of them, uninterrupted for hours together. She had this feisty wit he hadn’t expected -- completely unafraid to tell him to shut up for a few minutes while she concentrated. And then she was so sweet, so kind. So proud of herself. So adorable in the way she laughed at her own near misses. So intimidated by the power in her hand now.

Damn, but that girl had him spinning.

Not right now, though, he thought firmly. Now was about HYDRA, about Steve, about Dugan down there in front of him. She was safe enough far away from all of this, holed up in the church, as far as he knew. She was fine. He didn’t need to worry about her, not right now. His girl.

One of the HYDRA soldiers, the taller one, skirted around Dugan’s left and lost his footing on the crumbling street -- his stumbling sidestep gave Bucky the window he needed, and he dropped the goon. This gave Dugan the opportunity he needed to slam a meaty fist into the other guy’s gut, and Bucky was able to turn his attention to Gabe’s situation.

He watched as the medic shot out a series of eight rounds, as much as the Colt could manage before needing to be reloaded, but this time, he was not able to pull back around the corner soon enough. Clutching his arm, the man slid to the ground in clear shock, a dark stain beginning to bloom through the sleeve of his uniform. “Oh, hell.” Scuttling forward, Bucky took out a further three HYDRA soldiers, hoping that someone had seen Carlton/Charleston -- Jesus, it was Carlton, now he remembered -- fall.

Someone had. A pair of slender hands, pale with gentle use, reached around the corner of the tavern and tugged the man backwards, out of sight.

They weren’t soldier’s hands.

“What the hell?”

Elle worked at the medic’s jacket frantically, lips trembling with sympathy. He was in pain, such tremendous pain -- face gone chalky with it, his own mouth vividly red, like a crimson gash in a pie. “Here, sir, just a moment,” she murmured, settling him back against the brick wall. “It’ll be fine, everything will be fine.”

Rather than trying to ease the man out of his uniform, she merely exploited the hole the bullet had already rent in the fabric, widening the gap to reveal the bloody, puckered skin beneath. “Did it go through?” she asked brusquely, trying to emulate Nurse Jenkins’ calm and efficient manner. If a man thinks his nurse is afraid, he’s damn well going to feel the same.

Carlton nodded. “Yeah,” he huffed, New York accent broad and thick. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it did. D’you know --”
“Of course.” Elle’s interjection was firm and swift, but not critical. “Of course, Corporal.” From around her waist, she retrieved with -- and she was pleased to see this -- steady fingers her first aid kit, cardboard bending slightly under the force of her grip. As Gabe barked out a series of orders to the remaining fighters, still engaged in the tussle out on the main street, she tried to focus her mind on the next steps.

They were both fortunate the wound was a through and through. That meant she could treat it with sulfa to prevent infection, bind it briefly, and secure him enough for the potentially-long wait until they could get to a safe rear area. As far as she could tell, based on the gradually thinning sound of gunfire -- which for such a long time had been thunderously, overwhelmingly robust -- the battle was waning. Elle had no way of knowing, however, what the odds really were like. Her main focus right now was poor Carlton.

Carefully, she sprinkled some of the white powder onto the wound, watching as it fell like a soothing snow against the searing, glistening wound. Carlton winced, but allowed her to continue, as she gingerly pressed the Carlisle bandage against the wound, winding it and securing the dressing about his arm. “Alright?” she asked calmly, stuffing the sulfa envelope back into her kit and attaching it once again to her belt. “Do you want morphine?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine, until we get back. Shouldn’t be long now. Aren’t you supposed to be at the church? Private Jones said…”

“Yes, technically,” she admitted with a smile. “I gather the idea was to have me stationed in a neutral location, but something told me I might be of more use down here.”

A shot screamed past them, chipping away at the edge of the building behind them. She flinched, and Carlton tugged her further into the alleyway. “Well,” he said, breathing heavily, “I, for one, am glad you’re here. Why they’re firing on a fucking medic -- oh, sorry, ma’am.”

Elle had intended to reassure him his language was the least of their concerns at the moment, but Gabe and Dugan didn’t give her the chance. “Christ, sweetheart, what are you doing here?” Dugan snapped, reaching an arm under Carlton’s good side to help him to his feet. “Buck’s not gonna be happy.”

She couldn’t help but bristle at that comment, even as Gabe grabbed her hand and firmly led her back down towards the end of the alleyway. Five other soldiers from the 107th had followed them in. “What’s going on?” Elle asked, abruptly realizing that something was wrong. This wasn’t a strategy; this was a retreat.

HYDRA soldiers were pouring from the factory up the hill, Gabe explained. Steve’s contingent was supposed to be taking care of that, but it was possible they’d somehow gotten the jump on them. “We should’ve had a third group,” he muttered, chewing on his bottom lip. “A third wave to come in and tidy up -- shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

Gunfire was thick and pounding now, and a chill crept up her spine. She had a pistol in her hand, a damn pistol. Against machine guns. Against those horrific blue surges of obliterating light. She had a damn pistol she’d only learned to fire properly last week.

At the end of the alleyway, the group parted for a moment -- Dugan, Carlton, and three soldiers from the 107th crouched behind the back side of the tavern, while Gabe tugged Elle and the remaining backup behind the other. Across the width of the yawning mouth of the alley between them, Dugan sent her an encouraging look and a mouthed promise: “It’ll be okay.”
The decision to leave the church and head down to the village currently stood as the most impulsive of her entire life.

But she was there now, with two of her Commandos, and she was going to have to make the best of it. “Fired it yet?” Gabe asked, voice low in her ear, gesturing towards the Colt in her hands now. She shook her head. “Good, then you’ve got eight rounds.”

Eight rounds. Eight rounds between her and death? Fear curdled sourly in her stomach; all the false bravado she’d earned herself from being there to help Carlton had faded by now, usurped by this strange, fluttering feeling in her veins. Panic. Pure and potent.

Was war always this damnably loud, she wondered inanely, fingers slipping slightly on the curves of the gun in her hand. When she and Bucky had run through practice rounds down in the range, the world had been quiet and still, and she’d been able to fully concentrate on the task at hand. “Good girl,” he’d said, more than once, even if she was far off the mark.

How was she going to manage to shoot anything accurately when there was so much noise?

“Gabe,” she murmured, grimacing at the pleading in her voice. “Gabe.”

“S’okay, sweetheart,” he murmured, eyes trained on the main street, far beyond them now. “It’s fine. Steve and the others’ll catch up soon, you’ll see.”

He’d never kissed her. Not properly.

The thought -- inane, inappropriate, untimely -- wiggled and made itself comfortable in her mind as she tried to focus.

He’d pressed his lips to her hand; she’d touched his bare chest. He had seen her in rag curls and a dressing gown. She’d found herself longing to run her fingers through his hair, against the stubble on his jaw.

But he’d never kissed her. Not properly.

The lack of it burst like flames on her lips, regret and rue searing on her tongue -- the ghost of his mouth, the ghost of his taste. A fiery ghost. And she was going to die never having known the true thing.

Almost as though she’d summoned him, Bucky bolted around the corner of the ginnel behind the tavern, seemingly appearing from nowhere. His blue eyes were aflame with an emotion she could not identify, fixed on her across the way, even as Dugan hurriedly filled him in on the details of their current predicament.

“What do we do?” Gabe muttered, glancing back towards the main street. “If they’re coming…”

“They are,” Bucky said grimly. “Just about twenty of ‘em, but they’ve got those big ones, the blue ones.”

“Like back in Austria?”

Bucky nodded at Gabe’s curse, and then his eyes found Elle again. “What the hell are you doing here, doll?” His tone was not sharp, though his gaze was, and guilt simmered in her own stammered reply. She’d only been trying to help.

If the army gave medals for monumental foolishness, she would have been in receipt of all of them.
Apologies tumbled from her lips, but Gabe merely shook his head. “Don’t, Elle. You’re just doing your job, it’s okay, it’s okay,” he murmured soothingly, tugging her back further behind him. “We’re gonna be just fine.”

But were they? Were they? In the street beyond, HYDRA forces advanced, just twenty soldiers but armed with a strange and consuming power she had no desire to learn more about. She recalled now the black-haired prisoner in Austria, obliterated on the spot.

They were outnumbered, yes, and terrifically outgunned. Every single one of them was armed, though she and Carlton needed to reload. Nevertheless, their pistols and rifles were no match against Zola’s horrid inventions. What they needed, she realized, was time. Time for Steve and the others to get down into the village. Time for the final stand.

The alleyway was not long -- perhaps twenty-five feet or so. Short enough that they could hear the advance of the soldiers on the street beyond; that she could hear German orders to keep going, to find them, to show no mercy. Rapidly, her mind worked through a series of harebrained options, even as, by her side and across the way, her compatriots prepared themselves for a battle they were only half-sure they would win.

“Stay here,” Bucky ordered, voice low and stern. “Stay with Carlton.”

And he was right, he was right, he was always right, but love was her honour and honour was sacrifice and as the thunder of footsteps approached too near the mouth of the alleyway, Elle’s feet carried her forward, one hand tugging loose her curls so they cascaded down her back and obscured her face, pleading in German, cleverly accented in French -- “Oh, please, oh, please, help me!” she cried, hands raised high, running straight into the line of HYDRA’s guns, meeting, with teary eyes, the owlish gaze she had once hoped never to see again.

Honour was love. And she loved him.
Fool

“Mother?”

Death is a reprieve, her father says. A mercy; a sweet, sweet slumber after years of toil. Her mother is safe now, honoured and at peace, and those two words begin to twist and conflate in her mind, tender and sore in her grief. An honourable peace. Honour in peace. It is what her mother wanted for her, she is sure of it -- more than anything else. More than fame; more than success; more than love.

She loves her mother, deeply and well. The loss burns pure white and sears her soul. And in the months to follow, when her father finds the ache of a widower’s life too much to bear, and slips away to somewhere brighter, she does not weep as long. She knows now the price of an honourable peace.

She finds it with them. Flickering slightly, threatening always to sputter out. But she can tend it with them, buy it with them. And this is it -- the road to honour, the road to peace. Paved with sacrifice and love.

For who could she be in this world, but her mother’s daughter?

“What is that she’s saying?”

The doctor peered over the edge of the clipboard, meeting the girl’s glazed expression with a disapproving sniff. When he spoke, his words blasted, cold as ice: “Asking for her mother, I gather. Make her be quiet, Schwartz, so I can continue with the examination.”

As she gained awareness, the girl noticed with some faint jolt of dismay that the table was deathly chill against her back, and that her mouth was a veritable desert, her tongue sticking to the roof as though it were flypaper. What she wouldn’t give for a glass of water, or a friendly voice. Questions bumped and prodded stupidly at the back of her mind, half-formed but urging to be asked, and vague notions of the true frightfulness of her current state seemed to be growing in strength. I’m not supposed to be here, she thought dimly. Where am I? Who am I?

“Mama,” she mumbled again, a child now. And another name, another plea -- who did she want? Who did she need. “Bucky.”

She opened her eyes and remembered, a sudden rushing gust of knowledge that caused shudders and new aches to thrum through her limbs, gaining some traction on the smooth surface of the table. She thrust her ankles against thick straps as her memory wept within her. Elle Andersen. She was Elle Andersen, and she did not want this -- she wanted her mother, her dead mother. And she wanted him.

“Bucky!” Tears coursed fiercely down her face as she fought against the leathery restraints binding her legs and arms. Above her, the sun glared and gleamed down upon her -- no, not the sun. A light. A lamp. Blinding her.

Why would he not come to her? Why couldn’t he hear her?

The boy’s name almost escaped her lips, too -- she was that desperate. And then there were hands, there were strange hands upon her, forcing her head back down against the metal, and the skin of her legs, despite her trousers, was so, so cold.
“Halt die Klappe,” that cruel voice said, and she quietened, fearful now, struggling to see, to understand. “Calm yourself, Mädchen, or we will be forced to sedate you again.”

Elle knew that voice. How did she know that voice?

Pain bloomed behind her eyes as she tried to turn her head against the table, only to come face to face with Arnim Zola, the junior architect of past suffering -- the man who had taken Bucky and done awful things to him in the dark. She bit down against a rising swell of bile in her throat, willing herself to stop crying. Be brave, you foolish girl, she reminded herself. You’re a Commando.

A Commando who had dashed full-tilt into enemy fire on the slimmest hope and chance she could distract them long enough for her comrades to flee.

More questions pressed at the seam of her cracked lips, but she didn’t dare form them; Zola was very clear that she was to remain silent. But for what? As far as she could tell, her body was intact, and she was still clothed, having only her jacket removed. The blouse was not nearly thick enough to protect against the bitter air of the room, and shivers rolled through her, a movement that did not go unnoticed by the doctor. “Cold, meine Liebling?” he asked, disdain positively dripping from the false endearment. “I’m afraid you’re only going to grow colder. We will need to remove your clothing to get your measurements.”

No. No, no, no. She stretched her wrists against the bonds, gritting her teeth at the sharp burn of restraint. “Please, Herr Doktor,” she whispered, voice raw with disuse. “Please tell me what is going on.”

Clear surprise danced across Zola’s face -- what an odd way to frame the plea. No resistance, no refusal, no begging for mercy and decency -- no, just mere curiosity. Plaintive, to be sure, but genuine just the same. How peculiar. Even Elle could not understand why the thought had emerged thus, only that it had, and now she was determined to understand the predicament she’d gotten herself into. And more importantly, what had happened to Bucky and the others.

Zola barked out a quick order for one of the technicians now buzzing about to remove her blouse. When the soft fabric was cut away to reveal a cotton camisole, the man paused for a moment, eyes flicking down to meet hers, and she saw pity in his gaze. “Doktor?” he asked, scissors poised in midair.

“Leave it,” the doctor said impatiently. “As long as you can get the tape around her arms and chest, that is all I need. Now, Mädchen,” he added, turning back to his patient. “Listen well: you did something very foolish out there in the village, did you not?” His pen scratched across the page she could not see, intently scribing some detail of this horror. “I gather your commanding officer will be very upset with you.”

Steve. “He...he will be coming for me,” Elle choked. “He won’t leave me.”

“Height.” Zola gestured to her legs with his pen, ignoring her words. “Her precise height. Start with the legs.” He made another note, then paused to pick up a handful of her hair. Gently, Zola turned the strands this way and that, rubbing them between his fingers as though attempting to memorize the feeling. She shuddered in disgust, and he grinned. “What a distinctive colour,” he said. “I can see some red under the brown. Lovely. Pity they could not capture that in the newsreel.”

He’d seen the newsreel. Of course he had. HYDRA would want to keep tabs on prisoners who had escaped their clutches back in Austria. Steve’s daring rescue mission had quickly become the stuff of military and public legend (particularly considering that, mere hours before, he’d been performing on stage, encouraging others to do battle, whilst he sang a jaunty tune).
Elle squirmed at the thought of the enemy watching the Commandos, studying their movements. She thought of her favourite moment of the reel, the camera focusing on Steve and Bucky, laughing in sepia sunlight. She closed her eyes and thought of them, only them. “No, Miss Andersen, I do not think Captain Rogers will be here any time soon. He and his forces are rather overcome down below. Your little stunt, you see, but them some time, but not enough. Do you hear? Listen, girl.”

He cupped a hand around his ear -- rather sardonically, she thought -- and indeed, over the clacking of metal instruments and the scratching of a thousand pens, she could hear the faint peppering of gunfire, somewhere in the distance. “Yes, quite busy, quite busy. Now, on we go!”

Some brand of stunned resignation seemed to flood her veins in the time that followed, and Elle simply lay there, docile and limp, counting the shots above her, as Zola and his assistants measured and examined her. They poked her with various implements and even took a wedge of her belly between the tongs of a caliper. Her body was pinched and prodded and her blood was drawn and she felt so, so unlike herself by the end of it that she found herself whispering her own name, over and over again.

The gunfire burst and bellowed closer now, louder, but Elle was lost to worries, to dark imaginings. What had she done? Were they dead because of her? Had her short-sighted impulse cost a life, or more than one? Images, grim and tangled, threaded through her mind -- she saw familiar, loved faces cast in the throes of a bullet-riddled death. Resolutely, she closed her eyes against them. Pleading the early ghosts to stay hidden, at least for now.

“Hmm.” Zola’s tone was one of bemusement, and she snapped open her eyes, wondering what had caught his attention so. “Your age, Miss Andersen?”


She watched as Zola exchanged a look with the first technician, the one who had cut open her shirt. “Curious,” he said. “Your measurements would...it makes no...never mind. Very well, then.” He jotted down another note (surely the page must be nearly filled by now?) and then set the clipboard aside, onto a table not in her limited line of vision. “Now, to the second part of the examination. Lie very still, Mädchen. Schwartz! The serum.”

Serum? The word summoned up images, none of them pleasant: pain and a forcible rebirth. Peggy had confided in her late one night, after one sherry too many, of what Steve had endured in the cradle, back in New York. His path to Captain America had been written in electric agony, seeping through his veins as new blood, in the form of the super-soldier serum. Now, she knew full well there was no way Zola had access to that -- or did he?

The Red Skull haunted her dreams still, set in stark relief against the fiery backdrop of the burning factory. He had compared himself to Steve, assuring him that they two were unlike other men, much as Steve might pretend. And yet now, the assistant -- Schwartz -- was approaching with a thick, menacing needle held aloft, drip-drip-dripping a threat from its tip. She choked on a scream, on a plea, knowing that if that liquid divinity were to touch her blood, she would never recover, never, ever, ever -- it was not meant for her, nor she for it, and her begging became screams, her thrashing so strong that Zola was forced to shout for more restraints, lest Schwartz drop the syringe or jab it where it ought not to go.

“No!” she screamed, blood trickling through the leather bonds as she heaved and strained against them, willing to break bone to buy freedom. “No, no, no! Please! Mama! Mama! Bucky!”

The final was a clarion call, urging new love and bitter desperation to her side. An explosion
shuddered elegantly somewhere above, and plans changed in the space of a heartbeat. They left her there, Zola and his assistants, left her laying there cold and lonely, still pleading for a mother and a man, neither of whom could hear her, the horror of the moment pressing against her most ardently from all sides. Hot and cold and slithering and smug, all at once.

And in the minutes that followed, the minutes that felt as big as hours, when the notes of her panic had ebbed to a low, husky cry of just one name, just one hope, Elle found herself slipping. Into a deep, innocent sleep, purged of terror and tears. A sleep where they could not follow. When his arms wound around her, and his breath warmed her neck with a muttered entreaty to “hold on, doll,” she assumed he was only a dream, a spectre made of memory and faith. She murmured his name again, soft and supplicant, against his chest, freed hands reaching blindly for aid. He’d come, he’d come, he would always come.

“I love you, isn’t that enough?” he asks, faint irritation coating every word. How could love be rendered such a threat? How could one wield it against another?

“No,” she replies. “No, darling, it’s not. Can’t you see? We have been each other’s for so long, but there is nothing...concrete about us. And I want there to be.”

His eyes blaze, a pair of cold, green flames. “You want a party, is that it? A new dress? Weddings are stuff and nonsense, you know that. I can get you those things without having to endure the pageantry.”

She bites her lip. Of course she wants those trappings -- a beautiful new dress; a day only about them; good food and drink and merrymaking all ’round -- but there is something deeper and richer that she craves. Acknowledgement. An official rendering of their bond, written and said, for all to read and hear. She wants him, she always wants him, but she desires him as part of a union firmer and more enduring than what they have now. Their love now is hand-in-hand, a loose embrace easily severed by a turned head or a distracted mind. She wants their fingers intertwined so tightly and intricately that no one could ever work them apart.

“It’s to be simply a stroking of my father’s ego,” he adds, trailing a bold finger along the column of her neck. “Have you and Mother concocted this plan together, then, is that it?”

Despite her resolution to remain unwavering, she cannot prevent the heat rising up her spine at his touch. “Or is that you simply want someone’s blessing before we go any further?”

Further, further...the promise is in his every move, however minute. He calculates the waves of her desire, knows how to make them surge and crest. To him, she is an instrument, played to his precise requirements, but never fully. Never is she allowed to sing.

For that would be too much, and there are eyes everywhere.

But if she was his wife, she points out, for the thousandth time, their love could be played and strummed to their heart’s content -- for wasn’t it one heart? Beating in unison, since they were children, so long ago?

His lips graze her skin, and she sparks under his ministrations. It is a covetous love, for them both. A love of exclusivity. He wants her, so that no one else may have her; she wants him, because she has never wanted anything else.

Simpler love stories have been told, but not by them.
Gradually, the world came back to her again, reaching through a fog of drugs and panic to pull her back into awareness. A keen awareness, it was. Of shame and anger, regret, of fulsome penitence. Bucky had wrapped her in his blue jacket, and had shivered in the crisp winter air as he led her to the aeroplane, silencing the lightning-round of questions from Gabe, Monty, and Jacques with a cold shake of his head. “Later,” he said curtly, when Gabe tried to enquire further.

As they swooped high above the channel, the metal body of the plane shuddered around them. Elle tugged the jacket closer about her chin and leaned back against her seat, savouring the scent of him -- gunpowder and mint, a sharp perfume she could not seem to drink enough of. Her heart slowed and her breathing evened out, those shallow, gasping clutches of air ceasing in the terse silence of the plane.

She mustered a tremulous smile, catching Bucky’s eye and mouthing a thank-you, for her voice was gone now. In response, he simply nodded at her, just once. It was a gentle thing, with none of the ice he’d given the others, but there was little of the warm welcome to which she had grown accustomed. Her lips faltered, and she looked down again, realizing that things were not going very well, not at all. Hoping for a distraction, she decided to glance around, taking stock of her surroundings.

The Commandos sat in a strained silence: Monty piloting and Gabe plying him with questions in a bid to keep him awake and alert. The day had been long and taxing for them all, and there was nothing unusual there. Likewise, Steve’s tired pose, head leaned back against his seat with his eyes screwed shut -- not strange at all. Even the bruises and bandages did not startle her -- it was the empty spot on the bench that did that.

“Where’s -- where’s Dum?” she croaked, terror crowding her throat. “Bucky? Where’s Dum?”

He’d been with her in the alleyway, she remembered. He’d sought to reassure her, to keep her calm, as he always did. That big, bold smile, not afraid of anything HYDRA could think to throw at them. “It'll be okay,” he had mouthed to her, in the moments before she ruined everything. Oh, God, if he was dead, if he was dead because of her -- oh, no, oh, no, oh no.

“He’s alive,” Steve said, without opening his eyes. “Coming back with the medical unit from the 107th.”

Elle exhaled, and her shoulders sagged in the confines of the jacket. “And he’s...is he hurt?” She blinked at the stupidity of the question, but Steve still refused to open his eyes, and Bucky just looked away.

“Two shots. Shoulder and upper leg. Should be fine.”

She wanted to ask how, wanted to know the precise details of what had happened, but the hooded look in Jacques’ eyes, when she turned to him -- having realized by the tightness of Steve’s voice that she likely wouldn’t be getting any further in that quarter -- told her all she needed to know. Dugan was hurt, and it was because of her.

The rest of the journey passed in that same potent silence, trimmed around the edges with tang of guilt. It was nearly gone midnight by the time Monty was able to land at the airstrip just outside of London, and when Elle was finally given the go-ahead to disembark, she found that her limbs had turned to absolute jelly at some point during the trip and she could scarcely manage to extricate herself from her safety straps. “Here.” Bucky reached across to undo the grip, moving carefully and gently. “There you go. Take it easy,” he said, standing and reaching out a hand, pulling her to her feet.

When she finally managed to stand, the cramped confines of the plane, combined with her hand in
his, meant that they were fairly pressed against each other, close enough that she could feel how cold
he’d grown without his jacket -- close enough that her gaze was naturally drawn to his mouth, to the
sliver of his white teeth as they bit into his bottom lip. Suppressing a thought, a word, perhaps. A
criticism. Heat struck up her spine as one hand stole to her waist, tugging her more firmly against his
chest. “Bucky --” she whispered, ready to remind him that they ought to get going, that the others
were waiting, but he cut swiftly across her.

“I thought you were dead,” he murmured, leaning down until his forehead touched hers. “I thought
for sure... fuck, Ellie.” The word was harsh, but his skin was so soft, and both hands were around her
waist now, and he was so, so gentle. She closed her eyes, flushed and wanting, as he continued to
explain, in disjointed curses, how afraid he’d been, how God-awful it would have been to lose her,
to be without her. And when his breath ghosted over hers at the source, she almost fainted.

Abruptly -- damnable -- Steve’s voice cracked through the promising silence of the space, causing
them to step the few inches apart they could manage, Bucky’s hands hanging loosely now by his
side. “Hurry up. Colonel’s waiting.”

Steve said absolutely nothing to indicate that he’d seen how close they were, how Bucky’s lips had
almost grazed hers. His expression, when Elle finally recovered enough to look over at him, was
impassive, resigned. As though he didn’t care at all. Not one bit. “He will be coming for me,” she’d
told Zola. “He won’t leave me.”

He may not have left her in the village, but he was certainly not with her now.

“You’re going, then?”

The boy’s eyes are heated, but not swimming with the tender tears she had, petulantly, hoped for. She
nods, catching his mother’s gaze over his shoulder, as he stiffens. His mother softens, a rueful
smile blooming on her face.

She’s not wearing the uniform yet; just a dress he had given her, for a party so long ago she could
not recall the occasion. He loves her in blue, the cerulean silk of a summer sky, draped over her legs
and moving as gentle as a breeze as she walks. He whispered that in her ear at the party -- that
much she can remember.

There is no poetry in this conversation, no room for it at all. The dress is a farewell, a going-away
present he has no desire to touch. “I won’t be gone long,” she says with a false brightness. “A
minute, that’s all it will be. In the grand scheme of things. Not long at all.”

Kiss me, she silently pleads, offering him that look, the one he says he cannot resist. A look for the
ages, a shadow behind her eyes only he can banish with the warmth of his touch. But he only turns,
setting his drink gently down upon the table, the tiniest clink of glass on wood the only sound of his
goodbye. He strides out of the room without looking back, leaving her and his mother alone.

Her kind voice is filled with apology, with excuse -- a tone that she is so often forced to employ
where it concerns him. “He will miss you so much, my dear. He just...he finds it hard to say such
things.”

Yet words of lust and fire, he finds so easily. He can reduce her to a puddle on the floor with two of
them, sometimes one -- and yet here she is, leaving in search of an honourable peace, and all he can
do is finish a drink and walk away.

And yet, and yet...
“Insubordination, recklessness, plain disobedience -- do I have to go on, Andersen?” Colonel Phillips lowered his face to hers once again, and she gripped the edges of her chair until her knuckles finally went white, white as bone. He had dropped the “Miss” several bitter adjectives ago.

Not for the first time that evening, Elle wished that he had chosen to do this in private. It was absolute torture having to listen to this while in the presence of the very men she’d thought to sacrifice herself so nobly for. That sacrifice seemed so limp and pale now, having been battered most soundly to bits and pieces by Phillips’ ire and Peggy’s quiet seething in the corner.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he boomed, and she couldn’t help but jump a little in her chair. “Your position was secure -- you should have let your superiors handle it. You know, the experienced soldiers standing there quietly? Christ.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and reached for the glass of water he’d been using to lubricate his throat for subsequent rounds of criticism multiple times during the last thirty minutes. Or at least, she was guessing it had been thirty minutes -- the clock was hanging on the wall behind her and she did not currently possess the courage to glance down at her watch.

“Well?” he snapped, after taking a drink. She jolted, surprised that he now wanted an answer.

“I...er...I just...” Elle trailed off, looking for some expression of sympathy in at least one of the familiar faces in the room, but found none. No anger, either -- just that same cool resignation Steve had shown her so clearly in the plane. Even Bucky was much deflated now, having sunk down in his chair some time ago and found a terribly interesting spot on the wall behind the Colonel. “I thought I could help,” she finished weakly.

“Yes, because nothing wraps up a operation better than an unplanned rescue mission.” Phillips took a few steps backwards, collapsing into his chair at the head of the table. “‘Helping?’ You’re damn lucky you worked with such good men, Andersen, that’s all I can say.”

Her only goal, she had decided upon first entering Howling Central, was to avoid tears. Elle had known, from the moment Peggy had stiffly ushered her into the car and then into headquarters, that she was in for a severe dressing-down. But she had never imagined this abject shame she felt, forced to relive the most foolish moments of her life in front of the men she had endangered, who could not even bring themselves to look at her. They were good men, she thought, pained by his words -- they were, and she was lucky to have --

“Worked, sir?” she asked, paling at her realization. “Do you mean to say....”

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“Worked, sir?” she asked, paling at her realization. “Do you mean to say....”

“You’re damn right,” Phillips retorted. “You’re being removed from active duty, Andersen, effective immediately.”

The corners of her eyes burned, but she wouldn’t permit them to spill over -- no, she needed to salvage as much dignity as possible. Phillips was right to order this; she should have expected it. Elle had acted so impulsively, going against the basic elements of her training. Dugan had been shot because of it -- he’d lunged, Phillips explained, after her, around the corner, and two of Zola’s guards had fired. A good man, a kind man, was in hospital because of her. He’d almost died because of her. Because she had conflated old lessons with new emotions, and gotten so tangled and twisted that she had not stopped to think of the consequences of her own actions.

Time compressed and folded backwards unto itself, and she was back in the matrons’ tent in Italy, and they were accusing her of all-sorts and she could have happily burrowed into the ground to snatch at some reprieve. How did things always seem to go wrong? Just when she assumed she was making strides, Elle pulled the rug out from underneath her own feet, and took others with her.
Fredericks had suffered last time, for her; and now Dugan.

She deserved the dressing-down, the humiliation, and hung her head in due course. “Yes, sir,” Elle whispered. “I understand. I’ll get my things…”

“Hold on,” came Peggy’s crisp interjection. “There’s no need for that, is there, Colonel?”

Hope lifted Elle’s head, helped her ease the death grip upon the seat of her chair. Peggy’s face had not relaxed -- she still bore an expression of crimson disapproval -- but at least she was willing and able to meet Elle’s gaze. “Miss Andersen is still to be considered a Commando, is she not?”

Phillips gave a curt nod.

“Then there is no reason for her to be removed from the lodgings.” Peggy stood, smoothing down the skirt of her uniform. “Your training schedule should be organized by tomorrow morning, I should think, Miss Andersen. But you are to report to the typing pool at 0800 hours, is that understood?”

“I --”

“Excellent. Agent Novak will oversee your continued defensive and physical training, and I’ve asked Sergeant Barnes to initiate a more intensive firearms programme,” Peggy continued, gathering up her notebook and polishing off the last dregs of her tea. “0800, Miss Andersen. Bright and early.”

“Tell me a story,” the child says.


As usual, she wants a story of her mother, who rolls her eyes nearby, chafing under the idleness of these hours. The child clambers up into her father’s lap, tugging his beard to urge him on. He obliges with a deep laugh, and a story she’s heard a thousand times before.

“Your mother used to live on a farm, my little lady. Her papa, your grandfather, was a successful farmer with cows that gave the sweetest milk, chickens that gave a hundred eggs each a day, fields yellow with grain and apples that were so sweet they ought to have been made of gold!”

The child giggles at that; her favourite part. “I was passing through the area with a friend, in search of inspiration for my poems. I was a handsome, upright young man then,” he says, with some wist to his voice, as he remembers the thick head of burnished red, the decadent liberty of two well-functioning knees. “At any rate, we were getting hungry and were far away from any stopping-place. The only thing in sight was your mother’s farm.”

He had not seen anybody in the yard, but that was not unusual. It was a large, sprawling place, and the harvest was due -- he expected that they might have been hard at work at fields further out. His friend had come up with the idea first -- to pluck a few shining apples from the tree nearest the fence. “What harm will it do, one or twelve apples?” my friend asked, and I shook my head,” her father explains.

The child nods solemnly. “But they weren’t yours to take,” she points out, as she always does.

“Quite right!” her mother snaps, turning again to her needlework. She can’t bear to be without work or purpose, not even for five minutes. Sometimes her father jokes that all the work is keeping her young, that she’s bartering industry for eternal youth, and that’s why she still looks so ravishing.
The child is never quite sure what the word means.

“‘Yes, indeed, my little lady,’” her father says. “‘They weren’t ours to take. But we did anyways. Twelve apples, six for each of us. And they were so sweet and so wonderful, we stopped right there on the road and ate them all. Gobbled them right up.’”

“‘Greedy beasts,’” her mother adds, pulling her needle through again -- a rose blooms bright on the cloth.

“‘Greedy beasts,’” the child parrots, much to her father’s delight.

“And then, horror of horrors, the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen came flying from behind the apple trees -- so fast, we hardly had time to know she was coming. She set upon us, my little lady, but even in her anger, she was still so pretty, so fresh, so lovely. And I fell for her right then and there.”

“Only because I slapped you.” Another rose begins to join the first.

“And I marched right into the farm, offered my sweat to the farmer, and two years later, married his daughter.” He grins at his wife, who merely shrugs her shoulders, saying something about no one else coming to call.

The child sleeps now; under the sun, dreaming of golden apples and her father’s laugh.

Monty made her a cup of tea and Gabe set out saltines and SPAM for everyone, though none of the Commandos had expressed even the slightest interest in food. Steve ignored the spread and headed straight into the sitting room, sinking down into his preferred armchair with a deep sigh.

Although she had no desire to argue further or earn herself another reprimand, Elle took her cup and followed him, warily making herself comfortable on the chesterfield directly across from him. His hands were steepled, joined index fingers pressing into his forehead as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, looking for all the world like a sinner at pray. But, she reminded herself, he was not the one who needed to atone.

“I'm so sorry,” she said simply. There was nothing else to say, was there? On the way back from headquarters, Jim had taken it upon himself to clarify what would happen to her over the next several weeks -- she was far too rattled from Phillips’ lambasting to fully process Peggy’s parting words. She would be removed from active duty, yes, but only until sufficient training had taken place. At the end, Phillips had even acknowledged that she’d been sent out into the field far too soon.

Hours not occupied by training would see her joining the secretarial section of the SSR. She’d still be in charge of compiling mission reports and documents concerning the Commandos, and would be permitted, at Peggy’s insistence, to continue to reside in their lodgings, “For all intents and purposes, you’re still a Commando,” Jim had added. “You just won’t be leaving London for a while.”

Elle could do nothing but accept and be grateful. It was a reasonable offer, to be sure, and more than she felt she deserved. Now she had nothing left to do but apologize to her commanding officer, whom she’d failed so spectacularly.

“Okay, Elle,” he said heavily, rubbing his hands over his face. “Okay.”

Acutely aware of all the ears listening in, Elle self-consciously tried to press him for something more substantial. Was it selfish of her to crave forgiveness? Clear forgiveness? “Steve, I just want to --”

“Please, Elle.” He held up a hand, and for the first time, she realized just how strained and tired he
looked. “Please, I know. I’ve heard you. I know you’re sorry, we all know it. And it’s okay, really.”

But she couldn’t help herself: “I just --”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked up at that,startled. “I’m sorry I reacted the way I did today,” Steve explained, leaning forward slightly. “We all are, right?” Elle followed his gaze to the doorway of the sitting room, where the rest of the Commandos had gathered. A series of nods and a subtle wink from Bucky were the only replies to Steve’s question.

“Listen -- there’s something that didn’t get said tonight, in all of that commotion. Something that needs to be said.” Steve took a breath, looked at his comrades. “Any of you wanna tell her?”

“Tell me what?” she asked, panic spiking in her voice. What else had happened? What else had she done? Had they received word on Dugan? “Please -- what?”

Bucky cleared his throat, drawing her eyes to him. “It worked, doll,” he said softly.

When Elle had run out into the street, Zola’s group had become distracted, disoriented even, particularly when the doctor began ordering them to return to the safe house he’d been set up in down the road. Their orders had been to escort him from the village confines, to be put on a HYDRA aeroplane heading to somewhere north -- but he’d refused. The prospect of a Commando taken prisoner proved to be too tempting, and though his guards had managed to sink the two rounds into Dugan, they didn’t pursue the alleyway further than that -- on Zola’s eager orders.

“We were able to skirt around,” Gabe explained. “You gave us a chance to act as a third wave. Another unit from the 107th met up with us, and we took the village. Hell, we took Wagner, Elle. Because of you. And the three minutes you bought us. You all but finished the mission.”

Steve went on to explain how Wagner, the major placed in charge of the developing HYDRA facility, had cracked immediately, particularly when Bucky began his questioning. “He told us where Zola was being housed, that he’d set up some sort of lab in the old village doctor’s house. We blocked them in, did our best. He got away, of course, which can’t be helped, but we got you back.”

Elle let these facts wash over her skin, a cool, sweeping balm of absolution. They didn’t hate her, didn’t resent her. “I’m sorry for being so cold. I just panicked. We all did. It would have...if something had happened to you,” Steve said slowly, the fulsome dread of the possibility joining them there in the room. “I don’t know what we would’ve done. That’s why we need you to go back into training. You need more, and there’s nothing wrong with that."

“You’ll be back out there with us before you know it,” Jim added encouragingly.

“Yeah, because where would we be without our best girl?” Gabe grinned, shoving Bucky’s shoulder good-naturedly.

Eyes shining, she looked around at them all. Her team. Her happy few. Her band of brothers. And she smiled. Because she was home.

Her mother sings her to sleep when she’s sick. That night, she has a fever, and her mother makes her drink a too-sweet tonic and then tucks her into the warm embrace of her parents’ bed, where she is entirely dwarfed. “Go to sleep,” her mother commands, gently. “Go to sleep, and you’ll be right as rain in the morning.”
Her mother has a cure for everything. Broken bones and sweaty brows, rebellious stomachs and fiery throats. In the end, though, the cure she needs, she cannot find, and she slips away on a river of regret, leaving a wounded girl in her wake.

Sleep did not come. She tossed for an hour or so, then got up and decided to be useful, tidying her bedroom as quietly as possible, ears perksed for sounds of distress -- the first night after a mission always tended to be quite hard on the Commandos. But none came, and so, around half past four, Elle decided to dress and head downstairs to the kitchen to get a start on breakfast. Typically, they all pulled together come mealtime, but she could hear her mother’s voice in her head, telling her to turn those sleepless hours into something productive -- and the voice was such a comfort, she dared not refuse.

Unfortunately, the kitchen was a torrential mess -- cups and plates littered the table; the ashtray was overflowing, and it seemed two of her happy few had indulged in some whisky and neglected to put away both the bottle and their glasses. She started with those.

The washing-up was one task Elle had never minded taking on, not since they had moved into the house. The sink overlooked the back garden, and, on cold afternoons and evenings, her chiefest pleasure was to stand, with soapy hands, and imagine springtime there. A stone bench squatted hopefully in the far corner -- soon, she would pile cushions on it, and spend a few languorous free hours reading there. Poetry always been so much more enjoyable outside. And they could plant a garden; Monty had suggested that just the other day. He had a keen green thumb, and had already ordered a seed catalogue.

There was something so delectably homey about planning for the spring and summer, she thought, rinsing out her favourite teacup. As though there wasn’t a war on at all. As though that bloody Red Skull wasn’t dashing madcap and murderous about continental Europe. As though Dugan wasn’t in hospital, as though, as though….

“What are you doing up?”

She loved his voice in the morning. Raspy with sleep, a rumble deep in his chest. Elle glanced back over her shoulder to see Bucky standing in the doorway, idly scratching at his chest, looking around the tidied kitchen through squinted eyes, as though he’d never seen it before. “You alright?” he asked, visibly concerned. Most days, the Commandos woke in dribs and drabs, but Elle was rarely one of the first ones downstairs.

“Fine, I just couldn’t sleep.” She gestured with a sudsy hand to the tea-towel she’d draped next to the sink. “Would you mind helping? Then I can start some eggs, if you like.”

The two worked quietly and steadily for a few minutes, Elle handing over the wet dishes for him to methodically wipe dry and return to their proper cupboard. Outside, the world was still dark, nothing but faint, lingering moonlight illuminating the back garden. When their fingers finally brushed, as he handed her the towel to dry her hands, the spark that shot through her at his touch brought her back to those last moments on the plane, to the embrace neither of them had been able to talk about since.

But it seemed there was another question on his mind, as he studied her face, chewing his bottom lip as he did. “Ellie, can you tell me…uh…I just…” He cursed in frustration, then started over. “Did Zola…did he…he didn’t hurt you, did he? Didn’t tie you down?”

Ice against her back. Leather at her wrists. Feet that cannot walk or run and a throat so filled with terror and tears she knows her body cannot contain it all. And a name, a name escapes, trickles out, out, out and away, but she cannot follow.
Elle closed her eyes. *Lie.* “No,” she said carefully. “I was sedated, but only so they could take some measurements. Nothing happened, Bucky. Truly.”

She kept the mystery of Zola’s bemusement to herself, having not even begun to personally ponder the implication of his words and his confusion over something related to her age and her measurements. Elle lied because she cared for Bucky, because the featherlight weight of his breath on hers had been the most pleasurable burden she had ever borne, and because, shoulders sagging in relief at her words, he took a step closer. Instinctively, Elle angled herself, pressing her lower back against the worktop behind her. The movement was fluid enough, she hoped, that it was clear she was not recoiling, only getting more comfortable. Taking her cue, he leaned over her, gripping the edges of the sink on either side of her waist, and she inhaled sharply at his sudden proximity.

“Is this okay?” he asked, voice low and full of promise. Eyes trailing from her hairline to her mouth, and then back up to her eyes. “Tell me if it’s not.”

“No” was so paltry a word (and so American), she thought inanely, breathing deeply and thankful that, this time, her hair was not bound in rags nor were her cheeks tearstained. Granted, the smell of washing-up powder was thick on the air between them -- never mind that. No, “okay” did not even begin to encapsulate the sudden surge of heat, of emotion, of a keen sense of rightness that he was so close to her now. His presence and proximity, his eyes on hers -- that would always be more than “okay.” Such things were simply a collective, intoxicating marvel.

Elle could only manage a nod, but that was enough. A broad grin broke out across his face, the one she treasured so much, especially for the way his eyes crinkled at the outside corners to accommodate the smile. “Good,” he said, huskily. “Because I would really, really, really like to kiss you now. Can I?”

“Yes.” Her voice was soft, yielding. Wholly enchanted with the man before her.

He took his time, and Elle appreciated that. The boy’s advances were often rushed and secretive, tugging her into dark alcoves and empty hallways; a line of kisses down the back of her neck; hands wandering during speeches and conversations. But Bucky was *savouring* the moment, indulging in the novelty of it. One hand came first to her hip, and then around to her lower back; while the other – oh, the other -- the other he used to cup her chin, thumb rubbing just under her bottom lip so gently that she knew the sudden urge to cry.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, tracing the curve of her lip. She shivered, and with his left hand, he tugged her closer to him. Elle brought her own hands up to rest against his chest, mirroring their pose from months before, back in the factory, so soon after they’d met, and he’d pulled her away from that terrible, terrible scene. And she’d pressed herself against a stranger, rather than see the horror unfold. He was not a stranger now, she thought, glancing at his lips, too -- longing to touch, but loath to leave the firmness of his chest. She was nearly drunk on the heat of the moment, on the anticipation, on knowing that in another second, maybe two, those lips would be on hers. Almost as if he could read her mind, Bucky leaned his head down, using his thumb to tilt her chin, and her eyes drifted shut, the abrupt scent of mint only making her blood boil hotter, as sparks of pleasure chased up her spine and--

“Morning, lovebirds!”

Bucky tucked his head against her shoulder and let out a deep groan, accented by a muttered “*Shit!*” For her part, Elle knew a flash of irritation, a sudden rancour washing over her and she vowed that, for this interruption, she would *not* be making Dugan any eggs this morning. He could sing for his bloody breakfast; they’d been so --
“Dum!” she gasped as she realized who was standing in the kitchen doorway. “Oh, my goodness!”

Giddily, Elle disentangled herself from Bucky’s embrace and fairly leaped across the kitchen, stopping short when she recalled just how badly Dugan had been injured. She scanned the bandages at his shoulder and on his leg; wincing when she realized he was leaning on a crutch. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

But Dugan only grinned, winking at Bucky over her shoulder. “I think I should be the one apologizing, kid, but hey, don’t sweat it. I don’t want you thinking this is your fault, alright?” He levelled a stern yet playful glare down at her. “Soldiers get shot. It doesn’t mean it’s fun, but it’s the way things go. You got that, soldier?”

Bucky busied himself with breakfast while Elle and Dugan talked at the table and more Commandos drifted in to hear the story of how the bullet had only grazed his leg and the other had gone through clean, and how Dugan had managed to annoy so many of the doctors and nurses during his brief stay with the medical unit that he’d wheedled his way into coming home to recuperate. “Food was awful,” he said, gratefully accepting the soft-boiled egg from Bucky. The SSR was fortunate enough to receive weekly supplies from a Land Army-run farm not too far away. Bucky put one down in front of her, too, as Dugan continued, wholly indifferent to the fact that two of his audience members were now simply staring at each other over an egg, matching grins teasing at the corners of their lips.

“Jesus,” Gabe said, “I mean, I’m not surprised they kicked you out.”

“Watch it, pal.”

Elle reached for her knife, preparing to tap the egg open and dip her slivered toast into the runny yolk within, politely trying to focus on the conversation at hand -- but her mind kept racing back to the moment at the sink, to his lips so close to hers.

With a robust and noisy welcome, Steve and Monty entered the kitchen, clapping Dugan gently on his good shoulder in greeting. Taking advantage of the momentary chaos, Bucky leaned down close to her ear, and she froze with the toast in midair, lips parted in surprise and then delight at the words he whispered, just for her: “Later, doll.”
Wiping a sheen of sweat from her forehead, Elle paused for a minute. Just a minute, mind -- Agent Novak rarely permitted breaks for longer than that. The half-hour, of course, was an exception, mandated by SSR policy. Eight minutes then. Eight minutes to have a drink of water, adjust her jumpsuit, massage tiring muscles, and prepare for another round.

Following quiet mornings punctuated only by the need to refill empty teacups and the endless clacking of her typewriter, Elle does find herself stubbornly savouring this activity, and Novak’s endless demands. Six gruelling hours of training each day, featuring everything from boxing drills to self-defensive techniques, a few laps, and of course, calisthenics -- Novak’s preferred brand of army-sanctioned torture.

Much to her disappointment, Elle’s firearms training had been pared back considerably, as the Howling Commandos had been dispatched on a mission nearly ten days before. Phillips had been clear he wanted a skilled marksman teaching her how to handle even her small-capacity Colt, and of the team, Bucky was the best, despite his youth. He’d shown immense promise during his Stateside training, and had only improved over the past few years and missions. With his absence, though, Elle was then at a double disadvantage -- not only had her left her red-faced and wanting in the kitchen that morning, but she was now at risk of getting behind with a substantial portion of her training. To this end, Peggy had stepped up, offering to take her down to the firing range a few times since the new routine had been initiated, running her through a few basic sessions.

Though Novak and Peggy were highly skilled and relatively patient teachers, Elle nevertheless found herself chafing under the regime by the close of the first five days -- a unit of time which would afford her one day off. Life had changed so abruptly, yet again, and this time, she did not even have the comfort of returning to a boisterously-full household at the end of each tiring, bewildering day. It was her and Dugan, alone in the house, ambling through small, slim meals and long evenings of half-hearted card games and unaired anxieties. Poor Dugan was struggling so much than she, though, as at least Elle had the consolation of some work and purpose to her days, while he was under strict orders to rest and take things easy.

The longer the Commandos’ mission dragged on, however, the more worried the two of them grew. It was essentially radio silence from the team, as they were behind enemy lines and Phillips did not want any more channels of communication open than were strictly necessary. News came in small, impersonal spurts, telling them nothing about the respective conditions or fates of the people they cared for the most. Both Dugan and Elle, however, were hesitant to bring those fears into their home. Not when they walked by the trappings of their communal life together. Memory ached and yearned around them in the shape of familiar china mugs and pairs of wool socks; the empty spaces where Gabe should be sprawled out with a book, or Monty, Jim, and Jacques stiff-upper-lipping their way through a game of poker.

Elle tried to distract herself, tried to make herself useful and do her best to keep the air as chipper as possible, for Dugan’s sake, but at night, her mind crept into dark corners, and she often woke gasping and chill to the touch, moonlight bathing her bedroom in sharp, ghostly relief, so that she did not even the comfort of a recognizable space to anchor herself to. The nightmares kept hold; the only thing that could work to shift them was, quite simply, force.

“Andersen! Second position, please.”
With an internal groan and a small flicker of relief, Elle tore her mind away from the night, and from a letter, slipped beneath her bedroom door. A full, round script, the nickname she’d never exactly given him permission to use; the apology, the promise. Dear Ellie...I haven’t forgotten about later. I hope you haven’t either.

“ Andersen!”

Second position. Novak had them all numbered and scribed onto posters which peppered the walls of the training room. She’d also jotted them down on a piece of paper that was now taped to Elle’s vanity mirror, so that as she rubbed cream onto her skin or brushed out her hair, she was faced with a series of self-defensive techniques involving everything from placing an assailant in a mild chokehold to performing unspeakable contact between one’s foot and the other’s groin. Sometimes her heart clenched in sympathy as she actually considered the pain involved -- such thoughts were quickly followed by a swift realization that if someone were actually to get her into such a position, any guilt at targeting those sensitive nerve endings would be wholly misplaced.

She was familiar with second position, though it was her least favourite, perhaps it involved too much risk for the actual injuring of her instructor. The move began with Novak wrapping her arms tight around Elle’s torso, pulling her back flush against her own body. In order to break free, Elle had to step forward and situate herself in a wider stance, thus ensuring her center of balance was more secure than when their feet were too close together.

Her challenge then was to jab an elbow back towards her assailant’s face (necessitating, in practice, a measured movement, lest she knock her instructor directly in the nose), and then twist once the grip had loosened. Following that came a madcap release of energy, as Elle was supposed to simply batter her assailant “like hell.” For the purposes of instruction, however, she tended to simply finish, leaving her hands swinging awkwardly by her side as she took deep, gulping breaths of air, savouring the sweat-stained pleasure of doing something.

Dear Ellie.

She arched her back now in Novak’s grip, noting that this time, unlike the others, she seemed to give way a little earlier than usual. Tempering the force of her blow was always the trickiest part, requiring her to both mentally envision driving her elbow back with full intent, smashing the nose or mouth of some faceless HYDRA goon, as well as avoiding that surge of power through her strengthening muscles. Secretly, though, she liked that surge. She relished the rush of energy in her veins, the feeling that she could, if necessity were to demand it, handle herself in a violent situation. If Zola captured her again, this time he would be the one left with nightmares.

On the very first day, Elle had been a little out of breath from her mad dash down from the main offices, where she’d spent the morning reorganizing the filing system for Commandos-related documents. With a professional (yet somehow simultaneously scathing) cough in her direction, Agent Novak had made it quite clear that she had little hope for this out-of-shape young woman ever truly being able to function productively as part of a special operations team. Privately, Novak did like Elle, but thought the girl had been rather unnecessarily lucky in rising through the ranks as quickly as she had. Then again, no one understood better than Novak than benefits of an organization such as the SSR, which had afforded her the opportunity to serve her country with very, very few questions asked.

Coming from Harlem, Pearl Novak had been told that girls like her were wanted only in the factories, and even then, in the dirtiest jobs. Most white women weren’t too keen on fulfilling their patriotic duty alongside someone who looked like her, and Rosie the Riveter didn’t have a friend with the same dark curls and brown eyes as she. But the recruitment officer from the SSR had taken
one quick scan of her high school transcript, and her extensive experience in self-defensive training under the tutelage of her father, who operated a gym just underneath their apartment, and had stamped her through so quickly Novak had thought the ink was likely to start smoking.

So perhaps, she considered, as she dodged Elle’s practiced blow -- perhaps, just as she’d flown through the application process simply by virtue of her skillset, rather than any other discernible elements, Elle had some hidden talents that warranted her inclusion, regardless of her lack of experience.

For here they were, just scarcely a week later, and Novak could feel the restraint. Elle was having to consciously avoid injuring her trainer. Of course, her chest still heaved with exertion and her cheeks had gone bright red with her efforts, but Novak was impressed. And a little perplexed.

“Really?” Elle asked brightly, forehead gleaming with sweat. “I know last time I…”

Novak shook her head, adjusted her jumpsuit from where the sodden cuffs had begun to inch unpleasantly up her wrists. “You’re getting better. Much better. Stronger, too. It’s actually...surprising.”

“Surprising?” Peggy asked with a scarlet smile -- in all the commotion, Novak and Elle hadn’t seen her enter the room and settle in her usual seat. Agent Carter’s time and attention was in high demand, and she didn’t tend to take many breaks throughout the long workdays, but when she did have a spare moment, she enjoyed sitting in one of the various training sessions that Elle was expected to complete. Peggy was quite invested in Elle’s improvement; she’d vouched most vocally for her retraining and continued classification as an official, if not deployable, member of the Commandos.

“It’s not surprising at all, Agent Novak,” Peggy corrected good-naturedly, striding across the room to peer closer at a few of the instructional posters. “She’s got my best instructor working with her, and she’s a clever one, our Andersen. You two make a fine team.”

Novak’s mouth settled into a firm line as she watched Elle take another drink of water and wipe her brow apologetically. She hated to make a fuss, did Elle. Novak had picked up on that particular trait early on in their acquaintance -- months ago, now. She had trained dozens of new female recruits in that time, most of them accelerating quickly through her program and veering off into specializations. Many of them were eager, hardworking, patriotic young women; most of them had been duly deferential to her position, polite and even a little intimidated by her skillset and the level of respect shown to her by higher-ups such as Peggy, the Commandos -- even Phillips, at times, found himself struck a little at a loss by the crisp, cool tone Novak was wont to adopt, not to mention the watchful intellect keen in her gaze. She had the look, to be plain, of a woman who knew everything.

And while she garnered respect everywhere she went, Pearl Novak had yet to make an actual friend in London. Years of teasing and marginalization had naturally driven her to the outskirts of most social interactions, wherein she would pace about the outside of those little bubbles before deciding whether or not it was safe to enter. While many of the other agents, at her level or a notch above or below, were social with each other, she was not often invited along, and if she was -- to a film or the pub, maybe even to a USO dance or one of the teas one of the local Women’s Institutes were always putting on -- the shaking voice and darting eyes usually accompanying the request were enough to convince Novak that the evening could be better spent with a hot water bottle and her sketchbook.

Pearl Novak commanded respect. She earned praise, and she did her duty by a country that had, far too often, left her behind. But the one she didn’t have? A friend.

Not for the first time in the past week, she found herself wondering if Elle Andersen could become that friend. There was just something so acutely comforting about the woman’s presence, the way she tried so hard and accommodated Novak’s every order. She was motivated solely by a desire to
contribute, not ego or a sense of heroism inflated by newsreels and trashy, cheap novels. Novak admired her, respected the way she responded to their praise now. With a small smile and a shake of her head. As though she didn’t believe them.

“It does seem quite advanced,” Novak added, turning back to Peggy. “She was doing a good job before the first mission, but I went too easy on her after that. And now, she’s so fast, and she’s got much more stamina. Just a little odd, I suppose.”

Joining them again near the wall, Elle offered only a self-conscious shrug. “Perhaps my time in the field has something to do with it?” she suggested lightly. “I’ve been, er, watching the others, as well. Could that have something to do with my improvement?”

“It’s...possible,” Novak conceded, chewing her bottom lip. She still wasn’t convinced. As she scanned Elle’s figure -- still soft and belying the strength she was gradually showing more and more of during their sessions -- she could not quite reconcile her memories of an exhausted girl lying practically prostrate upon the gym mats, begging for a reprieve.

But, she reasoned, ordering Elle to head over to the mid-size punching bag to prepare for a round or two -- perhaps the girl really had just increased her endurance through her deployments. And it was highly likely that the Commandos’ regime had helped to keep her in shape (or put her into one). After all, hanging around with Captain America would probably show you a thing or two.

The terraced house the Commandos called home had, over the past few months, begun to take shape as a rather comfortable situation, eclectically personalized to reflect the distinct and varied personalities of its residents. The place had come furnished, of course, rented from an SSR associate who had, before taking to espionage rather passionately, operated it as a boarding house. But between the plain, battered contours of a generic series of lives -- as epitomized in the well-worn brown chesterfield and faded armchairs; the scrubbed oak kitchen table, and the built-in china cabinet featuring a mismatched army of crockery -- between those firmer, less-revealing lines, there was to be read the story of some people that Elle had very much begun to think of as her family.

A fat French novel sat on the side-table, waiting for Gabe’s return; Steve’s sketches -- of Brooklyn, of the Belgian countryside, of birds and flower arrangements and a laughing memory of a smooth-faced young soldier she sometimes wished she could keep in her room -- were framed and pinned to the wall here and there. Knickknacks had accumulated, nonsensical but charming: a pair of china dogs, perched haphazardly on the manel; a collection of stones, picked up by Monty to commemorate each of their missions so far; a checkerboard, several decks of cards, and stacks of newspapers and library books that really ought to be returned. Such things told a story, a story Elle found herself comforted by, even when she was not in the very amenable midst of it.

And now, as she bit her lip and fisted the smooth expanse of her dressing gown against her lap, she turned to some of those familiar comforts, rather than face the tricksy conundrum before her. “I don’t know,” she said, focusing on the china dogs, and the recollection of the day Dugan had brought them home from a charity shop window (with a muttered story about how his grandmother had had a similar pair in her sitting room), rather than the fluttering nerves in her stomach. She, who had recently run headlong into enemy fire.

“I don’t know,” Elle said, looking down at her hands, engaged in a writhing embrace. “I’ve never been to something like this before.”

Janie “no goddamn relation to Howard” Stark leaned forward with an earnest expression, puffing away a cloud of smoke as she did so. “Darling, it’s just a dance. The music will be swell and the GIs will be as polite as you want ‘em to be. No reason not to let your hair down for the evening.”
She was right; Elle knew that. The USO dances were known as splendid morale-boosters, offering war-weary men and women the opportunity to forget, for a few hours at least, the trouble brewing in every quarter of their lives these days. But there was something holding her back, something beyond the impracticality of heading out to a party at half-seven the night before her first day off, when she’d already had supper and a bath and had changed into her nightgown. The arrival of Janie and Lila had been a complete surprise, though not unwelcome. Their friendliness and generosity often caused Elle the slightest twinge of regret that she wasn’t housed in female barracks along with them. But this was indeed only a slight regret -- her unique situation had afforded the opportunity to grow closer with the Commandos, her little band of brothers, and for that, she wouldn’t trade a thing.

It was thoughts of them that made her hesitate. How could she put on dancing shoes and go out to drink a spiked punch and forget about the war while they were still overseas? She and Dugan had not heard any updates at all in two full days; the question of what was going on across the Channel kept her up at night, and when she did sleep, Elle’s dreams were punctuated by horrifying images of the men she cared for so deeply strewn lifeless about some snowy German field. How indeed could she dance while those terrible possibilities hung in the air?

Lila and Janie exchanged a look, smoke curling away from two cigarettes as they both reached forward in unison to deposit them in the ashtray on the low table between the chesterfield and the two armchairs. “Bit of lippy, some curls, you’ll be golden,” Lila purred, an inviting smile playing about her red lips. Both women were already dolled up for the occasion, dressed to the absolute nines in a vivid shower of violets and a deep, rich navy blue. “Batting off the admirers in no time.”

Easy for them to say. Elle had middling experience with such things -- the parties she’d attended with the boy had always been formal and rather stiff occasions, the dancing even more so. Of course, there were plenty of shadowy corners to be tugged into, where events were decidedly less formal, but all the same -- the prospect of an evening of raucous American music and having to be trussed up when she was already so comfortable, left her rather out in the cold. And how could she leave poor Dugan on his own? He wasn’t up for a dance, she knew that, and she hated to leave him…

“You don’t mind, do you, Sarge?” Janie called out, seemingly reading Elle’s mind. She grinned. Dugan emerged from the kitchen with his crutch and a small glass of whisky. “Course not,” he said warmly, settling down on the chesterfield beside Elle. Evidently, he had been eavesdropping. “You work hard, sweetheart. And the others would want you to have a nice night out, you know they would.”

“That settles it.” Lila stood and grabbed Elle by the elbow. “Come along, Andersen, we’ve got twenty minutes to turn you from ‘Goodnight, husband dear’ to ‘Hello, sailor.’”

In a cloud of powder and perfume, Elle spotted a girl she hadn’t seen for a long time. She wasn’t Sophie Dubois, nor the sad girl in a yellow dress; nor still yet was she Ellie Andersen, Communications and Reporting Liaison; nor Andersen the aide, clad in stiff white cloth and raw, sparking nerves. No, this woman -- for she really was -- emerged from the feverish ministrations of Lila and Janie, who worked overtime to give her a hasty set of round, bouncy curls. “What kind of colours do you have?” the former asked, riffling through the drawer of her vanity. Upon finding a slim gold tube, she held it aloft and shot Elle an appreciative look in the mirror. “Good choice, sweetheart.”

Montezuma-red smile in place, Elle turned her head obligingly so that Janie could secure the waterfall of curls with a few bobby pins. “You’ve got a real nice shade to your hair, you know,” she observed idly, arranging a few artfully over Elle’s left shoulder, while tucking them behind her right.
“There’s a little red in it.”

Her words were kind, but Elle froze.

Zola had said much the same thing to her.


“Hmm, those are pretty, too.”

With a deep, calming breath, Elle followed the direction of Janie’s finger, which had alighted on one of the plump petals of the silk roses she’d arranged in a vase. For the first few days after their return from Belgium, Elle had moved the bouquet around her room, first settling them on the windowsill, then on her nightstand, her dresser, and then her vanity. It was quite a covetous action; more about relishing the reminder that a handsome, kind, brave man had gotten them for her, rather than an expression of some interior decorating concerns. They were pretty, a bright burst of summer in this cold little room.

“That’ll be Barnes, then?” Lila smirked at her in the mirror, holding up the one pair of earrings Elle owned, a subtle pair of gold-finished bunches of grapes. They were small, and she’d picked them up months ago on day out in Sussex. Watching Lila clip them on to her earlobes brought back a memory of a sultry afternoon, toes pinching in too-small heels, back before the name James Buchanan Barnes had become its own sort of language for her.

Elle nodded shyly, still unused to this business of being in love. Her relationship with the boy had become so commonplace by the time they were both grown that scarcely anyone batted an eye to see them together, let alone think to ask teasing questions just to see how pink her cheeks could really get. “He seems like a real troublemaker, if you ask me,” Lila said. “But in the best way, if you catch my drift.”

Elle didn’t.

The girls obligingly turned their backs while Elle shimmied from her dressing gown and adjusted her girdle, then rummaged about in her top drawer for her nicer slip. “So tell us,” Janie said, and Elle could practically hear the mischievous grin on her face. “What’s Barnes like? Good kisser? He’s got the lips for it. And why the hell do they call him ‘Bucky?’”

“I believe it comes from his middle name,” Elle explained, a little out of breath as she struggled to smooth down her garter belt. “Buchanan. It’s a childhood nickname, Steve told me.” She chose to ignore the other question. *Later, doll.*

“Oh, ‘Steve?’” Janie said with a chortle. “Who knew you’d be on a first name basis with Captain America, eh? What’s he like?”

“Sweet, they’re both sweet,” Elle replied, reaching for the green dress the girls had found in the depths of her wardrobe. “Buchanan. It’s a childhood nickname, Steve told me.” She chose to ignore the other question. *Later, doll.*

“They were, truly. It was no exaggeration. Elle and the Commandos had begun to build quite a lovely little life for themselves in that terraced house, and she realized with another jolt of regret and fear that she wished they were all there right this instant. How much more comfortable would she have been, heading out to the dance, with Bucky and the others in attendance? And what would he think of her -- in this green dress, these earrings, with a cascade of bright curls over one shoulder and a nervous smile on her lips? She faltered then. Looking at her reflection. Yes, there was a nice girl there -- with carefully-arranged
curls and a slash of colour courtesy of Elizabeth Arden. But Bucky was...so much more. So much more than a girl in a green dress deserved, a girl who had already set him on a bit of a wild goose chase after only a few weeks of knowing each other. A girl who was, for all intents and purposes, attached to another, if not officially (a problem she would need to resolve soon). Elle felt ridiculous, looking at herself there, but had no desire to hurt her friends’ feelings — they had sacrificed a good chunk of their evening in preparing her. Doubts about Bucky could be shunted to the side, at least until she had a drink in her hand.

“Well?” she said awkwardly, waiting for Lila and Janie to turn around again. “Will I do?”

A pair of low whistles and some soft applause greeted her, forced a deeper hue to her cheeks. “And then some, Miss Andersen,” Lila crowed. “And then some.”

If only Elle could believe her.

“Out on the plains down near Santa Fe / I met a cowboy ridin’ the range one day.” Elle tapped her foot in time with the latest song, sung with some aplomb by a girl from Wisconsin, wherever on Earth that was, and tried to enjoy herself. Lila and Janie had made it very clear that she was to show off the emerald-green dress and the hard work they’d put into making her presentable tonight, but she found such things were harder than they supposed.

The hall was heaving with people, all of them eager to be wined, dined, and danced into a haze of forgetfulness. Despite the sea of khaki and olive, mixed here and there with splashes of floral and silk, the war did indeed seem very far away tonight, for most. Not for Elle, though. She worried on the inside of her cheek as she imagined some sort of dreadful transmission coming in to headquarters while she sat idly at this dance, or Dugan stumbling about in the dark all on his own, injuring himself further —

“Having fun, Miss Andersen?”

At times, Howard Stark seemed as though he were trying very hard to emulate Errol Flynn, but on a visual basis — in terms of personality, he was all devil-may-care debonair, cheeky jokes and a smile that held rich, silky promises. He was a genuine genius, Elle knew, and his contributions to the war effort were nothing if not illustrious, but there was something of the boy about him still. Not her boy, no — merely a boyish quality in general. Nevertheless, she liked him, even though his presence and flirtatious advances in her direction (they meant nothing, she was sure; he flirted so with any woman in a ten mile radius at any given time) did cause Bucky’s mouth to tighten in a displeased line during consultations or debriefings.

She smiled at him now, and at the leggy blonde who perched herself on his lap as they joined her table. “Evening, Mr Stark.”

“This is Genevieve,” he said, reaching over to finish the glass of punch Lila had abandoned two soldiers ago. “Genevieve, meet Ellie Andersen, the Howling Commandos’ Number One Gal.”

Cringing at the moniker, Elle shook hands with the woman; obviously not an SSR agent, as far as she could tell. Over the past several months, she’d worked her way to even a head-nodding association with most of the female staff. Genevieve, gorgeous with her bright blue eyes and candy-pink dress, would have stuck out even in the drab uniform of either the American or British army. She seemed nice enough, however — kindly enquiring after Elle’s evening. “Have you danced yet, love?” she asked, with a pointed glance at Stark. “It’s quite the party.”

Elle tossed up a vague, demurring excuse. Something about a day of training, a slight headache — the
usual sort of explanations intended to put a stopper in unpleasant conversations. Genevieve, bless her, couldn’t seem to get the hint. “Oh, Howard, why don’t you take Ellie here out for a spin? Listen, they’re starting up *Furlough Fling*!” She poked a finger into Stark’s chest. “Come on, darling, take the poor girl dancing!”

With his signature smirk, Stark refocused his gaze on Elle, who by now had become extremely interested in the trembling tea-light in the middle of the table. “What do you say, Miss Andersen? Want to give me a whirl?”

As the music swirled and trilled up into being, a robust dancing song made for wide swings and snappy feet, Elle nervously met his eyes, hoping to infuse a silent plea in her expression. She was sure that he and Genevieve meant well, but she couldn’t bring herself to accept. The whole prospect of joining in caused her stomach to clench with vicious nerves, and she wished she was home with Dugan, shuffling the cards for a game or alone in her bedroom, reading over the note Bucky had left behind. Not here, face flaming and toes tapping to fear, rather than the beat.

“Maybe wait for another?” Stark smiled and smacked a kiss to Genevieve’s cheek. “Besides, Genny, you know, I ought to tread carefully. She’s got quite a little cabal of her own. The Commandos might have my head if I showed her *too* much of a good time.”

“That’s right!” Genevieve laughed. “Number One Gal and all that. Lucky duck, you are.”

The punch was too sweet. Elle had rather hoped it might be spiked by now; even a drop of alcohol might do a little to alleviate this growing tension. She tried to muster a smile, but her lips only trebled slightly. “Do you have your eye on one in particular, love?” Genevieve went on, scanning the crowd with some obvious envy, her knee jostling slightly from where it was draped over Stark’s. “They’re all lovely and brave, so I hear through the grapevine. But I must say, I don’t know how you could bear spending so much time with them all. It’s enough of a pain getting all dressed up for one boyfriend, let alone six or seven.”

A cold chill ran down Elle’s spine. “They’re not -- we’re not --” she sputtered, not even worried about salvaging any dignity now. “We’re a...a t-team, not -- not *that* --”

Was this truly what people thought? Ines Lecomte had insinuated as much in her outburst over Christmas -- that Elle was a prop, a mascot. A young woman designed to sell a story. The newsreel session had added to her anxieties on that front, but the Commandos themselves, and Peggy’s encouragement, had firmly put paid to those fears soon after. Now, though, they came sprinting back to the surface, coupling oddly with a hangover from those old worries in Italy. Was she always to be reduced to a silly girl, incapable of working with men without pesky emotions getting in the way?

“Oh! Howard, will you excuse me?” Genevieve didn’t even wait for a response; she’d spotted someone familiar in the crowd and was headed over in a flounce of pink and perfume. “Nice meeting you, Ellie.”

Elle indulged in a deep, fortifying breath as the girl left, wishing that Stark had gone with her, so that she could steady herself enough to make a graceful exit. Suffice it to say, her evening was over, and even if she had to walk all the way back home on her own, she would do it -- Lila and Janie be damned. No reason for this kind of discomfort.

“It *is* a little unusual, isn’t it, you living with all of them.” Stark drummed his fingers on the table and appraised her with mild curiosity. “Everywhere else, they’ve got the enlisted girls locked up tight, never to roam, and yet from what I hear and see, you’ve got a pretty cosy set-up with your boys.”

She stiffened, a tangle of thoughts battling for centre-stage in her weary mind. Something about
Genevieve’s perfume and pretty dress had her itching in her own, feeling as though she were a little girl who’d stumbled into her mother’s bedroom and gone to town. And that insinuation, those rumours -- what if they bloomed into full-blown gossip and made their way through the ranks? It was unusual, wasn’t it? Even though the house had once held boarders and every bedroom had its own lock, there was still room for innuendo to creep up and down the hallways, casting every interaction into sharp and painful relief.

_Later, doll._

Back in Italy, those accusations had been furtive and sly. A woman bartering her touch for advancement. But the way she was with Bucky, the way he’d leaned down in the kitchen that morning and savoured the catch in her breath -- that was something far sweeter. And yet, and yet…

She was no Genevieve, no Lila or Janie. Her hair needed to be coddled into any sort of confidence; her face without the accentuation of their cosmetic handiwork was plain and forgettable. It had never been a real problem for her before, but now Elle couldn’t help but feel a little beleaguered by her own ordinariiness. The dance hall was full to the brim with beautiful women, beautiful women who could dance and swing and walk as though they’d been born to heels and seduction.

It was too much, it was all too much. Worries and fears danced faster in her head than the crowd before her, and all of a sudden Elle felt something bitter rise in her throat. Why had she allowed herself to be pressed into coming? Six men she cared for so deeply were lost somewhere behind enemy lines, and here she was in a dress that made her feel about four years old, sipping punch she didn’t like, having to listen to Howard Stark suggest she was more than friendly with her housemates. How ridiculous. This was the sort of mess the boy could have gotten her out of with a snap -- though she probably never would have found herself here if the boy had anything to say about it.

“So do you have breakfast with them? I mean, is there a dress code? You know, I’ve been thinking --”

“Mr Stark,” Elle snapped, causing Howard to look up with some surprise evident in his bright eyes. “Has it ever occurred to you, perhaps, that our living arrangements have been permitted because the SSR has rightfully assumed that our talents and capabilities perhaps outweigh cliched assumptions regarding self-control?”

He blinked.

Elle knew full well that the narrow focus and relative independence of the SSR had afforded her much more flexibility in terms of her position, training, and domestic arrangements. A few times, the issue had come up, the question of whether or not it was entirely appropriate for a young, single woman to be housed so with seven men. But the simple fact that they functioned as a special operations team, combined with the perceived respectability of residing in a boarding house. Had they all been paying rent under the watchful gaze of a landlord or -lady, the situation would have been so commonplace as to be rather boring.

She resented the fact that it was so easy for others to assume that neither she nor the other Commandos were capable of forming relationships based on expectations besides romance -- Bucky not considered, of course.

Across the table, Stark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Look, Ellie, I didn’t mean --”

“I really don’t want to hear it, Mr Stark, please.” Elle held up a hand, hoping to bypass rudeness and skip simply to brusque resolve.
“But I --”

A tall figure swathed in cheery plaid sat down in the chair directly to Elle’s right with a firm sort of intent, the kind of presence that brooked no argument nor necessitated an introduction. With an amused fascination, Elle watched Stark’s spine snap to attention as he realized that Agent Novak had joined them. “Hi there,” she said, with an unusual, breathless kind of warmth to her voice. It was a far cry from her usual demeanour during training sessions -- she wasn’t cruel by any means, but strident, sure. “Can we talk for a moment?”

Her stylish dress and artful makeup did little to take all that away, and with an audible gulp, Howard Stark awkwardly extricated himself from the moment, muttering something about leaving them to it. “Sorry,” Novak said, turning to Elle with an apologetic smile. “I hope I didn’t misread the situation. You just looked uncomfortable, and I thought I’d lend a hand.”

“I appreciate it,” Elle reassured her. “Honestly. I mean, Stark is fine, it’s just a bit...it’s all a bit much tonight, I’m afraid.”

Novak nodded, surveying the swirling, chaotic scene around them. “I know what you mean. This isn’t...I don’t normally come to things like this. But my, uh...my fiancé, he thought it would be a good idea if I started.” She ducked her head shyly as she let that particular tidbit drop. That’s when Elle scanned to her left hand, spotting a small diamond winking from her ring finger.

“I had no idea, Agent, how wonderful! Is it a recent engagement?” As soon as the question slipped out, Elle realized she probably should not have asked, and not so giddily. After all, Novak was still her superior, and wartime romances were not always so rosy and sweet as the cinema would have them believe. She hoped she had not been insensitive.

Novak glanced down at the ring with a private smile. “Two years. We went steady for a while back home, and then he joined up. Asked me right before he left. And then I did.”

“Lovely,” Elle murmured, reaching out a hand to cup Novak’s, turning it this way and that so the stone would catch the light. “Really, Agent. My best wishes to you both.”

“Call me Pearl.”

Elle glanced up, a grin dawning on her face, and felt herself relax for the first time since she’d stepped out of her nightgown and slippers. “Then call me Elle. Or Ellie. That seems to be popular now.”

“Well, which one do you prefer?”

“Oh, he’s handsome,” Elle gushed, taking another sip of punch. “Such a nice smile.”

From the photograph, Staff Sergeant Walter J. H. Nichols flashed a surprising grin from under the brim of his peaked cap. “Hmm,” Pearl agreed. “The photographer was a friend, so he took Walter’s official portrait and then one for me. I much prefer this one.” She took the snapshot back from Elle, and placed it tenderly within her clutch.

“And he’s stationed in the Pacific?”

Pearl nodded, reaching for her own glass. “Second Marine Division. We write. Try to keep things light. He’s always complaining about the heat, and I’m always complaining about the fog.”

Time had begun passing by with much more ease since Pearl had sat down. Elle could not help but
be a little resentful that Janie and Lila had effectively disappeared, after dragging her out and away from a cozy evening in. However, this new side to her trainer was proving to be quite enjoyable. Comfort was a tipsy drink, and Elle found herself growing quite giggly as the hour slipped by. The hazy smoke of the dance hall, and the opening notes of yet another lively rendition of a popular song, made for a dreamy sort of world, one that had gone soft around the edges, and Stark’s teasing had begun to fade to the back of her mind.

But evidently, that was about to change. Pearl cleared her throat, and all of a sudden, she looked every inch the agent. “Elle, I hate to talk shop, but I did just want to, uh, re-emphasize that you are doing really well. You’re much stronger and capable. It’s impressive.”

“And surprising?” Elle asked with a wry smile, echoing Pearl’s words from earlier that day.

She had the good grace to look a little abashed at that. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way, honestly. I’m just a little taken aback, I guess. Training is my primary job these days, and I haven’t yet had a recruit develop so quickly. Even with one-on-one instruction.”

Elle tipped her glass in Pearl’s direction. “Helps to have a brilliant teacher, though.”

“That goes without saying.”

The frantic notes of something by Glenn Miller started up then, blossoming out into a fulsome, audible joy, bringing a broader beam to Elle’s face in particular. She observed the couples speeding by, little black heels tip-tapping on the floor as one GI passed by with a wink at the two of them, earning himself a teasing swat from his partner, who just rolled her eyes in a flash.

“Can I ask you something?” Pearl leaned forward, touching Elle’s elbow to draw her attention.

“Is it why she’s not been dancing? Because I’ve been wondering the same thing.” Peggy settled into one of the free seats, an actual vision in red and confidence. “Evening, Pearl. Elle.”

Pearl tried to bite back a laugh. “Actually, that’s exactly what I was going to ask. I’ve been sitting here for nearly an hour and she hasn’t moved. I rescued her from Stark.”

“Kind of you.” Peggy sipped elegantly from her drink, then levelled that steely gaze at Elle, who squirmed under the growing (albeit good-natured) tension. She needed a good explanation for this one, and cast around for a sufficient excuse. And then simply decided the truth would be enough.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” she said softly, watching as the same GI, now dancing with a woman who looked too much like Genevieve for that to be a coincidence (yes, indeed, the candy-pink dress was bouncing in time with the beat) went streaming by their table. “Not without…”

“The right partner?”

Elle raised a heated gaze to meet Peggy’s, and was grateful to find no disapproval there. Pearl reached over to squeeze her hand on the table, empathy positively radiating from the small embrace. She understood. Perhaps they both did.

“Barnes, right?” Pearl asked. “The one that’s got you all doe-eyed all the time?”

“I’ve done no such thing!”

Pearl and Peggy exchanged an exasperated look, as Elle snatched her hand away and crossed her arms rather petulantly across her chest. She resented the implication; it sounded so girlish and inexperienced. Did she look at him like that?
“Ha!” Pearl tossed her head back with a throaty laugh while Peggy shot her a mischievous grin over the rim of her glass. “Ellie, you’ve seen Bambi, right? The one about the little deer? What’s that word -- oh, ‘twitterpated.’ You’re all twitterpated for that boy, and he is for you. I’ve seen him in the halls. Looks at you like you just finished hanging the moon.”

Elle visibly started at that. She knew full well the intensity of Bucky’s gaze when their eyes met -- on more than one occasion the looks he gave her sent heat crawling up her spine and flooding her face with a deep, pink blush. Ye gods, the man was sinfully handsome, and so sweet and kind. She’d told him once, a long time ago, in a snow-covered forest, that she thought she might be falling in love with him, but she knew better now.

She adored Bucky Barnes.

But slithering around that delightful fact were those insidious little doubts. Did he truly feel the same way, or was pursuing her simply easy? With a self-conscious shake of her head, she wondered if she should express this. She didn’t know much about Peggy’s personal life, but Pearl was an engaged woman; she clearly knew a thing or two about relationships. Perhaps Elle could confide in them? Furthermore, both knew Bucky.

Later, doll.

“We...” No, try again. “I do enjoy, er, spending time with him. I just...get worried sometimes, I suppose. Lost in my thoughts.” Of faraway battlefields, broken bodies of good men.

Though she hadn’t specified the theme of those thoughts, Peggy seemed to discern it regardless. “He’s a good soldier,” she said softly, leaning closer across the table. “They’ll all be fine.”

“It’s not just that.” Elle looked down at her hands, arranging them neatly on the table to disguise the slight tremble in her fingers. “Sometimes I worry...that it’s all too contrived between us. Stark was talking about our set-up, how we all live together --”

“There’s nothing untoward there,” Peggy interjected swiftly.

“I know.” She took a few breaths, hoping to steady herself. “But what if...what if Bucky is just, er, courting me because I’m there, or because he’s just convinced himself that he cares for me, rather than that he genuinely does? And he’s so at-attractive and charming and I just feel...I don’t quite know.”

“Say no more,” Pearl insisted. “Look, I’ve met Barnes a few times. He seems like he’s confident, focused. Knows what he wants. And from the very beginning, even when you and him had that strange little argument going on, when he didn’t want you in the field -- he was looking out for you. Respecting you. And you’re right -- he is young, and handsome, and charming, the whole nine, but look at the fact that he hasn’t gotten distracted from you. He’s got women batting their eyelashes at him the whole livelong day and he’s still only got eyes for you.”

“You told me about the flowers at Christmas, Elle,” Peggy added firmly. “And the letter. He left her a letter before he left for the mission, you see.”

“There!” Pearl jabbed a finger into the table to emphasize her point. “That right there. That’s consideration. What did the letter say? The gist of it, you don’t have to tell us everything.”

Dear Ellie,
I hate to leave like this, without saying a real goodbye, but you know our job. We’ll be back before you know it, so please don’t worry. How about this -- I promise to take a parachute out of the plane once we fly over London on the way back. How does that sound? Subtle, I hope. Because I’m all about that. I’ll be seeing you soon, I know it, doll. And I haven’t forgotten about later. I hope you haven’t either.

Yours, B.

She had it bloody memorized. Particularly the firm line drawn under the word “later.”

“Just that he would be back soon, and not to worry.” And he promised to kiss me, she added privately. “It was very quick. Rushed. He likely only had a few minutes.”

Peggy smiled. “That’s lovely, Elle. That he took the time to reassure you.”

“But I’m so ordinary,” she whispered, as though confessing a crime. “Bucky could have any woman he wanted, and I’m just...I don’t look like - like - like Genevieve!”

“Genevieve?” Pearl asked, sharing a bewildered expression with Peggy, who merely shrugged, then turned her attention back to Elle.

“Never mind all that. You’re a nice-looking girl, with or without all this dolling up,” Peggy said gently. “Besides that, he’s seen you in the worst moments of your life, back in Austria. Lipstick and curls won’t matter to a man like him. A good man. I gather Bucky is the sort of person who prefers to look to the inside, when deciding how he feels about a person. Look at his friendship with Steve.”

“And wait until he hears how much you’ve progressed,” Pearl pointed out. “How much closer you are to being deployable again. Bucky will be so proud.” She smirked. “Of you, not of Genevieve.”

“Who the hell is Genevieve?”

His voice was raspy, strained -- as though he’d just woken up. And without thinking, Elle bounded into his arms, dashing her worries and her fears away as she embraced him, not one thought given to how it might look. Her heart pounded in her ears as his hands settled at her waist, his thumbs rubbing slightly. “Hey, doll, sh .”

Was she crying?

Broken bodies. Zola and his needle, drip-drip-dripping horror. Her name on his lips, a deathbed promise in bloody snow.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, stepping back, mortification thrumming through her veins as she avoided meeting the eyes of everyone in her vicinity. ‘I just...I’m sorry.” Elle looked up; Bucky’s smile was wide and bright, in stark contrast to the bruises patterning the left side of his face, the deep circles under his eyes.

“Don’t apologize, doll. I missed you, too,” he said lowly, tugging her back towards him a little. For a moment, they simply gazed at each other, Elle savouring the familiar contours of his face, and the jaunty angle of his hat -- the one that always made him seem more the carefree boy than soldier. He tipped his head, looked down at her with that smile, the one that sent her knees to jelly and crinkled his eyes so endearingly at the corners. “You look beautiful, Ellie. Perfect.”

“Excuse us, won’t you, Sergeant Barnes?” Elle glanced over her shoulder to watch Peggy and Pearl gathering their drinks and handbags, gesturing vaguely to a distant table. “We’ve just seen...someone.”
“Evening, ladies,” he called after them, his eyes never leaving Elle’s face. “Seriously, doll. You look so amazing.” His eyes roved over her figure, lingering on the way the bodice of the dress sloped gently upwards, on the frilly cap sleeves designed to keep a dancer cool. Something pleasurable swooped low in her stomach as she realized how intently he was studying her.

Self-consciously, Elle looked away, wanting to change the subject. “Thank you,” she demurred. “How did the mission go?”

He tightened his embrace, but gently, so that Elle simply felt as though she were being gathered to him, leaving her no choice (not that she was displeased about it), but to wind her arms about his neck and lean in. “It was fine. Gabe’s got a broken arm and Monty’s got a hell of a headache, but we’re fine, sweetheart. All home. The others went straight to bed.”

Sympathy clenched in her stomach. Poor Gabe; poor James. She should head home, unpack their rucksacks, perhaps, head to bed so she could get up early to make them breakfast. Sensing she was about to pull away, Bucky lowered his mouth to her ear. “Hold on, doll. They’re all asleep; we’ve got some time, if you want to dance.”

She shivered at his proximity, at the heat in his tone. Later, doll. Was this to be “later,” then? Days and days had passed. He was visibly exhausted, possibly with mild injuries he was choosing not to tell her about. It was nothing so sweet as a morning in the kitchen, his hair rumpled delightfully from the night before. No, now was more traditional -- a soldier dancing with a girl at a USO event -- and yet no one less intoxicating.

And yet, and yet -- the music had picked up again, in the full throes of “Sing, Sing, Sing,” and it was far too fast-paced for her. Elle felt herself growing a little dizzy as she studied the couples around them, hands still clasped so intimately about Bucky’s neck. “I, er, don’t know how. Not like this,” she explained, turning back to him with apology plain in her gaze. He was probably a swell dancer, used to girls who knew their way around the floor. But the occasions with the boy had always been quieter, more refined; nothing like the frenzied swinging and twirling she’d been watching all night long.

She half-expected to see a crestfallen expression or even a note of disappointment on his face, but there was none. Instead, he had merely cocked his head again, appraising her with that old curiosity, the one that seemed to make something in the vicinity of her heart lurch with a pleasant pain. “Come on, then,” he said, slipping from her embrace to grasp just one hand in his. “Follow me.”

“You and I have a thing for abandoned hallways, don’t we, doll?” he asked, laughter trimming his voice. He took a step back, hand still in hers, to take another look at her. “I know I keep saying it, and you are, Ellie, but you are so damn pretty. Like hell, that doesn’t even do you justice. I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too,” she murmured, taking a bold step closer. They were alone now, nothing around them but recruitment posters and reminders about the next rummage sale at St. Luke’s papering the walls. The music had been reduced to a muffled kind of fervour, and she felt far less intimidated by the wild rhythm now.

“So,” he said with a grin, pulling her close yet again. “You want to know how to dance like that?”

She shook her head emphatically. “You are not going to be tossing me around like a ragdoll, Sergeant Barnes. Not even for the sake of the USO.”

“How about this then?” Bucky took her right hand in his left, tugging it up slightly and away from
them only a little. With his right hand, he held her waist, hand splayed at the small of her back. Naturally, her free hand curved, almost of its own accord, around his shoulder. “This’ll do for a slower song. And then we just…”

Their steps were easy, soft. In unison. As though they’d been dancing for years. And even though they were alone in a hallway, with the frantic stylings of Benny Goodman still playing, even faintly, around them, she didn’t feel in the least bit silly or self-conscious. Because there was only the two of them, in the whole wide world, wasn’t there? There was only the smell of his aftershave, the heat of his palm pressing hers into his chest. The steady beating of their hearts.

Genevieve who?

His hand was hot on her back, searing through the green dress, and as the music changed, slipping into the silky tones of “That Old Black Magic,” Elle found herself pressing closer and closer, until she felt him shudder against her. “Sweetheart,” he said. “Can it be ‘later’ now?”

She leaned back as their swaying paused, looked up. “He’s got the lips for it,” Janie had said, hours ago. He certainly did, Elle thought, wondering what to do next. His breath hitched in his chest, and her gaze flickered up to meet his eyes. Blue and hazy. They were summer and winter at the same time, and she could scarcely breathe now, he was getting closer, and she nodded, she nodded, and her eyes drifted shut again, as his lips finally, finally pressed to hers, so gently and sweetly she again wanted to cry. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed. Just his lips on hers.

And then a pause, a breath. He pulled away, and she ached at his absence. An impossibly icy heat raced up her spine, and she let loose the softest little sigh. “Elle,” he whispered.

Bucky dropped her hand to wind both arms around her waist, bringing his lips to hers more intensely now, and she brought both her arms up to encircle his neck again, wishing just for a moment that he had foregone the hat. He was so good, so wonderful, so gentle and his mouth moved against hers with a dizzying grace. When Elle let her fingers trail over the back of his neck, he let out a gentle, faint groan that seemed to rocket straight to her stomach, causing that pounding ache to return, and she wanted, she wanted, but she didn’t know what yet.

Her thoughts raced in contradictions and couplets, a frenzied poetry of action and feeling. She was spinning, but standing still; hot but cold; alone and yet so wholly complete. Here, she thought dazedly, as he lavished a kiss lower on her jaw, then a chain of them down the column of her neck -- here is where I should be. Whole galaxies couldn’t contain this kind of contentment, this peaceful, knowing jubilation.

“Bucky,” she gasped, as he pressed his lips to a spot near her ear, one that caused an aria to burst in her heart. “Bucky.”

Language was reduced to names, and sensations. This was so fast, so much for a first kiss, and yet, she thought, as his mouth returned to hers, more insistent this time -- and yet, hadn’t this always been the way it was to be with them? The world pressed against them from all sides, risk and danger and time working against them -- and they met in the middle, in the lovely middle, the eye of the storm, a space just for them and these kisses, for his hands on her and the faint fading notes of music drifting away beyond…

And the slam of a door in the near vicinity.

Elle jumped back, startled, and Bucky swore under his breath, his hands releasing her to reach up and adjust his uniform where their embrace had caused it to shift and rumple. Over his shoulder, Elle could see a familiar smile and felt a wave of relief wash over her.
“Agent Carter, ma’am,” Bucky said once he’d turned around, a faint dusting of pink across his cheeks.

"It’s good to see you, Sergeant Barnes, but I really must insist you and Miss Andersen head back to your residence now. It’s nearly midnight, and you were supposed to return, as I understand it, after your appointment on the medical ward,” Peggy said brusquely, winking at Elle. “I can trust you to escort Miss Andersen home safely, can’t I, Sergeant?”

"Of course, ma’am.” He glanced back over his shoulder with a cheeky grin. “Safe and sound.”

Elle bit at her lip, finding it plumper and swollen for his kisses, and she reached forward for his hand, taking it in two of hers, tracing a gentle pattern onto the back of his wrist. Five minutes alone and she was already craving his touch? But he was so handsome, so wonderful, and -- was he hers, now? Yours, B, he’d written.

“Oh, and Sergeant?” Peggy paused with her hand on the door to the main hall, throwing them both a knowing smile. “As lovely as that lipstick is on Miss Andersen, you might want to borrow a handkerchief for yourself.”

She left them laughing, Elle reaching up her thumb to rub away the Montezuma-red traces of her adoration from his bottom lip. And then, for good measure, she kissed him again. “Bucky?” she said softly.

“Yeah, doll?”

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Music referenced in this chapter:

1. "Cow Cow Boogie" by Ella Mae Morse (1942)
2. "Furlough Fling" by Freddie Slack (1943)
3. "In The Mood" by Glenn Miller (1939)
4. "Sing, Sing, Sing" by Benny Goodman (1936)
5. "That Old Black Magic" by Margaret Whiting (1942)
The broom hit the floor with a painful clatter, and Bucky swore softly against her lips.

“Do you think we oughta find a different spot?” he asked, leaning away just for a moment to reach down and prop it back up in the far corner of the cupboard, before winding his arms around her waist again. She smiled and leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

“Mmm, perhaps. But I think I’d rather miss the smell of bleach.”

“More than me?” he gasped, feigning shock. “I’m hurt, baby doll.”

Theirs was an elegant sort of subterfuge, the sweetest kind; at odd moments, Bucky had taken to pulling her inside the closet, when all others were occupied with their business around the house. It was dusty and dim, lit only by a naked bulb; and indeed, the scent of washing-up powder and bleach did tend to rise up around them, but there was also a necessitated closeness, engineered by the small confines and the heavily-laden shelves around them. The pair of them had no choice but to stand close together, to wind their arms about each other.

Three busy weeks had passed since the USO dance. The Commandos had been deployed twice, on short missions in France. Monty and Gabe had been cleared to travel, but Dugan was still on desk-duty at headquarters most days. Elle had resumed her training, but the hours she spent at her own desk were now filled with distraction, as her memory fluttered so lovingly over their quiet, chaste (thus far) trysts.

Kisses in the dim light. His hands around her waist, tightening and rising. And then, gradually, more: he loved to trace her neck, with hot, open-mouthed kisses that seared her skin and caused soft sighs to slip from her own lips. She loved to murmur sweet endearments against his skin, to earn a gentle groan by sliding her fingers through his hair. She became his doll, his baby, his darling. And in turn, he was her love, her sweetheart, her James. Something came over him when she called him that, whispered it warmly in the shell of his ear.

At times -- largely when she was making a pink-cheeked, furtive escape, adjusting her blouse or poking self-consciously at her hair -- Elle wondered how they had moved so quickly. How she could feel the rush of his affection, heady and decadent, in his every movement, his every word. Why me? was her constant thought, her frequent worry. Despite the reassurance to be found in his tenderness, she could not help but sit in wonder -- in raw, kiss-seared amazement -- that she had found this.

The guilt came at night.

In dreams, of the boy, and his mother. Betrayal soaking her in a cold sweat. Dreams of broken glass and shattered bonds, as he glared at her with cool disapproval. She knew she couldn’t break his heart; but breaking his trust was far more weighty a crime, and she risked it every time she slipped down to the broom cupboard, every time she took a step closer, every time she laughed and teased him. Ran her hands through his hair; nuzzled her face into the safe embrace of his neck.

The night that Bucky slid to the floor, with her draped over his side, and she felt a bolt of lightning strike her veins -- that night she dreamt of the boy and a wintry rage, a deadly snow that burned even as it froze her.

*I’m not married*, she reassured herself. *I’m not married, not engaged. I’m a free woman.* And she was. She had been so loyal all those years, loyal to a fault. Even when the boy had been unkind and
distant; even when he had weighed his pain as far more important than her love. Even when the balm of comfort she sought to offer him was rebuked with derision -- she had loved him then. Honoured him.

The lack of a proposal was not, for Elle, rooted in any sense of frivolity. It was not a party she wanted; it was a *celebration* -- no, an *enactment* of their love. What the boy saw as wasted time and vanity, she understood as commitment, and joy in the affection and trust of another. But where years had unwound between them, frayed and unconsummated, Bucky’s affection blazed hot and merrily against her skin and her soul, and his commitment even more so.

He’d apologized for his behaviour of months ago. He respected her position in the Commandos; praised her development and training. And he honoured her, never pushing her further than she was willing to go, preening only that he had been her first American kiss. Elle’s value, for him, lay in more than her wandering hands and soft, scented hair.

And perhaps, she reflected one night, having woken with a gasp from yet another nightmare -- perhaps the boy had valued her so. But she had no way of knowing for certain, no desire to contact him now, not when he had permitted her to leave for war without so much as a proper “goodbye,” let alone a confession of his undying affections. “I love you,” had been simple for him; “I desire you,” so much more intoxicating.

The boy’s love was orderly, structured and refined, if not a little scandalous at times. But Bucky’s love? That was jazz, that was swing, a song thrumming through her and setting her every nerve alight. Misplaced notes that seemed to somehow fall just right; unexpected, soaring notes that sent her spinning. Bucky’s love was a riot of sensation, a consuming chaos of soul and sensation, and it burst in her veins. “My girl,” he would say, as a morning greeting, wrapping an arm around her waist, when they were alone by the sink. “What colour are we wearing today?” he’d ask, before she pressed her red lips against his, or chased kisses against the sensitive skin of his neck.

Bucky’s love was a song, pure and simple. And what was life without a little music?

Shuffling the last few pages of the file with a yawn, Elle realized that she and Bucky ought to be scheduling their meetings much earlier in the evenings. Between her training and her desk work, the late nights were beginning to grow rather an inconvenience, albeit a pleasurable one. It was near half-eleven most nights when they finally crept up the stairs, his hand tangled loosely with hers as he led her up to the second floor, a mouthed reminder to avoid the fourth step, as it creaked.

“Late night?” Lila smirked, sliding her a cup of tea. “Which one is it? Please tell me its Barnes. Although that Jones is quite a looker, too. Have you heard his French?”

Elle smiled and took a sip, bracing herself against the heat. “It’s Rochester, actually,” she joked. “And that attic of his is getting quite noisy.”

“Please tell me you did not just make a Brontë joke, love.”

They passed their morning tea break in much the same vein, idling away the minutes until work would inevitably claim them. Lila confided in her about a transfer she was considering, a posting somewhere in Scotland she couldn’t really pinpoint, it was simply so classified. “What do you think?” she asked, suddenly serious. “It’ll mean more pay, but the fact I can’t tell her exactly where has my poor mum going round the twist.”

Elle had never seen Lila so discomfited; normally the picture of utter confidence, it was actually jarring to watch her nibble uncertainly at her fingernail, glancing around the busy typing room to
make certain no one else was listening in. For a moment, Elle wondered if she had gone to Janie yet with the same question. “...well...” Mentally, she cast about for something helpful to say, but could think of nothing. “Perhaps...perhaps you ought to ask Janie? Or Agent Carter, perhaps?”

Her experience with military roles and advancement was limited, to say the least. Elle had known enough of British Army protocol to enlist with the VAD, and to stumble her way through a few more formal interactions within the Royal Army Medical Corps, but other than that, she was at a loss. It was a tad embarrassing, actually, to realize how little she knew of the SSR as a body -- she only tended to pay attention when the Commandos came up.

But as to how one might advance their own career within such a structure, Elle had no inkling.

“I’m asking you, Elle,” Lila said, hearty tone belying the stress clear within her gaze. “What would you do? If they offered you more money? And truly, this could guarantee me some post-war work, too.”

She started at that, a tiny thrill shuddering through her at the prospect of a post-war world. The phrase seemed so foreign to Elle, perhaps because she had never thought to let herself imagine, to propel herself into that space -- as though it didn’t rightfully belong to her. What could her life be, after the war? A normal life, a life of groceries and bills and overdue library books and -- and him?

A sudden flash of understanding, of presentience: a tiny, cramped flat; the frenetic music of the city playing outside; a flowered tea-towel swinging on a hook; their hands roaming in the privacy and freedom of their own home. She felt a flush creeping up her neck and busied herself with arranging a line of pens on her desk, hoping Lila hadn’t noticed. “I suppose I’m...quite happy here. With the way things are now. But our roles are different, aren’t they? You have more influence here already, and a promotion could only make things better, in the long run.”

It was true. Lila Edwards was already turning official heads as an agent, having been headhunted directly from Cambridge some two years’ prior. There were whispers of M15, whispers that made Elle sometimes feel a clutch of half-envy, half-fear -- but that set a pleased, proud grin to Lila’s lips.

Looking at her now, though, perched delicately on the edge of this government-issued desk, nervously jostling a knee and fingers visibly twitching for a cigarette, she looked for all the world like a girl trying to choose between two suitors. One offered the same old same, a kind of predictability that was good at dressing up as security; the other was a flightier tempter, all slick smiles and beckoning hands, and he promised risk or reward, but wouldn’t say which.

The truth was, Elle would have stayed, if the choice had been put to her. The world after the war was still too distant for her, still out of reach, and she could not bring herself to calculate the cost of those dues. With Bucky and the others leaving every week for some operation or another, moving back and forth across the Channel, always just under the radar, her own peace of mind was tenuous at best. And there was talk brewing of a longer campaign, of weeks away. HYDRA was growing in influence on the Continent, the threat of Schmidt’s will unfurling like a storm across the occupied nations, already fighting on other fronts.

Any goodbye could be the last. The thought had occurred to her the week before, when Bucky had, in full kit, the collar of his blue jacket already popped against the anticipated chill of the morning, tugged her into the closet and kissed her breathless. “See you soon, Ellie,” he’d whispered, breathing in the scent of her hair as though trying to memorize it, twining their fingers and staring, with ill-concealed awe, at the sight of their skin pressed and tangled so seamlessly, as though they had always been meant to be thus.

She’d watched him go, standing on the stoop as he and the others piled into the lorry, his rucksack
filled with clothes and books and a special note from her, one she’d slipped in without his notice, a light missive traced with inside jokes and a sprinkle of her perfume.

After the war, she’d decided, she would never say goodbye to him again.

He was her second suitor, the second man she’d kissed, the second man who had caused her knees to buckle and her mind to turn to the lovely lure of tangled sheets and shared dreams -- he was the second. Her risk and her reward; in the short space of a few months, Elle had found her life turned upon its head, but in such a dizzyingly wonderful way that she could scarcely think back to the time before him, before the Commandos. Before this sense of purpose, clasped in her own two hands, not put there by her mother’s instructions or the boy’s influence.

She had leapt, leapt into the blue of his eyes, willing him to catch her, and he had, he had -- he always would.

And it was his gaze in her mind, the warmth of his grip on her waist and the gentle glide of his fingers as he turned her in the closet, pressing his chest to her back and laving quick kisses to the secret of her exposed collarbone -- it was Bucky in her mind as she advised Lila, as she reached out a friendly hand and squeezed in comfort and pride.

Two suitors -- one of the past, one of the known; the other urging her forward, on to better realms. The choice, Elle thought, was delightfully simple.

Tea was an egg each, an egg and a few tomatoes. A slim, scant supper, but the order from the Land Army farm in Detling had yet to arrive and the only other option was rations. And as Dugan gruffly decreed, spooning some jam onto his bread, forcing themselves to put those on fine china when they were on Allied soil simply had to be considered a war crime.

“Almost as bad as that goddamn cabbage water,” he grumbled.

Elle froze with her fork halfway to her mouth, a small piece of tomato dropping back down to her plate as she looked at him in shock. It was not often the Commandos brought up their time in Austria, the dark days of beatings and desperation. That Dugan had done it so blithely seemed incongruous -- absurd, even. The memory of those days swelled around them now, settling oddly in the cheery confines of their kitchen, where they crammed themselves most evenings, rather than fuss with the dining room.

The silence stretched taut, as forks stilled against plates and the light chatter died away. Looking around, Dugan realized what he had done; more so when Bucky pushed away from the table, stumbling to his feet without a word or a glance in anyone’s direction. After a moment, Elle followed him.

Whether he’d heard her or not, she couldn’t be sure, but then he made a beeline for the closet anyway, holding the door open for her while he looked resolutely at the floor.

Even in the dim light of the cupboard, once he’d flicked on the light, she could see he looked drained. Wan. The opposite of his usual joking, merry self. He hadn’t shaved, either, and while ordinarily Elle tended to relish the faint scratch of his stubble against her skin, tonight she just stroked his jaw sadly, realizing that something more was going on than simply displeasure at Dugan’s comment.

“Bucky?” she asked quietly, unease threading through her veins as he pulled her closer, cupping the back of her head in his hand. She pressed her head against his chest, marvelling once again at how
well they seemed to fit together.

But the weight of their dark days together had wedged between them now -- the memory of Zola and his ministrations playing cruelly at the back of her mind, and Elle bit back a small tide of regret, a feeling of being somehow tainted, even as she was cradled so carefully in his arms. One mere mention of that disgusting *Krautsuppe* and they were back, twisted fast within the grip of harrowing memory.

“Sorry, doll,” he sighed. “I just...I, uh, haven’t been sleeping well, and then Dum just...”

“I know.” She turned her head to press a kiss to his cheek. It was chaste, brief; not intended to fan the flames of heated desire, but merely to comfort him, to remind him that she understood. “Would you...shall we talk about it, then?”

Bucky pulled back slightly, just enough to see her face, and a small, wistful smile slowly came into view. “No, sweetheart. Let’s talk about your day.” One thumb gently swept across her chin, and he leaned down to capture her bottom lip briefly between his. “You had training?”

She nodded, sliding her hands up to cradle his face. Pain darkened his gaze, a story he wasn’t willing to tell, and her heart caught on his admission -- “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Nightmares sung regularly through the shadows of the house -- her own now joining them. But bad dreams were the price of war, weren’t they? Just another toll they must pay. And it hurt her -- oh, it clawed at her -- that she could now distinguish between Bucky’s low groans and Gabe’s; between the restless shifting of Monty’s sheets and the knowledge that Dugan merely tended to pace when his mind grew too heavy. They had seen so much, more than the prison: battlefields and endless nights; the blue light of HYDRA’s deadly machines. The slow, menacing crawl of a massive tank, swollen and arrogant with murderous intent. The futile horror of realizing the weakness of flesh against metal, against lead, against war.

He’d been a boy once, she thought, as he leaned into her touch and his eyes drifted shut. A boy untouched by grim truths. And now he was a man in need of a reprieve; something she could give him. “Calisthenics,” she groaned. “And boxing.”

“Wish I coulda been there,” he said, kissing her temple. “Give you a few pointers.”

“Maybe I didn’t need them!” Elle swatted at his chest teasingly, but then knew a tiny pinprick of hurt as he guided her hands back up to his face. “Oh, James. Please, let’s talk about it.”

“About what? Austria?” But at her tentative nod, he just shook his head. “No, sorry, doll. I don’t...I can’t.” Visibly unsettled, jaw clenching under her touch, he moved her hands back down to waist-level, entwining his fingers with hers but making no move to touch her further. “I’m tired and I don’t want to think about that. I just want to think about you, okay?”

For a few minutes, there was nothing but soft kisses, the quiet sounds of this yielding, this dance they seemed to know so well. And again, she wondered -- this boy from Brooklyn and this girl of craven comforts, how did they come together? There must be something more than happenstance.

She thought then of the tea-towel, the cramped city flat. Her little glimpse of the future. “Bucky, love,” she breathed against his lips. “I-I want to ask you something. Not about -- ah -- Austria.”

“Mmhmm?”

“Do you...” She hesitated; how to frame it? Instinctively, Elle knew it was not a subject often broached by soldiers. Planning for the future, for a world with no enemy -- that was a dangerous
slope to descend. It was why weddings came quickly and one dance often led straight to the bedroom. Some decried the loss of morals, but Elle saw it differently -- even as she and Bucky often had to pull themselves away from the ragged edge, from the temptation of his belt buckle and the hem of her skirt. *Not yet, not yet.*

Elle saw such things as *evidence* of morals. Of true ones. Love, honour. Hope. GI brides who met and wed within weeks because they simply couldn’t bear to be apart one second longer than war would have them.

But the future? The future didn’t belong to them, not yet. They were fighting for it.

She could still ask, though.

“Do you ever think about...after?” she whispered, voice trembling on the last word.

Slowly, Bucky raised her hand, the one HYDRA had indirectly ruined, marred with that ached still in cold water and made her cringe every time the skin brushed against anything other than cotton or him. He pressed a kiss to the centre of her palm, sending heat swooping low in her belly.

The conversation with Lila had sparked this curiosity in her, the first time she had ever given a thought to a life in London (or elsewhere) after the war. And now she could not shift it from her mind, especially not when he was standing so close, so warm and so firm against her. A resolute promise, all for her. And perhaps, she hoped, this curiosity would cheer him, comfort him. Pull him back from this dark ledge. Give him something sweeter to dream of.

She watched his face, alert to any sign of discomfort -- watched as his mouth smoothed into a soft, sad smile, lips pressed into each other as though holding something back. But then his shoulders relaxed, sinking in relief. “Yeah, I do,” he murmured, squeezing her hands. “I do.”

“We...this has been fast,” she admitted ruefully, hoping not to offend or concern him. It wasn’t meant as a complaint, merely an observation. A tallying of events: his head in her lap, her hand in his, that dangerous dance on the factory floor, and then above the flames, in the woods, the tent, the Christmas roses -- so fast. So fast. Love blazing bright and honest in the heart of her, in the damnable space between them.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not forever, darlin’.” Another kiss to her temple, then her forehead, then her hair. She adored when he did this, as though he were cataloguing every inch of her with his lips. “‘Forever?’”

The word was heavy on her tongue. A delicious weight, and she repeated it again, hands trembling as she reached for him, pressing her pain and her history into his shoulders, leaning against him as she said his promise, again and again. Forever. He was promising her forever. He had known her only a few months, and had decided he need not look further. Here was the enactment she’d always longed for, something more than a dance and stolen kisses, than tired reassurances that yes, he did love her and couldn’t she just be content with that? This was more. This was what she had always wanted.

There was a little doubt in his eyes, until she nodded. And then he smiled, so widely and so purely she caught a glimpse, a glimpse of a boy before the war. And she loved him, too.

Wonder made a tearful mess of her. The boy had never promised her so much, handed her *this much hope*, not in a single word. And here Bucky, with a war raging around him and in him, simply smiled at her question and gave her the world. Elle knew then that, when peace came, as it inevitably
must, her world would be a cramped flat, in some city, with a flowered tea-towel swinging on the hook and his body pressed close to hers, as they mapped their own constellations upon each other, as they stole a future and carved out their dreams.

One word.

One word in a dusty closet.

One word in a dusty closet, tears in his throat and flagging hope in his heart, and he -- he made her soul sing. Arch and swing and swoop under a sun of his own making.

Elle was not sure what she had done to earn this, what divinities she may have appeased in another life -- but there was this. There would always be this promise, his lips on hers and the sweet temptation of pleasure thrumming deep within her, that aching desperation of knowing that even were they to climb inside each other’s veins, it would not be close enough. They pressed against each other, knowing they had to be quiet, knowing there was no ring yet, knowing there was no real plan, and both craving the mystery he’d only begun to unlock, and she’d had yet to read.

That night, Bucky tossed and turned on his bed, drowsy hands reaching out loosely for her. And he tangled himself in dreams he hadn’t known in months, not since before Zola. Dreams of soft skin and pretty blushes, of breathless endearments and hurried pleasure. And this time, it’s not some faceless starlet or a girl he used to know -- this time it was her.

_Hands glide over bare skin, shared shivers rippling through their tangled limbs. Breath is shared, too -- in searing open-mouthed kisses, both of them too spent to manage anything else. He notes with satisfaction the pink blush dusting her cheeks and neck, and nips lightly at her collarbone, hoping to deepen the colour. She sighs in response, but he can only chuckle. “Like that, baby doll?” he whispers, kissing the same spot -- though the answer is clear. His mind dizzies as the sound of his own name shudders around him, and hell if he can’t taste it before he hears it, the prettiest damn thing in the world. “Yeah, honey?” he says, because she’s just as sweet. But when he looks up, her face is scarlet now, twisted, a horror-struck echo of her own beautiful self, and he screams, because they did it to her, and when she brings the fucking knife down, all he can see is red._

He woke with a cry.

“You’ve got me doll-dizzy,” he murmured in her ear, under pretence of helping to adjust the strap of her satchel.

The lingering scent of coffee and aftershave surrounded her, and Elle stumbled slightly with the little jolt of excitement that skated up her spine at his husky tone. Their conversation from the evening before -- begun in old pain -- had ended in a breathless parting, a sheen of sweat coating his forehead and her lipstick tracing an intoxicating journey over his mouth and neck. Even now, ten o’clock the next morning, en route to Howling Central and an abruptly-organized meeting with Colonel Phillips -- even now she relished the slight echo of a burn against her skin, where his stubble had scraped against her.

He’d shaved this morning, she noticed with faint dismay, though a smooth-faced Bucky was no less handsome.

Steve glanced over at the two of them lingering in the hallway as the rest of the team filed in ahead, a grin tugging at his mouth as he watched Bucky’s hand lower to Elle’s waist, guiding her into the
meeting room. Some things never changed.

Some things did, though. Elle froze as they crossed the threshold, causing Bucky to glance down with some concern, as worry creased her brow and her lips parted in unaired recognition.

“Wh --” He looked into the room, followed her gaze.

The two women were strangers to him, but not to her. Golden-haired and weary, with broken eyes and battered cheekbones, trembling hands clasping cups of tea in shared movements that seemed to him so vulnerable, so aching, that the pain and fear in the room seemed to seep out, flooding the floor, chilling his skin. He felt Elle step closer, and he tucked her protectively against his side, though what he was protecting her from, he couldn’t be sure. All he knew was that his doll had tears in her eyes, and that her voice wavered as she greeted the women, borrowed pain clear in her every word.

“Adele, Ines -- what are you doing here?”
Louise Richard, neé Lecomte, was the best sort of eldest sister -- fair and patient, with a charming amount of innate rebelliousness, enough to put her on a train to Brussels at the age of seventeen, and then on others all over continental Europe, scribbling down witty, romantic reflections on everything from the finest cathedrals to the swankiest restaurants. Something for everyone, that was Louise -- so her younger sister confided, cup of tea in hand, firelight dancing upon her bruised cheeks.

Tears crowded Adele’s throat as she related memory after memory to Elle, two hours after the lengthy meeting had ended, in the safe confines of the Commandos’ terraced house. Next to them, Ines paced back and forth, nerves having boiled over into fearsome rage, while Bucky, Steve, and Gabe watched uncertainly from the doorway.

The light tinkle of trembling china encouraged Elle to reach over and take the cup and saucer from Adele’s grasp, setting them down on the side table before taking both the woman’s hands in hers. Since the whole story had unfolded, in emotional fits and starts, Adele had been overwrought, teetering on the brink of nervous collapse -- except when Elle spoke, or touched her.

“Tu devrais dormir, mon ami,” she said soothingly, her voice feather-light. “Sleep will help. You’re safe here, Adele.”

“It’s not her safety she’s concerned about,” Ines snapped in rapid-fire French. “Our sister is still dying that damn prison and your precious soldiers won’t do a fucking thing about it.”

Elle twisted in the armchair, eyes suddenly blazing. “That’s not true and you know it,” she argued. “They require an objective. Once they’ve pinned down the facility’s position, they can strike. And they will.”

“We told you the location, fille stupide! They should have left hours ago! Louise could be -- she could be --” Horror stole the rest of her words, and she collapsed onto the chesterfield next to her sister, the full weight of the past week suddenly striking through her. Hot tears escaped the last vestiges of rigid composure, and she squeezed her fists tight against her eyes. “Mon Dieu, Elle -- et si elle est morte? What if we really have lost her? What if she -- what would they do to her?”

With no other clear idea of how to help -- she had spent hours repeating the same reassurances, employing her gentlest, most calming tone -- Elle simply slid to the floor in front of them, grasping firm each of their hands, holding fast and offering what she could. Would that she was able to turn a corner down the hall, pull Louise and her husband, safe and sound, from the broom cupboard. Would that the Howling Commandos could simply hop on an aeroplane and pluck them from the HYDRA prison.

Such hopes were slim and childish; war is so vastly complex -- but love is simple. And that was all Elle could offer them, kneeling on the shabby rug, hand-in-hand. Bucky felt a lump rise in his throat at the plaintive scene, two sisters and the ghost of a third, his girl’s tired eyes and soft voice assuring them, as much as she could, in a language he couldn’t understand. Not for the first time, it amazed him how calming she could be -- how knowing. Even the taller one -- Ines -- who had seemed to him a storm of a woman, began to relax, though tears streaked down her cheeks and angry interjections still spilled, intermittently, from her mouth.
“Nous ferons ce que nous pouvons, mes amis,” Elle said quietly. The words meant little to him, but the tension suddenly rolled from his shoulders, the fear and anxiety about yet another goddamn mission -- it all dissipated. Her words were like her kisses, like her gentle hands upon his skin. “Et nous espérons et pensons avoir de bonnes pensées.”

Good thoughts, good thoughts -- that was all they had now.

In the spring of 1943, Louise Richard and her husband, Emmanuel, had received word, through a furtive grapevine of spies, informants, and those loyal to the cause of freedom, that the Gestapo were coming.

There was not enough time.

No time for letters, no time for escape. Merely a few moments to come together in their sitting room, to burn the papers that might incriminate their friends and her sisters, to sit with their wedding picture and remember the brighter days. The ones before war and hatred had so ravaged the countries they’d once traipsed merrily through -- irresponsible, foolish children in love. Louise had fancied herself an artist, her husband even more so; and the brothers-in-law who now sat shaking in the kitchen -- the eldest debating whether or not to simply walk off the bridge down the street now or wait for the police -- they had seen themselves as carvers of a new world, armed with ancient knowledge.

The eldest brother-in-law did not make it out the door.

Louise had gone proudly, quietly. Emmanuel and Peter had wept for their brother, but only in their hearts.

And when they slammed the first set of bars shut upon their faces, Louise had thought of Ines and Adele, the little house in Charleroi, the flowers in the garden. The silk and lace of her wedding gown. Adele’s baking; Ines’ jibes.

Transfer after transfer, the three were constantly moved. Emmanuel was in demand because he was strong and skilled, a labourer after all his work to become an artist. Peter was kept alive for his brain, his mathematical prowess. And Louise? Louise was kept alive by sheer force of will.

Her golden hair fell out by September; her heart had broken by December. And in January, when the snow came fast and furious, she was transferred again, this time with Peter only, for Emmanuel had long since slipped away, taking half her world with him.

Greece.

She had been there before, she remembered dimly, watching through the half-frozen slats of the railcar as the turquoise promise of the Mediterranean came into view. She had been there as a girl, a girl of eighteen, with a slim waist and laughing eyes, heart full to bursting with a childish kind of delight in herself. Now she was older, with a threadbare soul. Her will was waning, her hope flagging. Her heart tiring.

Ines knew a little of this, but she could well imagine, based on the facts. Her friends, in high places and in low ones, had worked together to assemble as clear a picture as possible of Louise’s arrest for her work with the French Resistance. She’d found out that Louise, Emmanuel, and Peter Richard were arrested in April by the Gestapo, but then were quickly transferred to HYDRA’s custody, for reasons that initially, had seemed murky. Peter was a mathematician, of course; his brother, the one shot in the house, had been a doctor. Both fields would have earned them a higher value as prisoners,
naturally. But Emmanuel was a photographer; Louise a travel writer. These jobs would not guarantee their safety, especially in light of their impassioned efforts with the Resistance.

But somehow, the three of them had survived. Ines had discovered evidence of their arrival at a HYDRA facility in Austria, then another, six weeks later, outside of Berlin. Three months after that, they were transferred to Denmark, then back to France, and then finally, by January of 1944, she had obtained confirmation that Louise and Peter Richard had arrived at a base near Thessaloniki -- a known communications hub for HYDRA.

There, things had fallen together, and Ines, on a cold February morning, had finally told Adele of what she had learned. Whispers of Peter’s cryptographic skills had reached her ears long before then; it made sense that HYDRA would make use of him. Perhaps, Adele suggested, perhaps Louise had been kept alive as incentive for Peter’s work, or at his insistence.

When Elle and Jacques had arrived in December as part of Operation Newlywed, Ines had no real knowledge of any of this -- sustained merely by half-formed nightmares and a deep sense of anger. She’d taken it out most enthusiastically upon Elle, fixing on her as part of the problem. A naive young woman with no sense of loss, no experience with pain. Ines had been almost jealous of the girl’s perceived innocence, as though she had yet been untouched by the horrors of war.

But she’d inspired something in Ines, a brief flickering of hope, of purpose. She had lost her Sabine, her oldest and dearest friend, for sure and for certain. Sometimes, in dark dreams, Ines still could feel the girl’s hand slip from hers, the crack of a bullet severing years of love and trust. But Louise? There was still a possibility, even the thinnest, even the most unlikely, that Louise was still alive. And the more she traced the trail of information and fleshed out the story, the more Ines had cause to hope.

Until the day her cover was blown.

Bucky and Elle didn’t make it to the broom cupboard that night, but neither was complaining; the day had been long and taxing, and by seven o’clock that evening, they were both ready to turn in.

The house was quiet -- Elle had managed to convince both Lecomte sisters that sleep would help them, ease their minds. Their bruises and cuts, sustained from a beating by the Gestapo, had been tended to on the medical war before leaving HQ, and the plan was, quite simply, for them to remain within the Commandos’ domestic residence until further notice. Not that Elle minded in the slightest.

“Ines can be a bit testy,” she told Bucky, settling down beside him on the chesterfield and then curling naturally into his side. She rested her head on his chest and finally took a deep, fortifying breath. “But she does mean well, truly. And Adele is lovely, you’ll see.”

“You don’t have to sell me, doll,” he said with a yawn, stretching out his feet to rest on the coffee table. “‘They’re quite something, running that operation like they did. And finding all this intel? Phillips was over the moon. They’re just damn lucky they had a mole in the Gestapo. Wouldn’t be here without him.” Gently, he stroked her arm, earning himself a soft sigh. “You know, uh, when Jim got back he said we’re leaving tomorrow. Oh-seven-hundred-hours.”

Elle stiffened in his embrace. It had been only a few days since they’d returned from the last mission.

Though her training was going well, and Pearl was full of praise, she had yet to be officially reinstated as a deployable non-combatant, and the lack of active participation was beginning to chafe at her. Not to mention that she felt so much stronger -- faster, more capable generally. Elle was ready to go back, to being in the field with them. To simply have a chance to put her new skills and
stamina to good use.

“Thessaloniki,” she murmured, tasting the word. It was summer on her tongue, a foreign paradise, blue water and green hills. “Do you think -- I didn’t like to say anything in front of them -- but do you think it’s possible their sister is still alive?”

Bucky hesitated a moment before answering. By all accounts (if Ines’ information was accurate), Louise Richard had managed to stay alive a hell of a long time. HYDRA liked to have people prove their usefulness, and if they could be an asset to the cause, they were kept alive. A memory prodded there, catching on that idea, and he bit back a rise of bile as he remembered the source: Zola. Zola had told him that, during the hours of testing, of experimenting. With the cold metal against his back and fire in his veins….

“Love?” she asked, lifting her head from his chest. “Are you alright?”

He tried to muster a reassuring grin, for her sake, for her peace of mind. The absolute last thing Elle needed right now was to worry about him the night before a mission. “Sure am,” he whispered, pressing a light kiss to her forehead. “Why don’t you go on up to bed, sweetheart? You must be tired.”

It was the right thing to do. The proper thing. To extricate herself from his embrace, especially since she’d already changed into her night-dress, brushed out her hair and twisted it into a hasty plait. A stronger man than him would have helped her to her feet, not pulled the afghan up to their necks, settled his hand on her waist, tugged her flush against him, let alone begin tracing delicate patterns across the silk sleeve of her dressing-gown. A wiser man would have realized that it would be fruitless to try to sleep with his legs on the coffee table in front of him and his neck angled awkwardly against the back of the couch.

But then, a stronger, wiser man would not have woken in the night to her soft breathing, warm and welcome against the exposed skin of his chest, where his undershirt had slipped down and her cheek had eventually rested. A stronger, wiser man would not have felt the easy balm of her presence, when his whole body had tensed in the aftershock of a nightmare.

A stronger, wiser man would not have promised her “forever.” But a good man -- a man in love -- he did.

Distraction, distraction. Before the team (including, this time, the ineffable Agent Carter) had departed for Greece, Elle had been given three pieces of advice:

From Peggy: “Find something to do. Training, yes, but keep them both busy. The longer they sit there and worry, the worse it’s going to be for all of you. Make sure you all sleep, too.”

From Steve: “I know this probably seems, uh, a bit like some bad timing, Elle, but...it’s Bucky’s birthday in a few days. The tenth. And I just thought, when we get back...maybe we could have a little something? Might be good for morale.”

Elle had let the idea percolate for a few days, as she and the sisters Lecomte adjusted to their new living arrangements. But rising tensions and sleepless nights left all three of them feeling ill at ease in general, and on the fourth day after the team had been deployed, Elle married the two distinct pieces of advice into a cheery proposition -- one that Ines scoffed at and that caused Adele to practically leap out of her chair.

“Oh, yes, wonderful!” she beamed. “That’ll be just the thing. He’s your young man, isn’t he, ma
Reddening at the boldness of the term, Elle nodded slowly, supposing that it _did_ fit. And no matter -- Adele was heartened by the project, arranging to freshen up the sitting room, rearrange some of the furniture, and even haggled for some preserves and rare baking supplies down the market one Saturday, aiming to provide even a small cake for the party.

On the subject of her missing sister, Adele said nothing.

Ines, on the other hand, could not stop talking about Louise. By the second day of her stay, she had begun to stubbornly follow Elle to HQ, pulling up a chair at a spare desk and smoking away the hours while Elle typed up reports and organized files. In the afternoons, Ines observed while she and Pearl went through several rounds on the mats, and then nattered endlessly on the way home. She talked mainly about her weeks of research, of pressing connections, compiling enough information to formulate a clear timeline. Elle was a little in awe of her resilience, her relentless determination to do what she could to help her sister.

But the prospect of bad news seemed to prowl the edges of their every conversation, dowsing them both with cold shock when they _remembered_, with a jolt, the true weight of the situation. The Howling Commandos had landed in Greece safely, they had heard that much. From there, though, the team would have to actually locate the facility, endure a few days of reconnaissance, formulate a plan -- and then actually infiltrate.

Reports speculated that some one to two hundred prisoners were kept at the Thessaloniki base, but that the location was largely used to house a pool of cryptographers and some communications experts. Zola was known to frequent the place, and Schmidt himself liked to make his presence known. It was not a production facility, and so had not made it onto the map Steve had spotted and memorized back at the Austrian prison, but the target was undoubtedly going to benefit the efforts of the SSR in beating back HYDRA with an aim for full defeat.

And that was down to Ines. One angry young woman determined to save her sister.

By moonlight, Ines allowed herself to weep. Great, gulping sobs, wrenched from the depths of her soul. Time was a prison; memory a cage. Locked as she was within the confines of who she had been, who they all had been -- desperately, and alone, she tried to make sense of it all. One minute they had been children, a trio of little girls, and she had been the knight, always the knight, while Louise and Adele had been the princesses, the dames. The next minute, the world had fallen to pieces around them and war had sundered those old bonds, those ancient games.

She had no sword now, no shield. She was a girl again, but never a knight. They’d bade her remain, crying into her pillow, clinging to the slimmest, scarcest hope that perhaps, perhaps Louise would be fine. Whole and safe. That she would return, smiling and shaking her head at their worries. “_Bah, ma poulette_,” she’d say, laughing at Ines’ tears. “Why do you cry, then? Did you not believe I would come back? Did you doubt me, my fierce sister? Did you ever for a moment doubt I would not do everything I could to come back to you?”

Love was this kind of bartering. A paltry exchange of thin hopes.

Six days. Six painful, aching days had passed, and no word. Until that Sunday morning, Elle’s day off, when Janie had come dashing to the front door with news that the Howling Commandos had sent a transmission -- the Greek base had been taken. Some prisoners liberated. One Commando injured. Due to arrive in four hours.
“Should I put away the decorations?” Adele asked uncertainly. She’d taken to tossing a few ribbons about the sitting room, hoping to liven up the (admittedly drab) space before Bucky’s birthday party.

Elle steadied herself on the back of the chesterfield, pushing away memories of the night she and Bucky had fallen asleep there, and she had woken to his whimpers in the night -- the sleeper’s scream. His heart had beat so rapidly beneath her ear that she had dreamt of drums, and had soothed him back to sleep with gentle whispers and reassurances.

*It wasn’t him.*

But if it wasn’t him, it was still one of the other Commandos who had been injured. *Ye gods* -- was she to feel this every time they stepped out the door? This burning fear, simmering so slickly in the pit of her stomach?

By now, in her role in keeping the homefires burning, Elle knew the procedure for bringing home an injured Commando: he would be taken directly from the airstrip to the medical bay at HQ; the others would have to undergo their routine check-ups, and once cleared, would be permitted to return to their shared residence. This could take upwards of an additional hour or two, beyond the estimated landing time of nine o’clock.

Every single one of them was bound to be exhausted, mentally and physically, from this extended ordeal. And without any details beyond the scant ones provided by Janie (who had then had to rush back to work), there was no way for them to truly anticipate what kind of reception the Commandos would require. Indeed, they may very well be up for some tea and cake, to watch Bucky open the gift she’d bought for him; play a few games or even do a little dancing, as Adele had suggested.

On the other hand, they may simply want their beds.

Elle rubbed at her temples, fear blooming hot and heady in her mind. *What if, what if* -- such a tangled mantra. She weighed the cost -- a few decorations, including some flowers, in the sitting room wouldn’t go amiss. If her boys ended up wanting a small party, they could file in, sample the cake, and enjoy a quiet evening. But if not, the splash of colour likely would not offend, and perhaps she, Adele, and Steve could entertain Bucky for an hour or two.

And truth be told -- Peggy was right; she needed the distraction.

More ribbons, draped over the mantel and the back of the chesterfield. In the kitchen, Adele began assembling everything for the cake, a jammy confection that beckoned even taciturn Ines from the confines of her bedroom. “*Que se passe-t-il?*” she asked, running a comb through her damp hair. “Is my sister *baking*?”

“Yes, she is. And I need you to help me with this.” Elle pointed to the coffee table, and together, they lifted it clear out of the middle of the sitting room and into the narrow foyer.

“Do you truly think your lover is going to want a party? He’s coming back from a mission.” Ines flopped unceremoniously onto the chesterfield, arching an eyebrow at the fussy, admittedly-childish decorations. “They will all just be wanting a rest and a drink. Not in that order, of course.”

“He’s not exactly my -- never mind.” Arranging the parcel that had arrived from New York on the mantel, along with the present she’d picked up a few days before, Elle simply shrugged her shoulders. “If that’s true, then they can have their drink and go to bed. The party will keep. Cake for breakfast sounds a treat, anyway.”
The unspoken truth between them, however, was that, depending upon the news the Commandos brought back with them, the party might never be appropriate. The severity of the injuries sustained by (not him, not him) whoever Janie had been referring to -- that could determine the tenor of the next few weeks. More pressing, however, would be news of Louise.

For the first time since he had left, it occurred to Elle that Bucky had never answered her question, the question she’d asked on the last night, as they had snuggled close together on the chesterfield. “Do you think it’s possible their sister is still alive?”

He had been trying to spare her, to protect her, for as long as he could.

The whimpers and faint cries in the night had punctuated her own dreams for days now. Even as she tossed and turned her way through visions both delightful and disturbing (Bucky and Zola, respectively, tended to star in equal measure), Adele’s sobs and Ines’ murmured responses floated down the hallway and stirred her from sleep. A few times she had knocked softly on the door, and only once had they opened it, allowed her to share in a resigned, stunned silence.

She didn’t know Louise Richard. She had no real idea of what the woman was capable of, but the love her sisters bore for her was so tangible, so pure and so clear, that she could not help but wonder, a little foolishly, if that love was enough to keep her alive.

The fire was dying, casting the room in a dim light and lulling both sisters into an uneasy, tearstained sleep, while Dugan and Elle kept an anxious vigil in the armchairs, white-knuckled and far too concerned to try and sleep. Every noise had them starting, half-movements that brought them nearly out of their seats, hoping it was a sign of the Commandos’ return, a triumphant return, if there was any bloody justice in the world.

“Maybe I should head over to HQ,” Dugan said slowly, glancing down at his watch. “Get us some news. If their sister…”

“Please don’t go,” Elle whispered, biting her lip at how utterly childish she sounded. “Just another ten minutes, then we can decide.” Fear slithered and slid about them in the room, lancing through her with a tangible sort of pain, and in her mind, bargains were struck -- foolish, incorporeal ones.

The decorations seemed flimsy and somehow cruel in the low light, and regret simmered bitterly in her stomach as she realized what this would look like, if the news were bad. Bucky’s birthday -- his stupid petite amie thinking that some ribbons and cake could make the war go away, push HYDRA to the backs of their minds. She looked over to the mantel, where the two packages sat expectantly. In the bookshop down the street, Elle had picked him up a few books recommended by Howard Stark, knowing Bucky’s keen interest in science and technology.

Perhaps, she wondered, Ines had been right. Perhaps she had overstepped the mark, allowed herself to get carried away with this foolishness. Bucky might even be disappointed, or upset that --

A fumbling, a kick, a soft curse...the heavy creak of the front door.

Dugan’s eyes met hers, and for a moment, she could read a keen hesitation in his gaze. Another one of those incorporeal bargains floated enticingly through her mind -- if they simply stayed put, allowed the Commandos to file through into the sitting room in search of them, then it would be good news. A twisted ankle or a few scratches; Louise sweeping in on a tide of memory and hope. All right with the world.

As scuffles and footsteps erupted from the foyer beyond, Elle looked over at the chesterfield upon
which Adele and Ines slept, arms tangled about each other in a way that smacked of a familiar, childhood embrace. Having never had a sibling, Elle could not wholly relate to the need for such proximity, even in sleep -- but then she thought of Bucky. Of the two of them on the chesterfield, days ago, when he had woken with an awful crick in his neck and she with the seam of his undershirt pressed into her cheek. There had been nothing heated about their embrace that night; only comfort. Closeness. A reminder that, if nothing else good ever happened in the world, at least they had each other.

With a deep, shuddering breath, she stood, bracing herself for the sisters’ pain, willing herself to bear it first, to let it wash over her and bring her down to her knees before they woke, so that she would have time to gather her own strength.

For good or ill, the truth had come.

Monty entered the room first, face shadowed and sliding the beret from his head. “Elle...I…” He couldn’t form the words, could not bring himself to taint the domestic scene before him -- Adele and Ines sleeping peacefully; Elle’s abandoned novel on the side-table; Bucky’s gifts and cards arranged so merrily on the mantel -- with this dark, dark news. This grief. Tears shone in his eyes and she reached for him, murmuring gentle comforts against his shoulder.

“What’s the news?” Dugan asked tersely, shifting a bit on his healing leg. “What went down?”

Morita glanced down sorrowfully at the sisters. “Shouldn’t we wake them?” he whispered.

But the pain was already in the room, flooding the floor and coiling slyly about their ankles. Elle could feel it, understood it. And she needed to know, needed to understand it first, so that when she woke Adele and Ines, ushered them forward to their own heartbreak, she would already be armed, and better prepared to support them through it. She needed to know. Now.

“Just tell me,” she said. “Tell me first. Tell me what happened.”

There were just two facts, two truths for Jim to stumble over.

Bucky had been shot. Not badly. A graze to his shoulder. Enough to land him overnight, at least, in the hospital, where Steve refused to leave his side. He would survive, and she could go to him tonight.

And Louise...Louise had not been among the prisoners liberated.

A door slammed shut, but not in the house. Not in any building one could enter. In Elle’s mind, or perhaps her heart, that skinny little hope she’d been clinging to, despite the facts, despite knowing that a year under HYDRA’s control would have spelled death for anyone -- she had hoped that the ardent, wilful love of her sisters might somehow coax the universe into keeping Louise alive.

She wept -- great, gulping sobs that seemed to be plundered from the very marrow of her bones, pulled up through days of putting on a brave face and making the best of a grim situation. Elle had tried so hard to be cheery and supportive, tossing herself glibly into the role of contented sweetheart, planning a birthday party for her beau; Adele had participated, avidly, in the ruse. And then cried herself to sleep at night.

Here, Elle thought, gently nudging Ines’ shoulder -- here is the price of war. Torn from peaceful slumber, thrown to the wolves of devilish grief. Here is what we pay. In the broken bodies of good men and women; in the rending of history and ancient ties. In the stiff, cracking neck of a lover who doesn’t want to say goodbye. In the light scent of perfume, dancing on the page, a poor substitute for
warm skin.

And in the faint murmurings of a soldier to a baby, nestled high on his shoulder, as he steps into a borrowed sitting room.

“Elle?” Adele said groggily, disentangling herself from her sister, who was by now wide awake, staring around at the solemn, silent Commandos. “Elle, que s’est-il passé?”

Ines’ eyes had found him first. Tucked sleepily under Gabe’s chin, spent from a long day of travel and new faces. Wrapped tenderly and clumsily in cotton and unknown loss, he looked out curiously with blue eyes and an uncertain, gummy smile. “Th-this is René,” Gabe choked, offering the women the honour of a fine accent, so that their first introduction to the boy would be as rightful as he could manage. “René...he’s, uh, damn it, I-I’m sorry…”

René was all that was left of Louise and Emmanuel Richard. An echo in black hair and his mother’s slender limbs, the baby was nearly seven months old, born in prison, his life bought over and over again by the strength and will of his uncle, Peter, and the tireless, loving efforts of his mother.

Ines reached for her nephew, Adele still processing Monty’s quiet explanation. Louise, dead of a fever in February; Peter, three weeks later, from a beating. Another prisoner, a scientist from Nantes, had taken the child under his wing, until the Commandos had begun tearing through the escaping exodus, the name Louise Richard panicked and fervent on the air. “The uncle was able to feed him pretty well,” Jim added. “From what we can tell, HYDRA was interested in his research, he’d been heading into some decoding patterns that would have helped them...never mind; it’s not important. Just...he kept him alive. Poor kid.”

Wonder and grief fought for purchase on Ines’ pale face as she stroked one finger down the length of René’s minuscule eyebrow. The child looked curiously up at her, and then his cheeks seemed to rise with some faint dissatisfaction, and Elle bit her lip, hoping he wouldn’t cry, too. Tears were coursing down her own face, and Gabe had had to step back out into the foyer to quell his own cries.

What a terrible, terrible price indeed.

Against the crisp white lawn of the hospital-issued bedsheets, Bucky looked young, vulnerable. Angry red scratches marred his pale face, losing themselves a little in the darker shadows of his light beard. Above the rise of the sheets, one shoulder had been bound in gauze and bandages, and his chest was bare, revealing half a dozen bruises, scattered from his right side to his left, chasing up his collarbone. Elle gripped the edges of her mackintosh firmly, willing the tears to stay suppressed, knowing full well that the last thing he needed in this state was her sobbing messily all over him.

Steve looked up first, quiet conversation fading away into a faint smile. “You’ve got another visitor,” he said softly, nodding at her in the doorway. The scene seemed so intimate, she almost hated to disturb. As though she were trespassing upon a hallowed moment of their friendship, one she ought not to interrupt.

But then Bucky turned his weary head on the pillow, better to fix his eyes upon her, and he beamed. “There’s my girl.”

She perched lightly in Steve’s vacated chair, as he offered to give them a moment alone and see if he couldn’t find her a cup of tea. A nip of whisky would be preferred, she thought privately. The night thus far had been taxing and strained -- having extricated herself from a silently-sobbing Adele not thirty minutes before, Elle had spent the entire journey to HQ focusing on compartmentalizing the events. René Richard’s arrival was a blessing, but a tortured one, and watching Ines and Adele come
to grips with both their grief and their joy in the same agonizing moment had been heartbreaking.

She needed the balm of Bucky’s presence now more than ever. “Are you...are you quite alright?” she asked quietly, placing the packages gently on the bedside table. His eyes never left her face. “I mean, only, I know that you were...you were…”

“Shot, sweetheart,” he finished for her, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “I got shot. HYDRA sniper, but it must have been his first day. He left me with a bit of a mess.”

Elle nodded, as though he were reciting a grocery list she needed to remember. Yes, indeed, let me take stock... As though he weren’t telling her he had come close to death -- because as much as he might joke, the truth was he’d been in the bloody line of fire and had taken a bullet to the shoulder. At the end of the day, at the core of it all, Bucky had been wounded in war. And she remembered again -- the cost, the price. A motherless child; a romance cut short. The first to pay in war? Real, sweet, simple life.

She twined her fingers with his, rubbing her free thumb lightly over his grazed knuckles. “I thought...when you didn’t come in tonight...” A sob burst in her throat, halfway to fruition.

“Hey, baby doll, hey.” Bucky shifted restlessly, then let out a light groan when he’d strained his right side too much. She jumped at the sound, fumbling to remove her hand from his, to assess whatever damage she thought she’d caused. “Come back here,” he murmured, settling himself more comfortably against the pillow, grabbing her hand again.

“I know it looks bad, and I’m sorry -- God, Elle, everything you’ve been through tonight. Fuck.” He bit his bottom lip, looked down at their clasped hands. “Sorry. Look, I’m fine. They’re even willing to release me home in a day or two. How’s the...how’s the kid? And the girls?”

But she had no words. René was perfection, she wanted to say. A beautiful child, a tender apology from the cruel world. Caring for him, she felt, could help to pull Adele and Ines back to the living, preventing them both from tumbling headlong into a deep grief. He was fairly healthy, according to the doctor who had examined him before he’d been brought back to the Commandos’ residence -- especially considering all he had been through.

Unsure of how to explain this to Bucky, how a glimmer of envy had wound itself through her at the sight of Adele and Ines embracing the baby (not jealousy of instant motherhood, no -- just the love. The solid, definable presence of love). Nor could she explain the jagged edge to her own heart just then, the splinter of pain working its way deeper into the muscle. On the way over, she’d thought again and again of bad news, of brief telegrams, of missions gone wrong. A bullet two inches to the left.

A world shattered around her.

In their usual way, then, she leaned over to kiss him, capturing his bottom lip between hers, letting her tears escape and slide down his cheeks instead. “Jesus, Ellie,” he breathed as she pulled away. “If I’d known you were gonna kiss me like that, I would’ve got shot a long time ago.”

Her eyes snapped open at that, and she pulled away. “Don’t you dare James! Don’t ever say anything like ever again.”

“Oh what?” He gave her a weak grin. “What’ll you do to me?”

Love you forever. Eat your cake. Throw caution to the wind and sell my soul for something better. Was this love, then? That panicked fluttering in her heart, that utter sense of a precipice, of the
potential for loss? If he didn’t come back to her, what would the world be, then? A place without him. A place utterly without him.

And yet months ago, she hadn’t known his name. Elle’s history and entire being had been structured without him; her life set in motion with him miles and miles away. Bucky himself had lived twenty-six years without her -- and then what? He stumbled into cell three and into her life, and now she never wanted him to leave.

Could love be a moment? Not at first sight, but no -- but could things have been mean to be? Fated to always end here, with his hand in hers and the taste of him sizzling on her lips? Perhaps, she wondered, watching as his eyes shadowed with self-consciousness, as he chewed at his lip -- perhaps this is where she had been headed all along. And every other turn, every other coat and story and life she’d worn had simply been intended to get her here. On this hospital ward, on a crisp March night, celebrating, amidst deep loss and unexpected joy, Bucky Barnes’ twenty-seventh birthday.

Perhaps, after all, love was always supposed to be a surprise.

He watched her, little knowing how much was swirling in her mind -- how many major decisions had just been made. Not knowing she’d just flung herself into the forever he’d promised. That could come later. For now, it was just the two of them, alive in the space where too many had lost something -- the bandage at his shoulder and the sickly gleam of sweat against his bare chest reminded her of that. Too few a number of people had been offered the same privilege as she and Steve: to sit beside the hospital bed of someone they had loved, and be promised tomorrow.

Again, there were no words. He wanted a joke in response, she knew. “What’ll you do to me?” Oh, there was potential there. For humour and blushes, the language they’d been learning together. But Elle resisted, knowing that there was something ill at ease here, something that needed to be acknowledged -- that shadow in his eyes, she wanted it gone. Just for tonight -- the world and the war could come back tomorrow.

So she contented herself with stroking the back of his hand, looking with concern at the bruises, wondering if he truly would be able to come home within a few days, and how they would manage. It was by sheer luck that Gabe had been able to go on the mission at all; he hadn’t broken his arm, as Bucky had thought the night of the USO dance -- just sprained his wrist. Dugan would be able to go out soon, and as far she was aware, Elle was still grounded in London.

There would be weeks of adjustment. Adele and Ines had a long road ahead of them, caring for this child and accepting that, as the war went on, Belgium would not be safe for them. The sisters would inevitably have to make a new life in England, and there were already rumours that Ines was to be hired.

Questions without immediate answers rumbled madly in Elle’s head, forming a small ache behind her eyes. Bucky did not seem to notice the increase in her tension, but the sound of Steve’s voice just outside the entrance to the ward -- thanking a nurse -- appeared to agitate him somewhat, and he shifted restlessly until he’d oriented himself more firmly in her direction, wincing at the pain. “Elle,” he said with a slight grunt, twisting his good arm out of her grasp to better anchor himself against the mattress. “Before Steve comes back, I need you to tell me, doll -- did Zola do anything to you besides taking your measurements? He didn’t--he didn’t give you anything, did he?”

*Drip-drip-drip.*

His tone was far more grave than Elle had heard it in a long time. An echo of the days at the prison came back to her at the sound, the stony resolve creeping between his words as he’d pushed her so gently from the fray, back on the factory floor. He’d been protecting her, then, and she gathered he
was trying to do much the same now. But she needed to protect him, too. That was love.

Elle’s denial was soft lips against his cheek. “I’m fine. And you will be, too.”

But he wouldn’t be so easily swayed. He’d permitted to kiss away his other questions, but Bucky needed an answer now. Over his shoulder, Elle watched Steve enter the ward, two cups in hand, a broad smile on his face as he looked at the pair of them.

“I need an answer.”

She bit her lip, avoiding his gaze, focusing instead on the bruised knuckles clenching the edge of the sheet. Memories, hazy and panicked, surged forward in a sickly rush -- but she needed to understand, herself. “I’m not sure,” she admitted quietly. “There was a needle...one of the others brought it. But I-I started to cry, and there was an explosion, and then everything seemed to be happening at once. Everything hurt. I’m sorry -- but I just don’t know,” she whispered, as Steve came closer. “I’m sorry, Bucky.”

He wrapped her hand in his, and brought it to his lips. There was absolution in his eyes, though she really needn’t have apologized. Everything had Zola had done was out of their hands -- another price, another cost.

“Here, Elle.” Steve handed her the cup, and she broke her embrace with Bucky to enjoy the heat and the distraction. “Sorry, Buck -- they said with the morphine, you couldn’t have anything.”

Nearly ten minutes passed in an exhausted quiet. Steve and Bucky discussing the mission softly, offering her details and information she was not yet ready to process. On the subject of Louise Richard, Steve only bowed his head. “We were a month late,” he said. “But the baby...I never expected that.”

“And he seems healthy? Despite everything?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. They had him checked out right away. He’s going to need some special food or something...supplements, they called it. Underweight, isn’t he, Steve?”

“But there’s no reason, according to the doc, that he shouldn’t be fine and growing well within the next few weeks,” Steve said firmly. “Adele and Ines are going to stay with us for a while. Phillips even mentioned recruiting them, if they’re interested.”

The conversation flowed in much this same vein as they finished their tea, as Bucky’s hand again found hers and he adjusted himself in a more comfortable position. His eyes seemed heavy now, his grip on hers loose and sleepy, and even Elle found her words tripping over each other, syllables misplaced as her mind began to entirely process the enormity of the evening. Steve noticed, and wished Bucky a goodnight as he told Elle he would go and organize them a drive home. Home. The prospect was honey in her veins, though she was loath to leave Bucky.

She kissed his temple and fussed with his bedsheets, murmuring promises of visiting tomorrow, the next day, as many days until he was home. “Oh -- I nearly forgot,” she said abruptly, jolting him slightly from his half-doze. “Happy birthday, love.” With a warm smile, she handed him the brown-paper package from New York.

“Thanks, doll.” Bucky slid his thumb under a looser flap of paper at one end. She watched as a cardboard box came into view, helping to discard the excess and balance the box on her lap as he removed an envelope to reveal a card, which he held uncertainly and unopened in his hand for a moment. “I, uh…” He cleared his throat. “Would you mind reading it? My, uh...my eyes are…”
“Of course, Bucky.”

Steve had returned; she saw him lean against the doorway, a curious tug to his lips as he held up a hand, encouraging her to go on. Whatever transportation he’d organized could clearly wait, allow this moment to unfold.

It was a child’s birthday card, intended for a little boy -- a colourful scene from Jack and the Beanstalk emblazoned on the front. Elle smiled as she opened it, finding the inside completely covered in an old-fashioned, elegant script, begin “Dear Son.”

Willing her voice not to crack, she began to read. “Dear Son, your brother and sisters and I were so happy to receive your last letter, especially to hear that things are going well, and that despite…”

Winnie Barnes continued in much the same tone for several lines, expressing her relief at hearing from her son, some good news about his sister Rebecca’s new job. Birthday wishes from all and sundry. A brief relation of a memory of Bucky turning three, involving soap suds and a mud pie. Despite her best efforts, Elle’s voice began to waver as she read; love was imbued in every word. More of Bucky’s history began to take shape in her mind, and she pictured him at three, at ten, and fifteen, at twenty-four, sent off to war. And then, at the bottom of the card, tucked under the standardized greeting, not so much an afterthought as a quiet, grand finale, the lines that did indeed bring fresh, happier tears to her eyes:

“I was so happy to read about your sweet Elle. She sounds like a wonderful girl and I hope to meet her one day soon. Promise me you will be a perfect gentleman to her and ask her to write me. I’ve got questions. Send a photo if you can, although your last letter was vivid enough I feel like I’d know her in a crowd of a million girls. Thinking of you both, and of Stevie too. Be good, my darling, and keep safe. You are all in our prayers. A very happy birthday to you. Love always, Ma.”

Wonder stole her voice; and again, though she’d done so much of it that night, a tear escaped her eye and traced down her cheek. Bucky wiped it away with his thumb as she struggled to find her words. “You-you told your mother about me?” she whispered, awestruck. “You wrote about me?”

“Sure I did, Ellie,” he gave her a tired smile. “You’re my girl, aren’t you? I wanted my mom to know how much you mean to me, that’s all. And that I met the prettiest, smartest girl in Europe.

“Now, hand me those presents and we’ll pretend for a while, what do you say, sweetheart?”

With a tender kiss, she agreed. Pretending, just for a little while, that Louise Richard and her husband weren’t dead, that HYDRA wasn’t growing, that the war wasn’t raging -- pretending that the most important, essential thing in the world was celebrating Bucky’s twenty-seventh birthday on a grim hospital ward, just him, his girl, and his oldest friend -- that sounded like a damned fine evening.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for any mistakes in the French dialogue.
Thank you so much to those of you who have offered kudos and comments. I truly do love hearing from you, and hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

March

Balancing René on one hip, Elle tried her best to reach for the cloth nappy, settled precariously on the edge of the nearby nightstand. On a benevolent whim, she’d agreed to take care of the baby this afternoon, giving Adele time to attend an impromptu Women’s Institute meeting.

The house was quiet and still, just the two of them within it. Her day off this time had arrived on a Thursday of all days, and the rest of the team had been called to HQ by nine; Ines had disappeared to some mysterious appointment just a few minutes later, and then Adele had offhandedly mentioned the WI and the trouble brewing between the treasurer and president. With an encouraging bat of her hands, Elle had convinced her that she and René would be just fine on their own. Privately, she’d planned an easy morning of play in the back garden, tiring the baby out until she could soothe him with a bottle at noon and then perhaps a long nap for the both of them after some dinner.

She yawned as she gently nestled René down on Adele’s bed, the duvet beneath protected by a towel. He was a good baby, truly, and no real trouble -- although their plans for the morning had been ruined with onset of a heavy rain, great grey sheets coming down from eleven o’clock onwards. Since then, Elle had amused him with soap bubbles in the kitchen, wooden blocks in the sitting room, and several agonizing rounds of peekaboo. Still, she enjoyed the chance to get to know the child better. In the past fortnight, Adele and Ines had, understandably, devoted all of their time and attention to their nephew -- daily doctors’ appointments, walks in the park, muttered tete-a-tetes about their plans for the future.

Elle had scarcely managed to get a look-in.

Not that she was complaining. René’s presence and the busyness he demanded had brought the sisters so much comfort, pulling them away from the darker, ragged edge of their grief. There were still tearful moments, lost moments, when she would find herself making tea in the middle of the night, stroking a soothing hand through Adele’s hair, or bracing against Ines’ rage. But even the Commandos had noticed the improvement, the sense of purpose and care guiding everyone’s movements. Small as he was, René was running the household -- dictating the daily routine, necessitating quieter evenings, noisier breakfasts.

And they were all resolutely and delightedly wrapped around his finger.

He was not, however, overly fond of the entire rigamarole of having his nappy changed. In response to her ministrations, he opened his tiny mouth to let loose a furious wail as she unbuttoned his romper and slid it from his shoulders. Despite his dismay, Elle was pleased to register the softening of his limbs, the appearance of small dents in his wrists and ankles, proving that the supplements and formula the doctor had placed him on were working.
“Oh, darling,” she murmured, rubbing his tummy lightly, soothingly. “I’m sorry. I know, you’re not feeling very well, poor fellow. Let’s take care of that -- oh. Oh.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, bitterly regretting her earlier generosity. The smell was... utorial.

“Lucky he’s so damn cute, huh, doll?”

Holding both of René’s ankles in her left hand, Elle turned to see Bucky leaning in the doorway, arms crossed and smirking. He looked relaxed, amused. The past few weeks had been tense for all of the Commandos, as they waited on tenterhooks to hear back from Bletchley regarding the cipher machine brought back from Thessaloniki. If the code was able to be broken, substantial advancements could be made in monitoring HYDRA’s work. Because the Commandos and a small contingent from the 107th had decimated the Greek prison (including a massive tank), the hope was that Schmidt and his cryptographers might assume prisoners and destruction were the priority, and that the machine had been destroyed.

It was a flimsy hope, but it was all they had, and Bucky wore every inch of it. Her heart clenched and leapt in one disconcerting movement as she met his gaze, caught his wink.

“Fancy lending a hand, soldier?” she quipped, turning back to her task. René gurgled appreciatively now at her, clearly not seeing anything quite wrong with the disagreeable contents of his nappy, now that they had been distanced from his skin. “I’m sure you’ve seen worse.”

Bucky offered a low chuckle and a kiss on the cheek, not noticing her slight wince when she realized what she’d implied, making light of his service, of everything he had seen. “Sure thing.” He stepped further into the room, and she could see where he’d been caught in the rain, dark hair sticking to his forehead and the collar of his shirt slightly damp. He smelled of a wintry spring, the liminal perfume of cold blooms, snow on new grass.

“Hand me the powder, would you?” Elle had already managed to deftly wipe René clean, bundling up the soiled nappy and tucking it far out of his reach; Bucky sprinkled the powder onto the baby’s bottom, causing him to emit funny little burble. “Good boy,” he said with a smile. “Wait -- how do you say that in French?”

“Bon garçon,” Elle replied absentmindedly, deciding that the stink had permeated the baby’s romper so badly she really ought to pick out a new outfit for him. She turned with a grin as Bucky teasingly repeated her words, cooing them down at René, who merely offered him a gummy smile in return.

“How do you say it in Norwegian?”

“God gutt.”

“And Romanian?” he asked with a wink.

Elle nudged him slightly so that she could stand at the side of the bed again, in front of René, slipping him into a pale green romper now, clean and fresh and embroidered with cheerful ducks. “El este un om nebun, nu-i așa, băiat dulce?” She focused on the baby, offering him a conspiratorial smile he could hardly hope to understand. As she finished dressing him, Bucky gingerly took the used nappy in hand, watching as she tucked René against her shoulder, smoothing a reassuring hand down the length of his back.

She met his eye again over the soft curvature of the baby’s head, the warm scent of powder and rain filling the room instead of the rather repulsive emanating from the small bundle in Bucky’s hand. He
was looking at her strangely, so intensely focused on the tiny circles she rubbed onto René’s back, hoping to waylay a tantrum en route to his afternoon feed.

He cleared his throat. “That, uh, seems a little long for ‘good boy,’” he observed, turning to lead the way downstairs, pinching his nose with his free hand. “What did you really say?”

“That you’re devastatingly handsome,” Elle replied coyly, pressing an audible kiss to René’s forehead. “I was asking if he agreed.”

“Oh?” Bucky asked, visibly pleased. As they passed the door to their broom cupboard, he turned to flash her a self-satisfied smirk. “And what’s his verdict?”

“He prefers Steve.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky ducked into the small scullery off the kitchen to take care of the nappy and scrub his hands clean while Elle prepared a bottle on the hob, trying to keep René entertained until it was warmed. She’d found she received the best results from crossing her eyes or sticking out her tongue -- a resounding peal of babyish gurgles was always ensured when she employed both tactics simultaneously. Which, coincidentally, was the expression that she greeted Bucky with when he came back into the kitchen.

“You know, doll,” he said casually, leaning back against the worktop, “I never really thought it was possible to fall more in love everyday, and then you go and do something like that.”

Despite her best efforts, Elle froze at his words, and he noticed something flickering in her eyes -- but was it delight or doubt? He couldn’t tell, and nor could she; both were trapped in the liminal space of translation: had he truly meant that he was in love with her, she wondered? Or was he merely making a joke, albeit an unfortunate, bewildering one?

Elle knew how she felt about Bucky. Knew it every time he bent his head to kiss her, every time he wound his hands around her waist and whispered sweet nothings into her ear. It was love -- fast and intoxicating, certainly -- she was sure of it. But did he truly feel the same way? “Forever,” he’d said. Forever.

“Here, want me to hold him?”

Their fingers grazed as Bucky took the baby from her arms, bouncing him lightly on his knee as he settled on a kitchen chair, supporting his neck carefully and looking into his eyes. “He’s a really good baby, huh?”

“Mmmmm.” Elle turned her attention back to the pot and bottle, blushing as she stumbled over her next words: “You’re, er, very good with him.” Months ago, a compliment would not have held so much weight behind it, so much intention. Now, though, observing Bucky with a child had her stomach lurching, mind speeding ahead to opportunities she’d never quite entertained. The boy had never brought up parenthood, and she had been far too nervous to do so. The mere idea of asking him whether or not he one day planned to have children with her seemed to invite the possibility for rejection, denial. Refusal.

“Thanks, doll. You, uh...you too.” She could hear the smile in his voice.

The formula was warm enough now, by her estimation. And it was time to lighten the subject: “You’re off early. Wasn’t much on?”

“My shoulder was giving me hell so I clocked off early,” he explained, following her into the sitting room after she’d turned off the hob and fixed the nipple on top. “Nothing but planning anyway.
Paperwork and maps. They haven’t had any major breakthroughs with the machine yet. Phillips is getting a bit antsy.”

The layout of the sitting room had changed somewhat since René’s arrival. Small toys, some that he was still too young to be amused by, spilled out from a basket by the window and were scattered across the floor; receiving blankets were folded neatly on one of the side-tables, and a stuffed blue rabbit seemed to be constantly underfoot (though God help them all if it wasn’t in René’s crib by bedtime). A rocking chair now held pride of place by the fire, kindly donated by a member of Adele’s WI chapter, along with an ample layette.

With some faint surprise, Elle watched as Bucky lowered himself into the chair, nestling René lengthwise in his arms, the boy’s head leaning against the crook of his elbow. “Do you mind?” he asked, noticing her stare. “I just...uh, you know.” He gave her a sheepish look, as though wanting to care for a child was something to be embarrassed about.

Shaking her head, she quickly squirted a bit of formula against the inside of her wrist, determining that it was a suitable temperature, and then handed him the bottle. He really was a beautiful boy, she thought, watching René’s little rosebud of a mouth eagerly meet the bottle. Long lashes fluttered shut in contentment as he began to drink. “If your shoulder gets sore, though, tell me,” she murmured, settling on the chesterfield to watch.

For a few minutes, the slow, gentle creaking of the chair was all that could be heard. Elle felt an incredible tide of warmth crest over her as she watched Bucky feed the baby, his blue eyes bright and contented every time he looked back up at her. It was such a cosy, domestic scene, one she had never thought to envision for herself, and yet now, there was some force she could not identify pulling her towards it. Craving it for herself. She would like to see it again, and again, and again -- their hands working together to change him, never once bumping awkwardly, she realized. There was a fluidity to their interactions, not just with René, but in so many other contexts, too. In the mornings, Bucky always made sure to set out the hummingbird teacup for her, without her even having to ask; when it was time for her target practice, she would pick up a sandwich from the mess for them to share; in the evenings, they seemed to know, without exchanging a word, the perfect moment for them both to casually (and separately) leave for the broom cupboard.

And in there, they were bloody well in sync.

“What are you thinking, doll?” he asked quietly, his voice almost as gravelly as tended to be in the mornings, before he had had his first cup of coffee. “You’re a million miles away.”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell him, not yet. Not when things were so new, so tender. So easily shattered. Right now they had kisses in a dusty closet and sparks whenever their hands touched. If she told him that seeing him with René in his arms had drummed up images of a life like this, in peacetime, in Brooklyn, in a cramped city flat with a flowered teatowel and a dark-haired baby gurgling away -- a baby with her eyes and his plump lips -- what would he do? What would he say?

“Nothing, love.” Elle leaned over to kiss him. “Nothing at all.”

Clearly, he was unconvinced, but could not press her further; René had finished the bottle and was nuzzling into his chest now, ready for a nap. He watched with mild, unconfessed fascination as Elle took the baby from his arms, patting carefully, bending in a swift, fluid movement to retrieve the rabbit from the armchair. Dreams he’d pushed away came rushing back to his mind as she left, a whispered, coy order to meet her in the closet searing through him as though she’d said something absolutely scandalous.

Those dreams didn’t belong to a soldier, so he’d pushed them away. Dreams of soft skin and
perfume; cotton candy on his fingers and Steve’s nervous laughter in his ears; a baby, a toddler, maybe a little girl, swinging from his hand as he walked her to school. Those dreams had no place in a foxhole or on a narrow cot. No, his lot were the nightmares -- Zola and Schmidt, bloodied snow, the cumbersome advance of a tank over the faint rise of the battlefield.

But maybe, he wondered, as she slipped in beside him, his girl with her silky hair and her sweet smile, her gentle hands tapping away a baby’s burps -- maybe he could dream those dreams again. Cotton candy on her fingers, a little girl who looked like her. Her hand in his, a summer sun shining down, as they walked the sidewalks together. Home. In Brooklyn. Together.

April

By ten o’clock, Elle could have happily retired from public life and absconded to some isolated northern cave, if only to escape the humdrum horror of a day of bad luck. She’d already uttered some choice expletives, one loudly enough to earn her a sharp reprimand from the shift supervisor. Keeping steady company with Bucky Barnes had certainly enhanced her vocabulary; Steve, too, much to her surprise, had provided some new turns of phrase perfect for devilish situations.

Such as spilling a cup of piping hot tea all over her skirt, scalding her legs underneath and causing a suspicious stain to spread over her lap. Wiping half-heartedly at the expansive damp spot, Elle looked around for some reprieve, some distraction. She still had another two hours of work ahead of her, but perhaps Agent Novak would permit her to nip home and change before their training session -- but then that would be illogical, since she’d be getting into her jumpsuit to train, but the walk home after five might be infinitely more pleasant if she were not draped in tea…

“Miss Andersen?” As though Elle had summoned her, Pearl appeared at her elbow, looking down with some concern at the chaos consuming the usually-tidy space: paperwork strewn messily, piled high in teetering towers; stray cups of tea littering the surface and tucked haphazardly beneath the desk; an inky fountain pen that had, evidently, given up the ghost, staining the front of a manila folder. And presiding over the entire disordered affair, a much-bedraggled, sopping Elle. “Um, bad time?”

“Bad day,” Elle groaned, pushing a few stray curls back behind her ear. She’d been having an awful time since her eyes had snapped open twenty minutes too late: a midnight -- er -- conversation in the broom cupboard had gone on a little later than they’d both been expecting, leading to her oversleeping and arriving short of breath at her desk at nearly 0840 hours. “I seem to have been somewhat off-kilter since this morning, I’m afraid.”

“Do you have time to meet? Phillips and Carter are asking for you, in Carter’s office.” Pearl glanced down at her watch. “Fifteen minutes?”

Elle chewed at her bottom lip, trying to suppress an indelicate yawn. The meeting was not scheduled, and the prospect of having to sit in Peggy’s office, tea-stained skirt and wild hair -- though what choice did she have? “I’m a bloody disaster,” she muttered, “but all right.”

She shoved her chair back under the lip of her desk and collected a few of the mugs, flushing as Pearl stooped to pick up a few from the floor. “I knew they were keeping you all busy back here,” she said with ill-concealed amusement. “But this seems...excessive.”

Elle just shrugged her shoulders. This was important work -- she knew it, everyone in the room knew it. This secretarial work was keeping the war running, keeping operations organized. The room was a veritable hive, constantly thrumming with activity, meetings, new invoices and shipments and lists to be surveyed. She was one of three clerks working solely on the Commandos’ caseload,
compiling mission reports, medical records, and supply inventories. Nearly five hours a day of work, mission after mission, update after update -- and late nights, seared through with dreams of growing intensity.

Nightmares tossed her like a ragdoll upon the bed, so that she woke, skin dripping with a cold sweat, legs twisted in the sheets and hair tangled and damp upon her pillow. Zola flashed through, the needle dripping over her flesh, as he promised her all manner of glory. “You’ll be a goddess,” he vowed. “A pillar of strength and inhuman power.”

He showed her horrific visions -- bloodied snow, a high peak, piercing a sky of iron. Zola of her nightmares spoke in riddles and purrs, once as the boy had done, and those images conflated and roiled in her sleeping mind, in her waking shock. Guilt simmered daily at the edges of her affection, and every time she pressed her lips to Bucky’s skin, every time she stroked her fingers through his hair -- she thought, even briefly, of the night. The horror that crept into her sweet adoration, souring fantasies with fear, with a snaking awareness that the world was at war, the world was at war and the man she loved was a bloody soldier.

Stranger still were the dreams about him. The ones that began in faint flames and ghostly kisses, building and building to a passionate crescendo -- only to crash into darkness, as he was torn from her hands, as he fell, careened into a white kind of oblivion, and she would wake then in tears and longing, the exquisite agony of a glorious, stolen summit.

Suffice it to say, a good night’s sleep had been elusive, thus accounting for the unrestrained chaos of her daily life. Mornings were rushed and overpopulated when the team was home from missions; René was proving to be an early teether, and his angry little cries punctuated early mornings and quiet evenings, inspiring a frustrating mixture of both exasperation and pity.

Despite, then, the tapping pain behind her eyes and the tea marring what had been her favourite skirt, Elle followed Pearl down the long corridors and across the courtyard to enter the main L of SSR headquarters, leading her down a narrow flight of stairs to Peggy’s office. Agent Carter, she corrected herself, realizing that with Colonel Phillips present, she would have to be on her most professional behaviour.

Pearl rapped smartly on the door of the office. “Ma’am, Miss Andersen is here,” she said politely, deferentially even -- not as though just a few nights before the three of them, plus Ines, had danced up a storm at a ladies’ only event held by Adele’s WI chapter. Elle was planning a bit of a surprise for Bucky, though she wasn’t quite sure how or when to reveal it, and as she settled herself on the hard bench outside of Peggy’s office, she couldn’t help but smile at the memory of Pearl dipping her low on the dance floor, muttering darkly about how “Barnes better be damn well worth it.”

“Just another couple of minutes,” she said now, easing down to sit beside Elle, drumming her fingers lightly on her lap. “She and Phillips just have to finalize a few things.”

Elle nodded, smoothing down her skirt as best she could and plucking self-consciously at her jumper. She knew a brief flash of yearning for the crisp lines of her Commando uniform, her tactical belt slung about her hips with such a purposeful weight. Confidence, such as she’d never really known, had surged through her in that uniform -- making her feel as though she truly was essential, useful.

Stop, she chided herself silently. Her work in the office was important, too. God knows war necessitated absolute mountains of paperwork and records, and she was helping to keep the team on track, in check. Balanced. War demanded fights from every quarter: factories, fields, and thousands of nondescript desks, piled high with the tallies, with the loss. With the hope for reprieve. Not even just peace; just...a rest.
She was in sore need of one herself.

“Any idea what the meeting is about?” Elle asked idly, straining to eavesdrop on the low murmurs beyond the frosted pane of glass to her right.

Pearl merely shrugged, checking her watch again. “They didn’t say.”

“Quite impromptu, isn’t it? That’s a bit odd.” Nerves began to flutter deep in her stomach; this had never happened before. Certainly she had been called to Peggy’s office at odd times in the past, but that was usually because there was a new supply of biscuits ready to be ravaged. And in fact, the last time Elle had seen Phillips for anything other than a debriefing had been on the occasion of her royal dressing-down following the disaster of her last mission.

Oh.

Fear spiking in her veins, Elle began shifting on the bench, crossing and uncrossing her ankles, hands writhing in an uneasy embrace as the old anxieties began to rear up once again. “Baby doll,” he’d sighed last night, hot against her neck, as she’d finally disentangled herself from their embrace, reminding him they both needed to be up early.

Had someone complained?

That was unrealistic, she thought quickly. Dugan might roll his eyes when she burst red-faced and giggling from the broom closet, Bucky an unconvincing half-step behind, but no one truly begrudged them the time -- no, the luxury. The luxury of ignoring the war for a few hours, losing themselves in a dreamscape of their own design, where time was measured in quickening heartbeats.

Last week, the question had occurred to her as she wrapped her arms about herself on the chesterfield, chilled more from Bucky’s extrication than the dying fire he was attempting to stoke. Memories of the night before the Greek mission, when they had fallen asleep, tangled in each other upon the cushions, nipped at her composure, chipping away at the certainty, at the rightness. Everything Elle had been accused of in Italy had been so furtive and wrong, manipulative and calculated -- nothing like the symphony of gasps and soft endearments she and Bucky composed in the scant light of a single bulb, set against a backdrop of dust and stray clothespins.

But with Bucky, there was such an easiness to their time together. That first kiss, in the darkened hallway outside the USO dance, had firmly dashed most of her anxieties -- except for one. She worried that what they had wasn’t allowed, by either the rules of the SSR or those of a jealous universe. Elle was simply waiting for one shoe or the other to drop, leaving her bereft.

Perhaps they had been pushing the limits of propriety lately. The war had relaxed the morals of many, but military policy and expectations still trumped even the passionate conviction of the newly-in-love. And if Colonel Phillips had caught wind of their romance and decided that two enraptured Howling Commandos snogging in a downstairs cupboard was bad for business, then in one swift signature her career could be over and even Bucky (still waiting on a return to active duty after the incident in Thessaloniki) could be somehow reprimanded.

A gentle nudge to her shoulder. “You’re miles away, Ellie,” Pearl said quietly. “Don’t worry; I’m sure it’s nothing too serious, or it would’ve been scheduled.”

That was true. Elle tried to steady her trembling hands, tried to avoid the haunting message of her dreams, the ones that started sweet as a fairytale, and ended in icy terror.

She wouldn’t lose him, would she? Not like this. Not in the quick snap of a folder, the brisk sweep
of a pen. She wouldn’t lose him in ink and shame.

It was a quiet evening she returned to, spent and weary and tea-stained. A homely scene, almost a tableau, encapsulating, elementally, the habits of their house, such as they were.

Steve sat on the floor, sketching a memory, the scratch of his pencil harmonizing well with the crackling flames; Ines rocked René, while Adele could be heard in the kitchen, chatting in rapid-fire French to Gabe and Jacques, the *clink* of dishes and brief sloshes an indication that Elle had missed supper and escaped the washing-up.

In the far corner of the sitting room, Dugan flipped again through the evening paper, while Jim dozed at the table, an undealt quintet of cards dangling precariously in his hand, as Monty covetously counted out a series of bills across from him.

Bucky was nowhere to be found. The only thing missing. The one element she, without a doubt, needed in this moment.

Tightening her grip on the strap of her satchel and biting back the tears, Elle choked out a request, one which sent Steve’s eyes snapping up to her face and framing a quiet concern -- one she could not quite contend with at that precise minute. “Is h-he here?” she asked again, composure shaking on the edge.

“Upstairs,” Steve said slowly, realizing the risk of his answer. Bucky and Elle had been toeing the line, living together and pursuing each other, and the last thing he wanted was for either of them to get in trouble, especially for something as sweet and well-deserved as what they had going on.

Kissing in closets was one thing, he reasoned, but sneaking upstairs to bedrooms, that was another. Not that he had any issues with it personally, of course, but as Captain Rogers, shouldn’t he have something to say? Officially, the Army’s rule on soldiers’ personal lives were straightforward: respect your marriage vows, if you’d made any; sublimate your own urges, if you must; and if temptation or wartime love proved too great, then for goodness’ sake take the necessary, military-issued precautions.

But Bucky was a good man, and Elle a smart girl. And hell -- the sight of her tearful face as she turned away to head up the staircase caused Steve’s heart to clench at the thought of her being hurt, upset. He knew better than anyone else how good Bucky could be in those moments; Elle spent so much of her time and herself on comforting the rest of them, wearing their pain and their nightmares. She deserved this time. Just her and Bucky, halving whatever had brought those tears to her eyes.

By the time she knocked on the door to Bucky’s bedroom, those tears were pooling dangerously, threatening to spill; the slightest jostle, let alone rise in her emotion, would break the last, scant levee of composure she possessed. What a day. What a bloody day.

He was fresh from the bath; the crisp scent of Ivory soap rose around her as the door opened wider, and he was clad only in a white shirt and a pair of striped shorts -- her cheeks flamed as she realized they were his undergarments. Evidently, he hadn’t been expecting her.

“Uh, Elle,” Bucky said quickly, rubbing one hand over the back of his neck. “Give me a minute, okay?” He glanced over his shoulder, evidently scanning the room for something less revealing. “I, uh, wasn’t expecting you,” he added with a grin, which promptly faltered as he registered her glistening eyes.

“Honey?”
Hours had passed since Elle had entered Peggy’s office. Hours without someone to share the news with, hours in which she had been forced to simply dwell on everything Phillips had said, everything he had made her feel. Hours since she’d known that first flash of yearning for him, for the sweet reprieve of his company, his hand in hers.

She needed him.

The levee broke; her cheeks were wet, soaked amidst the faint bubbles of her laughter, rising like champagne in her throat. “I—I’m back, Bucky. Phillips reinstated me,” she choked, torn between amusement, relief, and that sheer joy of realization, that she needed him. “I’m cleared to go back on missions. He said m-my improvement was remar —”

He snatched her from the floor, hands firm on her waist and she had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck as he lifted her, cursing happily. “That’s my girl!” he crowed, stamping kisses to her neck. “Goddamn, baby doll. Goddamn.”

Elle couldn’t stop laughing, the champagne-giggles bursting from her so merrily that she could scarcely remember a time when she’d been this delighted -- not only did she have her mission back, her purpose, but she had someone to celebrate with. Someone who was so clearly and purely proud of her, blazing her skin with his lips as he traced a path back up to her mouth, murmuring all the while. When a sharp creak announced an advance on the staircase down the end of the hall, he lowered her feet back to the ground and glided them both backwards, into the privacy of his bedroom.

With a moment’s hesitation, and a meaningful look at her, he slid one hand from her waist and closed the door. “Is that…” He stopped. Cleared his throat. Increased his resolve. “I just...want to talk. It doesn’t mean...you know.”

“I know,” she smiled, fingers playing gently with the damp hair at the nape of his neck, rising higher and higher until he shivered visibly under her touch. “I want to talk, too.”

But first, a celebration, in a poetry of their own making -- a tender composition of soft sighs and warm lips, buttressed here and there with exploring hands, as she gently squeezed his biceps, a gesture that forced him to bite back a groan he feared would overwhelm her with its implications. In return, he pulled the satchel from her shoulder: it was the faint echo of a promise, an intention to one day peel back the layers the world got to see.

His happiness, such a revolution from the ire of months before, when he had sat in Howling Central and called her a civilian, said she wasn’t ready -- that happiness pressed against her now, from all sides, a warm embrace she could not seem to get enough of. Elle allowed herself to be consumed by it, bound up within it, scarcely registering the slight falter in his steps as they moved further into the room, as Bucky’s shin made contact with the edge of his bed and they went tumbling down together.

Predictably.

Laughing lightly, so as not to alert whoever had been coming up the stairs, Elle and Bucky shifted in unison, nudging far enough up on the bed that their feet would not dangle over the end, and they could lie, just a few inches apart; Bucky propped himself up on one elbow while Elle tucked her arm under her head, looking up at him shyly, uncertainly. Her gaze was weighted with the fulsome wildness of this quiet moment, knowing they had traversed some line.

Intimacy, soft as candlelight and just as warm, thrummed through the air between them. The night on the chesterfield was not half so important, so vital. But she was too relieved, too proud of herself to care at the moment. “Is this okay?” he murmured, shifting his weight a little, smiling uncertainly
down at her. “You’re not, uh, uncomfortable?”

How could she be? When the world was this poem, this heady song of his soap and his skin and the fragile barrier of thin cotton? Ye gods, she was craving this, Elle realized with a start. She wanted to be in his arms again, in this newest way, tucked close against his chest in the velvety dimness of his bedroom, the door shut to the world. There were no nightmares here.

She shook her head, wanting more, more, more.

“Jesus,” he said quietly, reaching out one hand to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “When I saw your face -- I thought something bad had happened.”

Her smile widened, even as she apologized. “No, no, it’s fine,” he rushed to assure her. “It’s fine, Elle. I’m just -- damn, I’m proud of you. You did it. You worked so damn hard and now here you are. My girl’s a soldier.” A shadow slid into his gaze at the words.

“How could she be? When the world was this poem, this heady song of his soap and his skin and the fragile barrier of thin cotton? Ye gods, she was craving this, Elle realized with a start. She wanted to be in his arms again, in this newest way, tucked close against his chest in the velvety dimness of his bedroom, the door shut to the world. There were no nightmares here.”

“Bucky?” She knew something was wrong; she always knew when something was wrong. The smallest grain of discomfort, of doubt -- she could detect it. “You’re worried,” she said flatly, disappointment bitter on her tongue. She’d thought they were past the conversations back in the autumn, when he had been so angry at the prospect of her being put at risk.

The instinct to lie simmered on his lips, but he didn’t dare try. “Of course I am,” he admitted. “I want you somewhere safe, baby. But I also know this is what you want, and you’ve been working towards it. I don’t want to hold you back, not from what you want.” He traced one slim finger down the length of her jaw, curving where her bones allowed it, savouring both the smooth descent and the shiver that threaded through her with the pleasure of his touch.

“You like that, baby doll?” he asked, voice raspy with want.

And that was it -- the line. A new one, but firm and blunt just the same. Elle’s eyes widened and Bucky jerked his hand away, sitting bolt upright and breathing heavily, realizing what he had just done. God, they’d only been at this a few weeks, and he had no real clue how much experience she had, and she was so sweet, so sweet, and had he just fu --

“It’s alright,” she whispered, sitting up slowly beside him, that pink blaze rising to her cheeks. “I, er, do -- that is, I mean, I did like it, but we…”

He exhaled sharply in plain relief. “I know. Maybe, uh, maybe we should head downstairs?” Sheeplishly, Bucky began rubbing the back of his neck again; a nervous gesture, she thought with a small smile.

“Yes,” she agreed, standing and smoothing down her skirt, adjusting her hair from where the fall had tousled it. “Yes, I’ll go down first, and then you can…you can get dressed.”

Elle paused a minute to peer into the shaving mirror propped up on top of a chest of drawers, poking here and there at her now-ruined curls and wincing at the high flush to her cheeks; it would be instantly clear what they had been doing together. In the reflection, she caught Bucky’s eye behind her, from where he still sat, perched on the edge of his bed, a mischievous grin blooming on his face. “Hey, Ellie?” he asked.

“Mmm?”

“What the hell happened to your skirt?”

She glanced down at the tea stain, a resolute brown sullying what had been a sophisticated heather-
grey earlier this morning. In all of the excitement following her reinstatement, followed by an afternoon of paperwork and tidying up her administrative duties, Elle had almost entirely forgotten about that morning’s incident with the teacup, the grand finale to a series of fiendishly difficult days. “Oh, that?” she said lightly, winking at him in the mirror. “My luck turned this morning, love, that’s all.”

“Thank you so much for coming, Sergeant; it really means a lot.” The young man, perhaps all of twenty-two or -three, pumped Bucky’s hand enthusiastically, wildly, so much so that Elle actually experienced a little jolt of fear that it would actually remain in his grip once the shaking had ceased. “And ma’am,” the newly-minted husband added, turning to her with an earnest smile, “thank you so much, too. My g-- my wife and I really appreciate it.”

He took so much pleasure in saying the word, Elle felt her stomach leap with secondhand joy. They truly did make a lovely couple, and the ceremony, though it had taken place at the registry office and necessitated a hasty reception here at the church hall (put on with some aplomb by the WI), was still one of the loveliest things she’d experienced in a long time.

Her first mission as a reinstated Commando had gone swimmingly -- a quick personnel retrieval in Switzerland -- and Elle was now sinking into the luxury of a few days’ worth of domestic comforts. Now that the Lecomte family had been relocated to their own residence the house felt somehow contracted, but nonetheless enjoyable. Quiet evenings of shuffling cards and roaming checkers; bustling mornings and the occasional midnight tryst in the broom cupboard -- all worked to facilitate an easy retreat, a warm and welcome space of forgetfulness, where she could be a girl kissing a boy or being soundly trounced at poker.

Every time.

She could not, it seemed, bluff to save her soul.

And there were moments like this, when she got to slip into a pretty dress of blue, white polka dots dancing in a frenzy before she’d even begun to move her feet -- when she had his arm wound through hers and the warm press of him against her, and the world consisted only of the next song, his sly little enticements to *Come on, honey, baby doll, sweetheart, dance with me, step on my feet, I don’t mind.*

Elle shook her head a grand total of eight times, declining the hired band’s skilled renditions of “Pennsylvania 6-5000” and “No Name Jive,” and even “To think that I’m the lucky one / I can’t believe you’re in love with me.” She contented herself with tapping her toes and sipping lightly on the punch, chatting with the bridesmaid and watching the merry chaos of khaki and spring dresses, love bursting fast and heavy with the troubling news coming from every quarter. But it didn’t matter, it truly didn’t matter, because a boy named Martin and a girl named Lucy had fallen in love and decided that war be damned, they were getting married.

But Bucky was relentless; he hadn’t let up since they’d walked through the door of the church hall -- Adele and the rest of the Commandos, sans Steve, who was kept back in preparation for an upcoming mission -- and had employed a dizzying array of tactics to convince her to dance with him. “I know you’re nervous, Ellie, but I’ll help. Let’s dance, honey; they’re playing our song,” he said now, slipping into the seat beside her and pushing the chair closer, so that his breath was warm and tantalizing on her neck. The faint kiss of cider sweetened the air between them, but all she could do was smile and shake her head.
The tune was catchy, bouncy, but it was anonymous, all jiving swings and jazzy arcs. This was anyone’s song, but it wasn’t theirs -- and besides, he’d already tried that with three others. “Have you seen Adele?” she asked. “Or Peggy?”

Both were wearing red, and she could see them clearly across the expanse of the dancefloor, conversing animatedly with Dugan and Jacques. Bucky rolled his eyes, pressing a kiss to her cheek as he stood again, preparing to head off in search of some form of entertainment, when the music changed again, dipping into a sprightly but even rhythm, and, beaming, she twirled on her feet to face him, extending a hand to Bucky as she flounced out her full skirt a little more with the other. “What do you say, love?” Elle asked, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Now they’re playing our song.”

The last time Bucky had been led onto the floor by a girl, he’d been fifteen and nervous as hell, sweating through his new shirt; at twenty-seven, Elle’s hand wrapped around his and those little white shoes of hers click-clacking across the parquet, his stomach flip-flopped and a sheen of perspiration bloomed on his forehead. Elle didn’t dance to songs like this, and they’d had yet to dance together in public. Not that he minded; anything to make her feel comfortable. But then she turned again, once they’d reached the middle of the floor, and he watched her chest rise with a deep, shuddering breath. “Ready, Sergeant?”

He smiled. “For you, baby, always.”

The beat was easy enough for her to manoeuvre her steps carefully, just as she and Pearl had practiced two dozen times. She glanced up as they spun to observe, with delighted satisfaction, that Bucky’s eyes had brightened, as he realized she knew the steps better than she did. “Fools rush in,” the lead singer crooned, and Bucky’s grip tightened about her waist, pulling her in a few inches closer, her breath coming quicker in response. “Where wise men never go / But wise men never fall in love / So how are they to know?”

He laughed out loud at her pleased grin, as she let him twirl her in all the right places, as her feet glided in perfect tandem with his. To everyone else looking on, they were a couple who spent all their time dancing, and fit together seamlessly. “Is that what you think, honey?” he whispered, pressing his lips to her ear. “That we’re fools, rushing in?”

A burnished cascade of curls trembled as she shook her head; the thin band holding them back caught the glimmer of the lights above, and Bucky had to fight an inopportune longing to run his fingers through her hair, reminding himself they weren’t in the closet this time. “Don’t pay attention to the lyrics,” she replied, leaning back to look at him, eyes flickering invitingly down to his mouth. “It was just the easiest rhythm Pearl and I could figure out.”

“Hmm.” He captured her lips in a quick, stealthy kiss. “Sure.” With one swift movement and a hand firm against the small of her back, Bucky had to fight an inopportune longing to run his fingers through her hair, reminding himself they weren’t in the closet this time. “Don’t pay attention to the lyrics,” she replied, leaning back to look at him, eyes flickering invitingly down to his mouth. “It was just the easiest rhythm Pearl and I could figure out.”

“Hmm.” He captured her lips in a quick, stealthy kiss. “Sure.” With one swift movement and a hand firm against the small of her back, Bucky dipped Elle low, anticipating the final notes of the song. Something immature in him had hoped to catch her off-guard, see her lips form that little O of surprise he’d only spotted a handful of times before -- but she had known it was coming. That clear, high laugh of hers rang out, and her hands shot up to anchor her grip on his arms.

She was a starburst in his hands, glowing and glittering with the simple joy of surprising him. And for three minutes, the world was the two of them, he thought, marvelling at the idea. Just the two of them, a polka dot dress and her pink-painted fingernails lost in the seams of his uniform -- nothing else existed, nothing else mattered.

After sitting out for another two songs, Elle had caught her breath (although the exertion and pounding of her heart had more to do with Bucky’s hands and whispers than with actual dancing),
and was ready to be pulled back out onto the floor, this time for something slower, something sultrier. “I want you to listen to the words in this one, okay, Ellie?” Bucky breathed, soft and promising, against her ear.

It was couples only now as the song swept into being; twosomes pressed closed together as the female lead singer took a break, allowing the rich baritone of her partner to glide out over the darkening space. Elle leaned her head against Bucky’s shoulder, breathing deep the scent of his soap and shaving cream, the sharp tang of sweat in his uniform.

The physical reality of James Barnes never ceased to amaze and overwhelm her; that she was permitted to touch him, too, was a repeated revelation. Time and time again, she knew a coil of frustration twisting in her stomach, as she realized how much of him there was, how many lovely elements to catalogue and savour; the limitations of time, privacy, and propriety working against them furiously. There was only so much passion a broom closet could contain, after all.

She counted his heartbeats, took careful note of the uptick in his breathing as a slow, sleepy smile unfurled against his neck. “How long would it take me / To be near if you beckon? / Off hand I would figure / Less than a second.”

The words were tender, intimate, and Elle allowed them to wash over her. Listen, he’d told her. And she did. To the sweet promises in another man’s voice, but his words -- was that what he meant? Was it his curiosity she heard, when the singer asked those questions, offered those answers in the next breath? “Do you think I’ll remember / How you looked when you smile? Only forever / That’s puttin’ it mild.”

Only forever.

“Listening, Ellie?” he asked, voice rumbling deep in his chest, and she nodded.

“But isn’t it sad?” she murmured, ghosting her lips against the stubble at his jaw. “Doesn’t it mean…”

Bucky froze, registering a slight trembling to her voice. “No, honey. It just means he...I won’t...I won’t ever forget you. Your smile. How sweet you are. How beautiful.”

“But that’s for people who are apart,” she pointed out gently, sadly. “Are we -- ?”

He kissed her. Soundly. In a way he’d only ever kissed her when they were alone; the kind of touch that made her melt against him, sinking into the searing promise he could not verbalize. He stole her words with his lips, swallowing that fear. A sound burst in the heart of her, rising on a tide of fanning flames, and he smiled against her. “Do I want to be with you as the years come and go? I want to be with you as the years come and go? Only forever, if you care to know.’” he said softly, repeating the opening stanza back to her, even as the music faded around them and a few titters erupted here and there; even without her knowing, her hands had wound into the thick sweep of his hair; she stroked back his fringe lovingly, seeing nothing but his blue, blue gaze.

“Do I want to be with you as the years come and go? Only forever, if you care to know.’ That’s it, honey,” he murmured, cupping one hand around the back of her head, thumb rubbing that tantalizing spot just under her ear. “It doesn’t mean we’re gonna be apart; it means I don’t have to forget, ’cause we’ve got forever. How does that sound?” Gently, he kissed her again, capturing her top lip between his, and her right hand came up to his neck, to tickle the hair there lightly, just as he’d told her a thousand times he liked so much.

Heat swept through her, heat and wine she had not drunk; Elle was brimming with the fullness of this joy, giddy and shaking with wonder. Bucky, his hands on her, in her hair, against her skin, his
love and care kindling something deeper and purer than she had ever known within her soul. Simple words and actions only -- notes tucked under her bedroom door; jokes curling into her ear; the rasp of his morning greeting, his regretful goodnight. His pride in her success. His patience during her firearms training. His thousand and one pet names.

Breathless again, Bucky’s lips parted and he rested his forehead against hers. “You’re so perfect, baby doll.” She shivered with the pleasure of his words, shivered even as she shook her head, even as guilt swept through on an unhappy tide and soured the wine-drunk moment.

“No, Bucky; I’m not perfect,” she said softly, thinking of the boy. “I’m far from it.”

But her words were lost in the swell of a new song, in the heat of his gaze, the question growing in his mind and desire-blown pupils. It was a question that may have been too early, of course, but was a tragedy if it was asked too late, and the words pressed at the seam of his lips, watching new roses bloom in her cheeks, and though she could not hear it yet, Elle knew there was a weight to his gaze now, an intention forming steadily and truly.

He’d promised her forever, and Bucky Barnes always made good on his promises.

Chapter End Notes

Music referenced in this chapter:

1. "Pennsylvania 6-5000" by the Glenn Miller Orchestra (1940)
2. "No Name Jive" by Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra (1940)
3. "I Can't Believe You're In Love With Me" (1926)
4. "Only Forever" by Bing Crosby (1940)
June

Chapter Notes

Please note: descriptions of war-related violence in this chapter.

0155h

Elle stirred, legs tangled in the sheets and a thin sheen of sweat shining on her arms even in the dark of the bedroom. In her sleep, the dream had been vivid, but was forgotten now, fading into vague recollections of summer days long ago -- her childhood, painted in watery pastels, endless days of stories and plump strawberries, crushed between her lips. Her world then had been very small: her father, mother, and the boy. Adventures in books and mischief in his eyes.

Tears soaked her pillow as she remembered, as she felt the keen, insistent tug of who she had been, once upon a time, urging her back. Elle Andersen, she thought steadily. I’m Elle Andersen. A Howling Commando. Bucky’s girl. I’m Elle. She was not the story of long ago, a girl by another name, a girl led into trouble and joy, a girl who had lost half her heart, a girl who had wept in the long grass of a meadow, those strawberries turned to ash in her mouth. That girl was gone, banished to dreams. She was a woman now. A woman capable of simply rolling over onto her other side, snuggling down deeper into the careful embrace of better thoughts.

Across the sea, nearly two thousand aircraft burst forth, heralds of a bloodier summer than the world had ever known.

0300h

Throat dry, Steve stumbled down the hall and the stairs, pausing for a minute outside of Bucky’s room. Hoping he wouldn’t hear a strangled cry, knowing that if he did, there was little help he could offer. Bucky tended to shrug off the concern, even as his hands shook to sweep back his hair and his bottom lip trembled in the aftershocks of the horror. He wouldn’t even let Elle deal with him when he was like that.

He drank deeply, down in the kitchen -- moonlight slanting down to illuminate the table, his hands wrapped around the glass, the muscles of his arms taut and rippling beneath the shirt he’d worn to bed. Time compressed and collapsed around him, and he was small again, small and thin and gasping for breath. And then he was the Captain, strong and bold and clever as they come. It was a relief simply to be thirsty, to be jolted from dreams by a dry mouth and nothing else. No wracking cough.

Across the sea, soldiers crept from the confines of their ships, piling -- mouths full of salt and prayers -- into the landing crafts, heading towards the beach, towards the beach. Towards war.

0354h

Bucky shifted, a muscle cramping in his left arm. Just slight; nothing too painful. He’d wrenched it during their escape from the Strassen factory, as he’d wrestled with a HYDRA goon for the gun he
was supposed to be retrieving. Samples of enemy technology and weaponry were in high demand from the SSR. At a briefing last week, Stark had made it clear that understanding their energy source (a good exemplar of which had been extracted by Steve from the Austrian prison months before) would be one of the biggest boons in beating HYDRA back. “If we understand what they’re fighting with,” he’d explained, twirling his pen idly and winking in Elle’s direction, “then we can better understand how to fight back.”

It made sense to Bucky. One of the few things that did these days. His best friend had grown nearly a foot, and gained over one hundred pounds, transforming into a super soldier overnight. He’d been drafted to come over and fight Nazis; instead, he was chasing rogue scientists and a red-skulled man who believed in magic across Europe. Technology, advancements -- he was stunned on a daily basis. Tortured at night, as he remembered what they had done to him.

Elle made sense, though. Elle would always make sense. As he rubbed small, tight circles into the coiled, rebellious muscle of his arm, he thought of her featherlight touch. The song of her laughter. The heat pounding through him as he realized just how different this was. She wasn’t a Saturday night date; she wasn’t a “Hi-honey-you-look-real-pretty-today.” Elle was a future, a future he wasn’t entirely sure he deserved. But under her lips, the shame melted away; in her embrace, Zola did not exist. He was clean again. Better.

Across the sea, fifty-two Waco CG-4As swooped high and glided silently through the night. A baker’s dozen of soldiers nestled in each, heads bowed, muscles taut. Ready for the drop; ready for the fight.

0629h

The day shifted into being, just like any other Tuesday at home, with faint grumbles and groans and the squeaky yielding of bedsprings as their occupants begrudgingly accepted the reality of waking up. Soldiers every one, sheets and blankets were drawn up neatly and tightly; morning ablutions performed efficiently. Downstairs, the kitchen bloomed into a flurry of orderly activity, as Gabe and Bucky prepared fried eggs and toast, while Dugan set the table.

Despite the faint ache of hunger gnawing at her stomach, Elle chose to draw an uncharacteristic morning bath, slipping into the warm water in an effort to soothe sore muscles, particularly her legs (which were still resolutely screaming after a four day mission in Luxembourg, requiring quite a lot of running; and then a gruelling training session with Pearl the afternoon before). She was loath to rush downstairs; she knew what would be there -- tension; impatience; disappointment, trimmed with preemptive grief.

Across the sea, the waves gave up soldier after soldier, an onrush of intent. On the beach, blood seeped and stained; great craters carved themselves where once shaky castles had grown. And the dead, the dead slept an uneasy rest, strewn indecorously, cruelly, across the leisurely expanse.

“We should be there,” Dugan argued, slamming down a fist. “Goddamnit -- it’s been three fucking days, what are they waiting for?”

Elle laid a gentle, calming hand on his arm, earning her a rueful glance. “Sorry, sweetheart, but you know…”

Of course she knew. Hadn’t the prospect, the early intel, haunted her for days now? Phillips had made it clear during Sunday’s debriefing that the reason the Commandos weren’t being deployed as part of Operation Overlord was, quite blatantly, because they didn’t need to be there. “But it’s the
largest Allied effort yet,” Steve had pointed out. “We should be there to help. Do our part.”

Logically, yes, the Commandos could be a benefit. Overlord was a major, expansive operation, necessitating contributions from land, sea, and air. It was a theatre of war, a new one, being carved out from German-occupied territory. Overlord, and the invasion of Normandy, it was hoped, would liberate western Europe from Nazi clutches.

But the plan encompassed so many elements. So many variables. Miles of beaches, vulnerable towns beyond. Great green plains, wide open and unattainable. Verdant forests, thick with threats. And all of that was only reachable if they made it past the initial skirmishes on the beaches.

The Howling Commandos had not taken news of their grounding well -- all except Elle, who had known a tiny wave of relief when Phillips had made the announcement. A deep sense of foreboding was blanketed over the news (even the bloody name made her shudder), and, selfish as it may be, she had no desire for anyone she cared about to be anywhere near the English Channel. No -- for the moment, they were safe within the confines of their own home, eating breakfast. She could reach out and grasp Bucky’s hand in her own, from where it rested on the edge of the table. She could meet Gabe’s eyes over a plate of toast. Even Dugan’s noisy frustration was a comfort.

From the far end of the table, Steve heaved a weighted sigh, drawing everyone’s attention. Bucky squeezed her fingers, bringing their clasped hands down to rest upon his knee; he could feel the tension rolling from her skin, mingling with the fresh, warm scent of her still-damp hair.

“I understand, Dum,” Steve said evenly. “Believe me. I’m right there with you. But the Colonel and P-Agent Carter have made it clear they want us grounded for the time being. Those are our orders.”

“As a smaller unit, we stand a much better chance of being useful once the actual invasion has been initiated.” Monty stood and began clearing the table. “We can be much more agile than a large contingent.”

Dugan just crossed his arms, looking for all the world like a spoilt boy who’d lost his favourite toy. “But the 107th is there, boots on the ground.”

“And the Howling Commandos are here, safe and sound,” Elle argued gently. “James is right; if the time comes, and we’re needed, we will be more effective as a smaller, mobile unit.” Cautiously, she slid Dugan’s coffee mug a little closer to his hand, hoping to give him something to occupy his fist, rather than banging the table. “I think we all just need to calm down and accept our role, such as it is.”

As usual, her calm tone and comforting presence seemed to defuse the growing tension, settling the room’s occupants back into a sleepy kind of contentment, and for a few minutes, the only sounds were the scraping of their forks and quiet bursts of civil conversation, about anything other than the invasion. Bucky neglected to release her hand, and so finished his eggs somewhat awkwardly with his left hand, stroking small circles onto the centre of her palm as he ate. There were no blushes, no shivers, no bitten lips. Just the easy reassurance of his hand on hers.

At 0453h on the morning of 06 June 1944, S- and T-Companies of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (101st Airborne Division), as commanded by Maj R. McTavish and Maj J. W. Daniels, was rerouted en route to a drop at Vierville-sur-Mer. 28 troops on board inclu COs; 4 crew.

Emergency landing some 13 miles due south of Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer. Remains of 4 crew members and 15 troops recovered at scene. Evidence at scene combined
with recent intelligence indicates the high likelihood of HYDRA involvement.

Maj Daniels known to be significant HYDRA target. Assistance requested.
Confirmed stronghold located at Lisieux.

Hadrian, they called the aeroplanes. One would expect a craft called a “glider” to be light as a feather, silky smooth on the air, and yet they’d been named, in England at least, for an emperor, a name weighted in history and purpose. Elle tried to picture the wall instead, the one Hadrian had built, snaking across a firm, green landscape down below, safe from the roiling Channel beneath. And her roiling stomach.

A gasp escaped her lips as the plane lurched slightly; turbulence born of a summer squall, brewing just below or just above (she couldn’t tell) was making for a rough passage, though Monty, from the cockpit, was resolutely reassuring. “Another twenty minutes, Cap,” he said cheerily, as though they weren’t flying through the air in a bloody death trap. On their way to a bloody death trap. To then get into another death trap. And drive to --

With a curse, she grasped at Dugan’s arm, squeezing away a sudden wash of ice-cold fear, streaking up her spine, as the plane dipped low and a rumbling spurted from somewhere near the tail. “Oh, ye gods,” she muttered angrily. “Why the bloody hell did I…”

“I distinctly recall your exact words being, ‘Oh, Colonel, Agent -- thank you so much. I am so grateful for the renewal of this opportunity and I promise not to let you down.’” Nonchalantly, Peggy turned the pages of a dossier, propped open neatly upon her lap, not the least bit affected by the tin-can rattling of the aeroplane, nor the fact that she was, essentially strapped to a wall. “I rather got the impression you were thrilled to be back, Miss Andersen.”

She fought the urge to stick out her tongue, an expression Bucky caught and quickly interpreted. “Renewal of this opportunity?” he mouthed, silent laughter crinkling his eyes.

Elle shot him a steely glare that did nothing to dissuade his amusement, nor that of Dugan, who chuckled lightly by her side. “Guess Barnes didn’t know he was going steady with a thesaurus,” he teased, nudging her knee gently with his.

Her gaze dropped at his words, pink dusting her cheeks as low chuckles of agreement rang out in the tinny space. They all knew about her and Bucky -- they were being careful, but not subtle. Just two days ago she knew Monty had caught sight of her hand snaking out from the confines of the closet, grasping the front of Bucky’s shirt to pull him quickly in with her. Need and want were rising higher and higher these days, and the last bastion of their mutual resolve was, she feared, thinning.

She wasn’t ashamed of her desires; she and the boy had tutored each other well in the cresting of affection, bolstering the waves of want here and there with words, soft touches, the lowering of her lashes or that faint growl he could muster in the back of his throat.

Bucky’s want was different. A “baby doll,” burned into the tender flesh of her neck; the firm press of the wall at her back; his warmth at her front, hands chasing down the fabric of her dress, playing more freely against bare skin now with the summer weather, as she forewent long sleeves and jumpers. His breathless extrication, a chaste kiss on her forehead that said what he couldn’t -- he was done, he must be done, lest they go too far. But what, she wondered now, as the plane lurched again and her eyes sought his -- for comfort, for reassurance -- what was “too far?” He’d whispered to her before that they should wait, that they weren’t ready, but the two of them had yet to discuss what they were not ready for.
She wanted; she wanted.

She wanted him even now, on the cusp of a mission, with the dark, rich sweep of his hair, that tiny tug of a smile upon his lips. He would intervene, Elle knew, with the teasing -- if she wanted. One word from her, one blush too deep, one incline of her head and he would put an end to it. A sharp word, perhaps; a light curse.

Truly, though she may blush and posture, she didn’t mind. Taunts and ribbings, taking the mick -- it was all a distraction, for the other Commandos. While they teasingly called her “Mrs Barnes,” her stomach flipped in delight; her skin sizzled with hope. And when Dugan asked Bucky if he would like to drop by Selfridges to pick up some new lipstick, since most of hers seemed to be on his collar or neck, they exchanged that look. The one that made her think of stars, of galaxies -- big enough to contain the molten, raging expanse of heady, trueborn infatuation.

She wanted; she wanted.

Even on the cusp of a mission.

It was want, and his lips on hers, on her mind when the first shot hit.

Parachutes work on physics and hope; love is much the same way. She was desperate for him in those moments, swallowing screams as his hands worked over the safety straps for her. Craven shivers trembled through her and soft pleas slithered from her, clamouring against his ears. He tucked one hand under her jaw; she’d been through this procedure, they had prepared for this. Overland now, just skirting the edge of a beach. “I’ll find you,” he said heatedly, fear biting at every impassioned syllable. “Baby, I’ll find you, okay?”

An emergency landing; they could make it. They would make it. On the sand. Peggy gripped her arm, pushing her back more firmly into her seat; it was time. She slipped her fingers from his and then grabbed them again, pressing them to her mouth. A goodbye in tears and lips gone dry and cracked with fear. Just in case.

The battered, smoking carcass of the aeroplane looked painfully at odds with the serene, curving elegance of the shoreline. Dawn stroked at the white foam of eager waves, still far out with the resistance of low tide -- painting a pretty picture in the distance, ill at odds with the chaos erupting from the Commandos’ panicked descent. In the distance, beyond the beach, the white and red roofs of the nearby town appearing just over the gentle, lilting rise of the sandy dunes, but everyone who stumbled from the plane, choking on the acrid air, knew they would find no aid there.

They were in occupied territory now.

Salvaging what they could, the Howling Commandos burst into a flurry of focused activity, retrieving bags of medical supplies and Gabe’s communications equipment. In the months since their formation, the team had gradually slipped into more defined roles -- and Gabe’s keen interest in coding and his skill with languages had allowed him to transition, alongside Elle, to the dual position of a communications liaison.

Hurriedly now, he and Elle worked to pull loose a large, portable radio. With an insistent tug, the box containing it shifted and slid from the bowed and broken side of the plane, where a deep gash had splintered the metal from the impact of the beach. Monty had done a fine job, despite appearances -- save a few bumps and bruises, all present company were in acceptable shape.
“Good? Good?” Morita wove in and out of the busy knots of industry, checking a cut on Dugan’s forehead and ordering Bucky to flex his shoulder. Though the doctor who had given him the all-clear for the last few missions had been effusively impressed with his speedy recovery, the risk of relapse was always present. “Elle,” Jim said firmly. “Press gently along the collar, let me know how it feels.” He moved on to Peggy, who had a rather sizeable, bleeding contusion on one cheek.

“You okay, doll?” Bucky whispered, as her fingers skated in a familiar dance beneath the fabric of his shirt, trying hard to suppress a shiver of pleasure at her touch. It wouldn’t do for a soldier to blush during a medical examination, after all.

She nodded, tears brimming in her gaze, a kiss pressing at the seam of her lips. He wanted to kiss her, too -- she could read it in his eyes, that burning gleam that seemed to descend just a split second before he did. But this was different; this wasn’t training, this wasn’t an evening in the supply closet. This wasn’t a breathless hope, a heated promise in her ear. This was a moment of war, a time and space in which they could not afford to be Bucky and Elle. She was a medic, a comms tech; Peggy’s right-hand. He was the sniper, the soldier. They two must inevitably accept the mantles they’d carved for themselves on this beach, though death had stroked their skin only minutes before; though it waited in the hills and fields beyond.

“Love, I…” Elle swallowed the plea, smoothed both hands over the expanse of his shoulders, easing the blue jacket back into place. As a thousand women had done before her -- mothers and sisters, lovers and wives, sending boys off to war, looking their best. Her fingers trembled against him, and he grasped both in his, brought first her left hand to his lips, and then her right, lighting a kiss to the sandy, shaking palm of each. His mouth was gentle, his eyes bluer and brighter than she had ever seen them before.

“You’re good, baby, I’ve got you; you’ve got me.”

But what would get them?

The countryside rolled and shuddered with distant explosions; the absence of birdsong and busyness made for a stealthy skirting of the nearby town. Weighed down with weapons and disorientation, Dugan did his best to interpret the landscape and against the maps they were in possession of, but it seemed that, in response to the invasion further west, the Germans occupying the area had taken deliberate (and admittedly ingenious) steps to altering various road signs and landmarks.

Of the artillery that had brought them down, they could find no trace -- though Monty, Dugan, and Steve combed the beach in a four-mile radius. “It could have come from the other side of the beachhead,” Bucky explained. “That would give them a clear shot, and if this map is right, there’s a valley road going east.”

To this end, there was little option to do anything other than walk. Dugan had arranged for transportation to meet them in their initial destination of Beaumont-sur-Auge, some twenty kilometres north of the German-held city of Lisieux. It was there, intel had suggested, HYDRA was likely keeping Daniels and what remained of Sierra and Tango Companies under lock and key. Daniels was well-known, his name and serial number floating on the HYDRA airwaves quite frequently.

A physicist from McGill University in Quebec, before the war Doctor John Walter Daniels had been something of a rising star in his field, applying new theorems and techniques to the study of particles and the way they behaved under very specific circumstances. He was particularly intrigued by the potential to utilize some of these theorems in the development of new defensive technologies, thus putting him in the company of one Howard Stark.
Much of the information helping the Commandos with their mission had actually come from Stark, who had kept up an infrequent correspondence with Daniels, who had known HYDRA was sniffing around. Scouts had been spotted in Montreal, men with American accents and Germanic inflections, who tried their best to blend in but were often given away by their frustration at not having access to the wary doctor -- who had eventually reported first to Georgia, then to England for training. Howard had even met up with him a couple of times while on furlough.

“Schmidt will want him,” Stark had assured the Commandos during yesterday’s debriefing. “Wouldn’t be that hard for them to find out his regiment, especially where he’s a CO. And then it’s just a matter of picking the right plane from the sky. Which, if they’ve got our codes intercepted, well…”

The one good thing, Elle decided as they began the long walk to Lisieux, was that there was no reason to yet suspect that Daniels or the fourteen other men (including Major McTavish) were dead. Indeed, Daniels likely could use his strategic position and desirability to keep the other soldiers alive. Extraction, thus, could be easier -- with more hands on deck, so to speak.

Nevertheless, despite this slim and tender hope she nurtured, Elle kept a hand close to her gun, eyes trained on the horizon. It wasn’t just HYDRA they would have to worry about in the French countryside: the Normandy invasion had let loose a wild, defensive stream from within, as the Nazis clamoured to maintain their hold on France. Lisieux was strategic, settled as it was at the meeting of four rivers. It made sense that HYDRA would want some sort of a stronghold there, though whether this location was within the city proper or reached out into the countryside a ways, remained to be seen.

“I want at least eight hours’ reconnaissance when we get there,” Peggy said briskly to Steve, just up ahead on the path from where Elle and Bucky kept an even pace together. Intermittently, he would reach for her hand, give her fingers a gentle squeeze; once or twice already, he’d kissed her hair. His movements spoke of cagey want; a craving for the smallest of reminders that she was safe, she was with him. She was alive.

The rest of the time, his eye was trained on the horizon, on the surrounding gently-sloping hills. Plenty of places for an enemy squad to hide, and with Steve’s uniform and their armfuls of weapons, they could hardly hope to be inconspicuous.

“Sergeant Barnes” -- Peggy turned on the path, following Steve’s agreements -- “if we can find you a suitable vantage point, will you serve the entire shift? In addition to another pair of eyes, of course.”

Bucky nodded, shrugging away Elle’s silent expression of concern as Peggy and Steve resumed their intense conversation once more. “Don’t look at me like that, doll,” he said quietly, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. “It’s my job.”

“I know, but you need to rest,” she pointed out. “And your shoulder --”

“My shoulder’s fine. I made it through Strassen okay -- what makes you think this’ll be any different?”

A boyish defensiveness had crept into his tone, and he paused, right there on the dusty road. “Elle, you just got back, don’t turn into one of those…” He trailed off, losing his nerve before giving shape to the word.

But Elle was curious, now.
“One of those’ what?” Her voice teetered on the edge of composure; the morning’s near-miss had yet to fully crest within her; the aftershocks of the crash and the rapid reevaluation necessitated by landing in Cabourg, some eighty kilometers off their course, had all but stolen her entire composure. And now, the prospect of Bucky having to spend hours holed up in a church tower, or laying on his belly atop some hillside -- hungry, sore, tired -- rankled her no end. “Please -- go on.”

Steve put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder, knowing neither of them truly needed the sentence finished. He could hear the shrill trim to Elle’s voice, an indication that she was more upset than her demeanour was letting on -- and really, who could blame her? They were all shaken up by the change in events, by the prospect of heading through enemy territory to an enemy stronghold. If Bucky were to now accuse her of becoming a “clingy broad,” a “nag,” a “worrywart,” or whatever was sitting foolishly on the tip of his tongue, well --

HYDRA might be kinder than an irate Peggy and Elle together.

“We’re about twenty kilometers out,” he said calmly, gesturing for the other Commandos to gather. “And it’s nearly -- what Gabe, three?” At Gabe’s nod, he continued: “Here’s the plan. We’re going to find a viable location nearby where we can set up a small camp and get Bucky a good eyeline to the city. The landscape will have been changed quite a bit with the bombings, so the photographs we studied before leaving are going to be next to useless, I’d say.”

“What time are we going to head in?” Jim asked, squatting a little to stretch out his tired legs.

Steve glanced at Peggy, who crisply explained that the first task must necessarily be, of course, to determine the actual location of the HYDRA stronghold. “We’re unsure precisely what we’re looking for, of course. By all accounts, we can suspect that Daniels is being kept there for questioning and possible torture, I’m afraid. I don’t think HYDRA would take the risk of transporting him to a research or production facility just yet, not with the threat of a Commandos attack and the countryside crawling with Allies.”

"But are we looking for a house?” Elle blinked, looking from Steve to Peggy. “Or are we looking for a more sizeable base?”

Peggy shook her head. “All we know, from locally-sourced intelligence, is that it’s not production-oriented. So it could quite easily be a smaller location, a house or farm. We’re not sure.”

“I remember seeing some big houses in those pictures,” Gabe piped up. “Stone, pretty fancy, too. If it’s just a few officers and an armed guard, maybe they’d prefer something like that?”

“And the place was blown to hell,” added Dugan. “Not much is still standing in the city proper after that.”

After another ten minutes of back and forth and weighing the odds, it was decided that they would skirt east around the main breadth of the city, at least for the first night. There were sure to be plenty of farms in the area, and chatting with locals or with any encountered American troops could yield some fruitful results. It was unlikely, Elle reasoned, that HYDRA was still holed up in the city. The Allied bombardment of nearly nine days before had levelled about two-thirds of Lisieux, killing many civilians. They were likely to retreat to the countryside, if they weren’t already stationed there.

“What if they aren’t around the eastern side of the city?” asked Jacques “Then what?”

“We start knocking on doors,” Peggy said. “We have three fluent French speakers in our company; we can pair up and start pressing the locals.”
“And if they’re afraid to talk?”

Peggy’s smile tightened. “You make a good point, Barnes,” she said gently. “But we have to hope they have the courage to speak the truth, or even to point in the right direction. The invasion has initiated something; despite the devastation, there is more hope now than ever.

“We have a few hours until full sunset, until about 2200 hours. That should be enough time for us to make camp and set up Sergeant Barnes. Now, shall we carry on, gentlemen, Andersen?”

In the sweaty confines of the tent -- pressed full of Commandos, though she and Peggy had been given the two cots that had survived the emergency landing -- Elle tried to dream. Of better things, the dreams she often tried to weave for herself, by focusing her thoughts on specific notions as her mind faltered between waking and sleep: she would think of the roses on her vanity back in London; the taste of Bucky’s kisses; the feel of a dancing dress, silky joy bubbling about her legs.

Sometimes, she would indulge in visions of the future, inspired by the letters from his mother that were now addressed to the two of them -- missives containing local news and gossip, packed with little details about church suppers and fundraisers, her various home projects and the new man that Rebecca was keeping company with.

Elle would try and imagine a future of her own in Brooklyn, leaning back in Bucky’s arms on the chesterfield, him reading aloud as he held the letter right in front of her. Often, they would pair up to reread the letters several times over, and then he and Steve would get lost in memory and conversations about what seemed to her now to be another world.

Occasionally, there were tidbits he wasn’t as eager to share. Like the time Winnie had written to tell him that a girl named Connie was engaged, and he was forced to explain to Elle that she was a girl he’d been keeping casual company with for a few days before his orders came in. “She’s sweet, doll, but she ain’t you,” he’d assured her, kisses chasing down the length of her neck until her shivers and sighs put an end to the conversation.

She thought of those kisses in the dark of the tent, squirming slightly against the suspended canvas bed and in the discomfort of realizing they had not spoken since their altercation on the road. Bucky had never been so terse with her -- at least, not since the autumn, when they had both been mired in the misery of that awful miscommunication. It soured her stomach to think that she’d gone to bed without a “goodnight,” or the press of his lips on hers. Each and every night they were together, Bucky made sure to remind her how much he cared, how much he wanted her; and she him.

These days -- especially on a mission -- tomorrow was not a guarantee.

It was ill-advised to sneak up on a sniper, however carefully set up he may be in a belltower, but her desire had been stoked, flashing deep in veins -- she had to see him, had to speak with him. Never mind that it was nearly one o’clock in the morning; never mind that they were in enemy territory. Elle wanted to see her sweetheart, her beau, her Bucky.

*Ye gods*, but it was warm. Sweat and humidity made her clothes cling to her skin, her hair sticking uncomfortably to the nape of her neck. Not the prettiest she’d ever been for him, but that couldn’t be helped. And he would never ask her for more.

The boy had, and often did. As she made her way from the mouth of the tent, stepping out into a shady copse of oaks, about thirty yards away from the churchyard -- as she walked in the night, feet soaked with early dew and heart pounding with risk and want. Gifts from the boy were rarely ever simple, coming attached with the implication of another dinner to attend, another appearance to
make. When she would chafe at his lack of commitment, he would point out all that he had given her, and how could he be uncommitted if he was so willing to invest thus in their relationship?

Did the boy truly love her, she wondered now, stepping around the gravestones to reach the front door of the church. The stone wall was so cool against her hands, a real balm on this sultry night, that she paused a moment there, forehead and hands braced against the ancient edifice, another face in her mind. Another memory; another world.

Elle’s time with the Commandos was changing her, she could feel it. Her strength had increased; her resolve. The boy might scarcely recognize her now.

But there in the dark, dim night, she wondered again -- did he love her? Or were the years that had passed between them mere playacting? Encouraged as they had been by his parents and hers, she and the boy had never truly had a chance to come together as she and Bucky had, to sort out emotions and desires on a more even playing field.

He had never been cruel to her and -- she knew -- never would be. Never had a hand been raised in anger nor a too-harsh word volleyed in her direction. If anything, the boy had protected her from such things, preserving her innocence and keeping her safe from judgement and criticism.

But with him, she had been a girl. A girl, always. With Bucky and the Commandos, Elle had come to define herself as a woman, inspired by the models of Peggy, Pearl, Adele, and Ines. Janie and Lila, too. A woman capable of comfort and compassion, a woman able to fire a gun and stitch a mighty wound. A woman willing to sneak into enemy territory and sacrifice herself for the good of her compatriots.

Her mother had never wanted her to be a warrior, and yet, here she was. What would the boy think of that?

“Ellie, it’s late,” he said, voice gone hoarse with disuse. “You should be in bed.”

"We didn’t say goodnight.” When the words had finally escaped her, tiptoeing into the quiet of the space, Elle realized just how childish they sounded. All her posturing down below of being a woman now, and she was a girl again in one plaintive sentence.

Bucky’s face softened. He was perched in the corner of one window, able to see a large swathe of the surrounding farmland via the aid of a special night vision scope Stark had developed just for him, affixed as a scope on his Johnson rifle. The area had been mostly peaceful in the hours since they’d arrived and made camp, but there was always the potential for a sudden disturbance.

“Come here, doll,” he murmured, raising one arm and shuffling back against the wall; from this position, he could still see outside. He propped the gun between his legs as she scooted forward, tucking herself against his side as comfortably and familiarly as though they were on the chesterfield back home. She leaned her head against his chest, and he placed a kiss to her crown. “I’m sorry about earlier, baby,” he said softly. “I shouldn’t have...I, uh, the truth is, when you worry about me like that, it makes me feel...kinda guilty.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered, sliding her fingers beneath the opening of his jacket. Not far enough to touch the shirt beneath, nor yet skin. But there was something intimate about the gesture just the same, something that warmed her. Kindled a flame inside her.

Above her, Bucky heaved a sigh, and tightened his grip, rubbing small circles against her upper arm with one thumb. “It’s just, I wish things could be easier. That you and I could just date, you know?”
Be together. I wish I could take you dancing and out for lunch and dinner, kiss you on the front step and go to the movies.”

“We are together, though,” she pointed out, a small smile blooming on her lips at the thought. “We do things, just you and I.”

“Yeah, like cram ourselves into a closet and go on missions together.” There was a note of bitterness to his tone that made her shift in his embrace, lifting her head to see the worry in his eyes.

“Bucky, love --”

“No, just...just let me, okay?” His jaw flexed, but he wasn’t angry with her, she knew -- from the warm press of his lips against her forehead, from the trembling touch at her arm. “I just wish there wasn’t a war, baby. That’s all. I wish you and I could be a guy and a girl, with normal, boring jobs. I wish I could take you out like I used to do with Connie and Dot and…and other girls. It just pisses me off that I have to kiss you in a dusty closet. That the only times we get to go out are for USO things. That our plane crashes and we have to deal with that, that I have to think about losing you and you have to worry about me collapsing of exhaustion.

“Jesus, baby -- I just want to take you home late, I want you to come over to my ma’s for Sunday dinner. I want to buy you something special and make sure everyone knows you’re my girl.”

Power trembled through his every word, of a kind she had never known before. The desires he expressed were so simple, so straightforward, so bloody innocent and yet Elle felt lightning chase up her spine, and would not have been surprised to see her fingertips, as they stroked his jaw, beginning to spark. They were nothing akin to what the boy had once whispered in her ear, but the promises were no less intoxicating.

Bucky wanted peace. He wanted peace and quiet, a simple life of work and fun and everything in between. And it was the type of life she had never truly envisioned for herself, so different was it from the one the boy offered.

His was richer fare.

Elegant glassware, filled to the brim with old wines. A dance, a dinner, a dress that fell like rain against her skin, a necklace that outweighed than her soul. She had been a girl then, a girl in gold and pearls, a girl in memory and deep, deep history. A girl of consequence, of a good family name. A girl steeped in story.

With Bucky, she was a woman of truth. A woman of honest answers, of loyalty. A woman who fought for what she believed in, who offered succor and care and comfort. Who kissed the man she loved in a dusty closet and thought it a palace.

The man she loved.

The man she loved.

“Oh, Bucky.” She caught his lips, pressed hers to his, sealed their bond and bargain with a deep, cleansing kiss. Outside, the world ached and burned with war, but in the little stone church, an age-old die had been cast, far more ancient than even she suspected: two souls, mingled in love and desire, wrapped together against whatever would come. On his tongue, she tasted sorrow -- sorrow for the life they were not yet able to live together, that Brooklyn life he yearned for; and on hers, he tasted hope, her dreams of joining him there, of shedding the story-girl she had been, of a releasing of the past.
They sat in the dark, and whiled away until dawn in apology and quick kisses (he was still on watch), and as they touched, and as they talked, a longing grew in her, a longing far stronger than anything she had ever felt before -- an ache in her veins, singing in her blood. What she yearned for, though -- and what he wanted so badly, so badly she could hear it in his heartbeat, in the heat between her legs -- they could not yet sate. Not yet. Not yet.

On the outskirts of Lisieux, towards the southeast, there sat a well-appointed farm. A sturdy house, built of stone and centuries, sat fat and well-fed with a mismatched rhapsody of architectural styles -- additions and ells and a curious collection of lawn statues. It was a gentlemen-farmer’s stead, elegant and well-mannered. Orderly and ancient.

And HYDRA, it seemed, was rather enraptured.

After spending their second day in France furtively interviewing locals eager to support the Allied cause, the Commandos had confirmed that two HYDRA officers and a small contingent of soldiers had ousted the well-to-do family from the farm and established themselves there approximately four months before. The day after the bombardment of the sixth and seventh of June had ceased, a HYDRA lorry, with canvas-covered sides concealing the load, had trundled up the main road and into the farmyard by twilight.

It seemed likely -- highly likely -- that their cargo was Daniels and members of Sierra and Tango Companies. The farm was sprawling, featuring a good half-dozen out-buildings of varying sizes. Plenty of spaces to keep such a crew of men, and to hold forth with investigations and interrogations. After several hours of assessment, Peggy, Steve, and Monty headed off to the church, planning.

Elle waited and watched, hand cool on her gun, ready. She waited for her position, for her job. She and Jim, a double-header, opposite ends of the road. If things went bad, Bucky would come for her, or someone would -- if not, she was to escape through the village. But at opposite ends of the road, the wounded could be brought to either Jim or her.

She hid in the ditch, concealed in a rather modern (and convenient) culvert, her medical bag slung about her shoulders and her heart in her mouth as she caught the sounds of gunfire and shouts from the farm. German commands rose hot and heady on the air, and Elle could picture it, could see everything so clearly:

Steve leading the main thrust, shield held high. A wedge of soldiers behind him, fanning out wider as they approached the main yard. It made more sense to draw them out; the plan of the house was mysterious and old homes often yielded the funniest of turns, ancient hallways that did not behave in predictable ways.

Bucky would have claimed the barn, the one Jacques had determined was empty during a furtive, one-man recon session that had made them all bite their nails for two hours. From this vantage point, he would pick off as many HYDRA soldiers as he could. The officers, though -- just two, according to an eagle-eyed local doctor, wholly thrilled by the prospect of helping Captain America -- would be captured, if possible.

The men freed.

A flurry of footsteps approached, and a panicked cry brought her scrambling to the lip of the ditch -- a delayed self-chastisement burst in her mind as Elle realized she had no real clue if they were friend or foe. But the smooth American accent that confirmed she was Andersen, the olive-green blur of them against the dust of the road and the gunsmoke in the distance -- all sought to reassure her.
Three of them, all about Bucky’s age -- the third dangled between the arms of his compatriots, face gone milk-white with pain. “Gut shot,” a tall man said brusquely, without emotion. “Not sure how many rounds. Do you have sulfa? Bandages?”

“Y-yes.” Elle’s hands worked rapidly, sliding into the old dance she’d been taught so many times before. Pushing away the uniform, a sprinkle of cleansing, snowy powder; soft reassurances trickling from her lips. “What’s his name?” she asked, unravelling the Carlisle bandage to press it against the ruined flesh.

“Rodriguez,” the third man replied, voice trembling. “But we, uh, we call him ‘Doc.’ ‘Cause he was gonna be one. A shrink. Before.”

She smiled up at him, hoping her mouth was steady. “Alright, lovely. Now, Doc, I just need you to stay still and breathe easy for me. This is all fine.”

Her hands were crimson with him, blood lining her nails and staining her dry palms. But she kept working, kept talking, even when the two other men walked away, even when the guns died away, even when Steve wrapped his arms around her and tried to tug her away from Doc Rodriguez, even when Monty said her name softly, even when Peggy called for Bucky, even when her sweetheart seared her skin with the truth.

“He’s gone, doll, he’s gone.”

But he couldn’t have been. He was young. Bucky’s age. Young, good, bright men off to college do not die in French ditches, bellies torn asunder by enemy fire. Young, good, bright men do not die with their blood staining a woman’s palm, a girl’s palm, her screams shattering the stillness of a spent battlefield, cracking open a beautiful blue sky with the song of borrowed agony.
For a few hours the next day, the world seemed to spin on a liquor-soaked axis. An afternoon bloomed in tipsy summer heat, melting then into an evening of furtive merrymaking -- which seemed to strike Elle as both wholly discordant and entirely required. Miles of walking ached in her bones and muscles: despite her training and improvement -- despite the warm comfort of Bucky’s hand around hers -- she was footsore and blistered by the time they arrived at the long, low-roofed building, nestled against the softer side of a summer-green hill. The road wound away wide and open; a good vantage point to be sure. Far enough from the nearest town to avoid suspicion.

Under an iron sky, Elle allowed the memory of the farmhouse, and that of Rodriguez to fade away into a numb, dull roar. Softened and sweetened by the promise of golden apples, the liquid embrace of a taste of amnesia, the delicious slide and retreat into alcohol and forced camaraderie; lulled into something better than the stink of guilt, of loss. Chaos stuck beneath her fingernails.

The pain of it had twisted deep in Elle’s stomach as she turned in Bucky’s arms at the oddest of moments as they walked, pressing her face against his shoulder to block out the day before, and the sleepless night. She’d gotten only an hour of rest, propped against a tree, only to be shaken awake from a tearstained nightmare by Bucky’s gentle touch, a subtle kiss against her cheek.

Death clung to her hands, or so she imagined. She’d scrubbed them clean in a stream near the farmhouse, watching with a nauseated detachment as Bucky’s fingers slipped and slid through her own, washed them innocent with tender words of reassurance. But the guilt simmered brighter, though, at his touch -- so much of her thoughts were given over to Bucky’s body in front of her, broken and bloody. Dead in the dust, limp and empty in her arms. It was a horror she wanted to halve, but couldn’t bring herself to tell him.

Home would help; Dugan and Gabe had arranged transportation. They were to meet an SSR-sanctioned vessel off the coast in two days’ time. The wait was simply designed to put HYDRA and the Germans off the scent; already, it was likely, the story of the Lisieux farmhouse was spreading far and wide. Peggy was hopeful much of it would be buried within the larger, more troubling reports from the larger-scale rebellion and, as it was, the Commandos and the liberated prisoners had tried to move randomly and stealthily towards the coast -- relying on a few abandoned buildings and random patterns of movement. An hour or two of rest; twenty minutes’ progress, then taking cover. Hence, their presence, at nearly seven o’clock that evening, in the stuffy, yeasty confines of what once likely had been a prosperous brewery.

Hungry bellies ached for more than strained rations and the slick burn of cognac, but that did little to staunch the raucous, drunken celebration among Daniels’ men. They’d pried open crates to reveal fat bottles of dark amnesia, squatter jugs of feigned joy. The Commandos, for the most part, abstained -- except for Elle. She started by sipping cider, earning roses in her cheeks and a giddy, loose smile. But by the time Bucky had come back in, ducking out of that crackling calm before a summer storm, she had found a taste of brandy on her tongue. A taste that put stars in her eyes and sloppy apologies on her lips.

Trembling fingers, nails stubbed and chipped -- such a far cry from the pearl-pink manicure she’d worn for the wedding not too long ago -- reached for the proffered bottle of cider, failing to notice the stiffening of Bucky’s shoulders. The coalition for moderation was in slim company that evening, as Steve and Peggy were closely ensconced with Daniels and another soldier in the far corner of the large building; Dugan was napping, and Gabe, Jacques, and now, Monty, on watch outside.

Leaving just Bucky, Jim, and Elle herself to manage the situation within.
“How many has she had?” Bucky muttered, propping his gun up against the wall and brushing some loose grass from his uniform. A storm was indeed rolling in, crisp and daunting on the horizon; he’d seen it plain enough from the crest of the hill. As worried as he’d been when Monty had clapped a hand on his shoulder and suggested lightly that Elle needed him, Bucky was glad to be under the roof now.

Morita just shook his head, gesturing with some clear disdain towards the merry group gathered in the middle of the warehouse. “I tried talking to her, but she just...she’s upset, Buck. Still thinks it’s her fault,” he said. “Poor kid.”

She’d shucked off her jacket -- the swelling June heat evident in the sweat-stains beneath the arms of her blouse, perspiration dripping down her forehead and blooming into damp curls on her shoulders. Bucky watched with a jolt of dismay as she twisted and turned on the floor, struggling out of her boots with fumbling hands and light curses. Morita clicked his tongue, mouth a flat, disapproving line as he took in the scene. A muscle twitched in his jaw at a particularly loud series of jeers; Bucky followed his gaze to see one of the paratroopers stretching over to help Elle tug off her second boot.

“Sweetheart,” Bucky said softly, crouching beside her in one swift movement. He tried to ease the bottle from her slim fingers, but her grip merely tightened. Glassy eyes slid lazily to meet his; love trickled from her lips, clumsy endearments that felt hollow against his skin, tinged as they were with drink and grief. “Sweetheart, I think you’ve had enough.”

Hazy, vague recognition stirred her limbs, her eyes. “My James,” she slurred, and it was a sigh from the closet back home -- from swollen, kiss-chapped lips and sweet nothings that could usually make Bucky shiver, feel a clumsy boy in her arms, unsure of anything save for the utter, soft rightness of the moment, of them together.

He was painfully aware of all eyes on them, on the way Elle draped her arms around him, the way her fingers played covetously in his hair. The drunker she grew, the more the laughter sparked and stung; Daniels was a far sterner major than McTavish, but it was the latter in charge of the men. “Come on, fellas,” he urged weakly, catching Bucky’s pointed glare. “Let’s call it a night, eh?”

“Yeah,” Morita snapped. “Wrap it up.”

Messy giggles burned Bucky’s ears, sour firecrackers in the night, and he wound a careful arm around Elle’s waist, in a vain attempt to lead her over to a quiet corner. Earlier, he’d worked with Gabe to gather some burlap sacks, build a makeshift bed for his girl. She needed rest, he knew that, needed it desperately -- he’d had to practically drag her through the day. Gently pushing her to accept, in quiet, loving words, that Rodriguez’ death was not her fault.

The man had already been dead before being brought to her.

But Elle’s sorrow was deeper than Bucky could reach, and it frightened him, really, that there were depths to her he could not reach, could not soothe. A helpless, inadequate sort of ache enveloped him as he stroked small, futile circles against her back as she curled against him. “Honey,” he pleaded, voice low and rasping. “Come on, Ellie. Come with me. You need to lie down, huh? You’re drinkin’ way too much, baby-doll.”

Brandy -- a heady, thick scent -- rose between them, and she didn’t resist his movements, but she certainly didn’t yield, either. Instead, Elle slid her fingers daintily through Bucky’s hair, forcing a dull flush to his cheeks and earning another round of robust laughter from the soldiers. “Got yourself a real sweet girl there, pal.” He gave a wink, and a cold leer crawled over Bucky’s skin. “She’s looking for a good time. You gonna give her one?”
Abruptly, Elle twisted in his arms, and Bucky thought of dances, of the wedding, of the sweet weight of her delighted smile -- the pretty arch of her laughter against smoky dance-hall air. But now, in a mockery of those moments, she clutched at his chin, fumbled with his belt, tried to draw his mouth down to hers. “Kiss me, Bucky,” she murmured, syllables slipping inelegantly against each other. “It’s my birthday soon; you need to kiss me for my birthday.”

Oh, he knew. It wasn’t yet June twentieth, but it soon would be. And he had plans -- dinner out, at a proper restaurant. A pretty dress he had Adele shopping for -- and yes, a kiss. A kiss he hoped for as an answer to a question he was now fairly desperate to ask her. The close calls -- a bullet whipping past his ear; watching her crumple to the ground, blood soaking her hands and those hazel eyes tilted up to his, pleading for him to take the pain away -- had changed his perspective yet again. War demanded quicker courtships, brisker decisions. A lifetime shaped in a few weeks, or months, of love.

But -- and this shocked him, had shocked him ever since that letter to his mother, the one he’d taken back from Elle, after she’d finished a quick note. At the bottom, Bucky had added his intention. His plan to come home not just in one piece, but with a daughter-in-law for her in tow. If Elle said yes. Bucky needed her. He needed that answer. And anyone who said he was rushing things could go f--

“He would have kissed me,” Elle said, pouting now. She extricated herself from Bucky’s embrace and returned to the straw-strewn floor, accepting another bottle, filled with something dark and possibly rummy. Bucky’s fingers itched to snatch it away, but was frozen, glued fast to the way “he” had curled, icy and accusatory and unfamiliar, from her lips. “He always did. At the parties.”

With a sly grin, Cohen nudged his friend -- Roberts? Robertson? Something like that -- with his elbow, then stretched out an arm around Elle’s shoulders, friendly and open. “Who’s ‘he,’ darlin’? Who’re you talking about? Not Barnes here? Not your Sergeant?”

Time slowed and snapped. Elle took another swig, but this was one was clumsy, harsh, and she coughed around it, spilling a little down the front of her uniform. Bucky winced, torn between his own need to understand and an instinct to get his girl somewhere else. Somewhere quiet. Not that he ever wanted to be the type of man who thought he knew what was best for her -- but he did know, crystal-clear, that this wasn’t what she needed right now.

A twist of nausea stayed his hands, stole softer words from his lips. Who was ‘he’?

Night crept in, deeper by the moment. The camplight glow made a stranger of her, touching her face in new angles, and Bucky’s stomach clenched as she turned, fingers shaking in her lap. “H-he always had a party for me,” she whispered, voice cracking at the edges. “His mother would plan it, but he would...he took credit for them.”

“Yeah?” Cohen smirked. “Did you have fun?”

Bucky stiffened, straightened. Hands shoved in his pockets now as Steve stepped out from around the corner, exchanging a look weighted with both concern and curiosity, the former glimmering in widened eyes as he took in the sight on the floor: Elle, armed wrapped around herself, tears coursing down her cheeks, empty bottles littered around her in an accusatory circle. “There was dancing,” she said dreamily, lost in memory now. “Pretty dresses. He always got me a new dress. Silk, mostly.”

“A sweetheart,” Bucky thought heavily. Someone other than him.

In all their time together, Bucky could never recall Elle mentioning another man. Her kisses were shy -- in the early days -- and didn’t smack of varied experience. Logically, rationally, he had known
there could have been others; they’d met at twenty-six, after all. But while he had been honest about some of the girls he had dated, his Ellie had never brought up any names. There were no fond remembrances of youthful dates, no songs that seemed to prod her memory. And when he’d asked her, point-blank, back in Austria, she’d told him there was no one special in her life.

A cold flush enveloped him, head to toe, as he listened, simply stood there and listened as Elle drunkenly unwound a part of her life he had never known. Steve settled a hand on his shoulder as she talked about a boy, a boy who’d kissed her in dark corners and bought her jewellery; a boy who had infused her childhood with mischief and troublemaking; a boy of warm words and wandering hands. A boy who, he realized with a sinking stomach, held some part of her past. A large part, it seemed. A part that Bucky could never hold.

It wasn’t jealousy -- he didn’t own her, after all. But it sat sourly inside him, solid as a stone -- a trembling, distant sense of fear that she felt she could not trust him, could not unfold her own past in the safety of their time together. Was he somehow lacking? Didn’t she know that she could tell him anything, anything at all?

The other soldiers were howling with laughter by the end of her story, as Bucky clenched and unclenched his hands, disjointed questions streaming chaotically through his mind -- her parents were dead, but how? No siblings? Where had she gone to school? Her favourite colour?

His knowledge was scant and pretty -- Elle Andersen. Nearly twenty-seven; she liked tea, first thing in the morning, milky in a delicate, hummingbird cup. Raisins, too. She was always snacking on raisins, kept a small packet of them in her desk. There was always a book on her nightstand, if not two or three.

More intimate still -- she loved to kiss, and was damn good at it. Giving him light moans and sharp gasps, letting them simmer on his own tongue as she leaned into him, in the dark of their closet. A sensitive spot nestled under her ear; she’d fairly purr when he tugged her flush against him; liked it when he curled soft, warm words against her neck, her collarbone.

And when her hands strayed to his shoulders, to his hair, to the length of his arms and the vulnerable curve of his neck, Bucky felt himself yielding in a way he had never known. Kissing Elle was more than necking with a pretty girl in a closet; kissing Elle was coming home, over and over again. She was victory and she was peace, comfort and tenderness in the span of his two hands. She was a future, shivering under his touch.

“What’s going on here?” Peggy asked sharply, jostling him from this plaintive, rushing reverie. Elle blinked up at her, eyes shot to Bucky’s next, glassy with faint confusion.

Major Daniels stepped into view, barking out a series of orders for quiet and decorum, as Peggy reached down to pull Elle to her feet. Dizzily, she sagged in Steve’s ready embrace, tears sliding down her cheeks as she reached out a hand towards Bucky.

A hand he did not take.

“Buck,” Steve said lightly, distantly, as though he was miles away. “Help me lay her down.”

But he was numb. Frozen. Rooted to the spot where he realized that this girl -- this girl of autumn shades and inborn comfort; this girl of secret kisses and eager sighs -- his girl -- had a history she had not shared. Rapidly, distractedly, Bucky’s mind sorted through unanswered questions, even as he managed to help Steve lower her to the nest of burlap sacks he’d gathered, even as he swept his blue jacket -- too hot for these summer days, but with that storm rolling in, he wanted her dry and warm -- over her shivering shoulders. “Goodnight,” she murmured, hand shooting out to find his.
“Goodnight, love.”

Stunned, he watched, scarcely feeling her touch as she stroked at his knuckles. “Say goodnight.” There were tears in her whisper, the ghost of a sob pressing against the words. “Please, Bucky, love.”

That word always managed to make him smile, despite anything else going on; it was so sweet, so simple, and he’d never been called so before. But there was no softening tonight, even “love” tripping daintily from her lips couldn’t make him smile, not when everything between them now seemed tainted, dipped in drink and secrets. Who was ‘he’? Who was she?

Still, he settled down next to her, the cold weight of the floor cutting through his shirt, and he removed his hand from hers, only to push shaky fingers gently through her sweaty hair, as she wrestled herself into a fitful sleep. Names and words tumbled groggily, quietly -- some he recognized, others were foreign and twisting. Twice she asked for him, and twice Bucky leaned down to press uncertain kisses to her temple.

“Goodnight, pretty girl,” he said softly, touching her cheek, yielding when her hand, loose with dreams, found the front of his shirt. Squeezed tight, as though knowing he might roll away. “Goodnight, doll.”

The next morning cut a jagged seam, pressing raw and mean against Elle’s temples. Crueller still was her disorientation, her inability to clearly remember what had passed the night before. Brandy and cider simmered sourly on her tongue, and apologies -- disjointed, uncertain, fell on Bucky’s deaf ears.

I’m sorry.

But he didn’t want to hear that -- blue eyes bore into hers, desperate for an explanation, for reassurance. Of trust and love and loyalty, and all the pretty things Bucky had assumed they were tending together. How many times had he unfurled his own past for her? Brought out the small pieces of himself for interpretation? He had worked so hard to bring his life to her; she added notes to his letters home, her photograph sat on his bedside table, and his by hers. In the closet, their bodies bent and curved to accommodate the new shape of the flames licking between them, the thrumming chord of desire and want and every beautiful thing he whispered into her ear. Every promise she emblazoned on his skin.

On a dusty road, under a storm-wrung sky, bright and blue with the relief of thunder -- Bucky handed her instead a bruised heart, placed it carefully within her palm. “I’m sorry,” she whispered again, tugging him closer, resting her face against his chest as he stroked carefully down the length of her back. Both majors and Peggy looked over with some disapproval, and one or two catcalls earned a quiet curse flung over the top of Elle’s head -- but it simply Bucky the opportunity to press a swift kiss to her hair.

“I just need a bit of time, doll,” he murmured. “And you do, too.”

Time to think, he explained. Time to breathe. Since Christmas, they’d been going fast and furious in their feelings -- plunging headlong first into delicate friendship, and now into this heady rush of romance. Endearments that grew ragged, breath shared in those gentle, open-mouthed kisses they both loved so much. Moments of tightening, of fastening, of loose, frantic touches that strayed far too close to the edge. The edge he wouldn’t tip over, not yet.
Bucky kissed her quick, rubbing his thumb gently against her chin. “I’m not upset,” he said softly. “Just wish...I just don’t know why you didn’t tell me. About him. About a lot of things.”

Disappointment bloomed soft and supple against her skin, a bruise not yet formed. “Bucky -- love.” And that was the gist of it, really, this simple truth she could give him. More honesty than perhaps she was used to, but it emerged so prettily that Bucky could not help but smile.

“It’s okay, doll,” he said, glancing self-consciously over his shoulder; several of the soldiers had stopped to look back at the delay. “We don’t have to talk right now. We...we can’t.”

Too many ears, too many eyes -- the prospect of spreading out their entire relationship for everyone to see was daunting at best, dangerous at worst. Steve and Peggy were skilled at turning farsighted eyes to the handholding, the kisses, the stolen embraces. Pet names that tripped wildly from Bucky’s tongue at the most inopportune of moments. And now, as he stroked Elle’s hair, and she shuddered and shivered at his touch, Steve looked over and shook his head. Too much, the look seemed to say.

In France, they were to be soldiers. Nothing more. The rising wake of her panic and grief had allowed them both to chip away at some propriety, but not all. Bucky stepped away with a soft, reassuring smile, one she did not reflect. “I’m not upset,” he repeated gently, words doused in love. Understanding and acceptance, too -- all the things the boy had never given her, but that Bucky saw fit to distribute so generously.

The urge to hold him again blistered deep within, but Elle managed to resist, satisfying herself only with reaching for his hand again, squeezing sweetly, hoping he could feel the aching misstep of her shattered apology. Over and over again, she wanted him to understand so acutely that silk dresses and parties meant nothing in the face of what he had built with her. That the boy was simply that -- a vestige of her childhood, a misguided foray into adult rituals. A lover in nothing more than fragile words and mindless touches. His was a name she would not speak, a history she was doing her best to simply pack away.

Not for the first time, the irony of the situation struck her: that while the world tore itself apart at the seams, blood soaking the decade through -- while she outran the long, aching stretch of her own past -- Elle had found love. A sweet boy with blue eyes and a warm soul; hands that soothed and seared in equal measure. Lips made for kissing and kind words.

A soul for the future, bright with hope and new love.

Three silk roses clutched in her left hand, Elle raised her right to tap lightly against Bucky’s bedroom door. Fingers trembling slightly with midnight-uncertainty, a prickle of tension snaking up her spine. Already, too many hours had passed, too much retreating and pulling-away and denying, Bucky was slipping back into the frosty resistance he’d shown in the autumn, after they’d returned from Italy. Once more, it seemed, she would have to jolt him from it.

His soft acceptance on the road had soured to upset by the time the Commandos and the 506th arrived at the shore. Wind whipping through her tired bones and taut muscles, Elle had reached for his hand on the beach, hoping to tangle their grip in the moments before embarking, hoping for a moment. Time snatched on the edge of risk -- the Channel roiled with death, didn’t it? More than the air. More than France itself.

But he’d pulled away, the tightened line of his mouth belying his earlier reassurances. The boy sat in Bucky’s gaze -- his sullen, hurt gaze -- as Elle had known he eventually would. “It's like I don’t even
know you,” he’d blurted, soft and sore, the words wrenched from some vulnerable, uncertain quarter of his soul -- a part she longed to soothe, to hold. To wrap in feather-soft kisses and remind him how she felt, how much she wanted. The ache he ached -- the tender, lovely hurt of wanting him, of knowing him.

Didn’t he know, she thought sadly, tapping again? Didn’t he understand how overwhelmed she was in his arms? When he kissed her, Elle felt her soul brimming, felt herself sinking, melting, spiralling in a way she’d never felt before. Not even the boy’s searing kisses could do that to her, make her yearn and want and cause tears to prick at her eyes.

The boy.

He would adore this trouble. This mayhem. All in his name, all because of him. Bucky doubting himself and everything they had been building for weeks, love going sour and spoilt in the wake of her revelations. “My love,” he would say, voice sliding slick and sly against her. “No one can touch you like I can; no one can do this for you like I can; no one understands you as I do.”

Another tap, and no reply. She decided, right then and there, propriety be damned. Sensibility, too. The press of her own sadness seemed to push her forward, twist her fingers around the doorknob, and she entered Bucky’s room on a gasp, eyes catching for a minute on him -- lean body propped against his headboard, the loose, sloping neck of his undershirt revealing, once again, a faint shadow of chest hair. His eyes, wide awake and glinting with something she could not yet interpret. Not anger, no -- not even dismay. But with some warmth, some bright heat that put her, quite breathlessly, in mind of gilded flames and summer sun. Tangled resolutely, contrarily, within the blue gleam of his gaze.

“Elle,” he sighed, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, shifting the sheets where they had drooped to the floor. “Go back to bed.”

“No,” she whispered, gently shutting the door behind her. “We have to talk.”

But there was no have or even must about it -- they needed to talk. Something was fraying between them, something she couldn’t bear to see go ragged and threadbare. He had to understand, he had to remember. The memory of the boy loomed large, even Elle couldn’t deny that, but there was no reason that her past should come to tear her future to pieces. A future aligned in blue eyes and gentle hands, in sweet words and the pretty silk roses still clutched in her hands. Roses which she now brandished at him directly, stepping forward on bare, shaky feet to meet him.

Bucky’s eyes dropped to hers, to her lips and pink cotton nightgown, the one that skimmed so delicately against her skin -- and he swallowed. A flush blooming on his cheeks as he focused on the flowers, bright crimson between their chests. “Doll,” he breathed, voice a little huskier now. “We can talk in the morning.”

Their proximity -- the time -- the way her thigh grazed his with another step -- any of it would have been enough for them to lose their jobs. Steve, as their commanding officer, would earn a hearty reprimand, and it was likely Elle would find herself slammed into a secretary’s chair, this time with a tarnished record. If she were lucky.

But it was worth it, if only for the way her heart began to race, heat bursting on her skin as Bucky reached out a hand to cup her elbow, bring her a little closer. “Why did you buy these for me, love?” she asked softly. “Tell me.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled sharply, tugging her so close the swell of her breasts pressed against him, earning a shudder through his shoulders. Elle dropped the roses down on his bed, wound her
arms around his neck as he brought his forehead down to meet hers.

A faint whiff of Pepsodent had her wanting his lips on hers, the way he’d grip her waist and tuck his thumbs against her hips, rubbing those circles that always made her knees go weak. “A few weeks after the Christmas party, and the mission,” he choked, eyes still closed. “When you moved in here, I was walking by your room, and the door was open. I wasn’t snooping or anything, doll, I just noticed...I just noticed you didn’t have much stuff.”

Bucky pulled back to look down at her, gaze heavy and hazy, sparking a little with the gentle scratch of her fingernails at the back of his neck. It was a trick she’d learned in the closet, weeks ago now. Remember, she willed him to realize. Remember how they’d learned -- in fits and starts, in touches of increasing boldness -- to play with the sensations of the other. He knew the spots that made her shiver, body thrumming with desire; she understood that a slight tugging of his hair could have him gasping into her mouth, that a hand flat against the rapid rise and fall of his chest could bring him down, help him collect himself.

“Personal stuff, you know?” he continued, voice soft. Eyes fixed on her lips. “So I saw those in the shop and I just thought it would be nice. Real ones would...they’d wilt and die, but these are always going to be pretty, and I just wanted to make you happy, I just...”

She stole the rest of his words with a kiss, one he returned eagerly. Open-mouthed and wanting, a heady, breathless rush that sent a strange, tingling ache low in her belly. Never before had they been so close -- only a thin layer of fabric between hot skin. Pale pink cotton and the shifting, easy weight of his undershirt.

It was more than the roses, more than his sweet words. The intoxicating pleasure of simply being together again, of the yielding and the slip and the easy tangle of their movements. A surety had developed in their weeks -- months -- in the closet. Knowledge bursting in the dizzy wake of hands and lips and shuffling feet.

Bucky groaned when her fingers slid delicately down his back, only to scrabble at the hem of his undershirt to reach bare flesh. His own hands strayed to her hips, a twisting press that sent Elle’s head spinning.

Panting, he broke away, just for a moment. Just long enough for Elle to chase his lips and softly giggle -- faint, breathy, mindful still of Gabe’s bedroom on one side of the wall, and the staircase on the other. “Holy hell, doll,” Bucky sighed, pressing a chaster kiss to her forehead. “Damn. Just, uh, just give me a minute.”

“Only a minute, soldier?” she cooed, mouth grazing his ear. “I suppose I wasn’t apologizing hard enough.”

Bucky froze; stiffened in her arms, face falling as his hands left her waist. “Apologizing? That’s what this is about?”

Her lazy smile faltered, melting into trembling confusion as she registered the sudden tension in his jaw, hurt brewing in his gaze. “You don’t have to apologize,” he said gently, firmly -- cupping her face in both hands. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But I --”

“No.” Bucky leaned down, pressing a kiss to her nose. “No apologies, doll. You don’t have to tell me everything -- all we need is here and now, right?”
Foolish words of a lovestruck soldier-boy, they were. Gleaming bright with good intentions, with the feather-soft privilege of a hazy future. Here and now, that was all they could hope for, in a world rent by war. A world bursting at the seams of ancient fault-lines and flaws -- imperfections Elle understood well. After all, how many times had it done so before? Malice and sin creep-creep-creeping along the ground, snatching whole generations between cradle and altar.

“I just got caught off-guard, Ellie,” he murmured, rubbing one thumb gently against her jaw, her chin, and her bottom lip. “I felt like I didn’t know you, and I don’t like that. I want to know everything about you, honey.”

Everything.

A story thrummed through her, shot through with lies, but the under the blue, loving warmth of his gaze, Elle could only smile. Glad again to have his arms around her, heart beating strong in his chest. Bucky wasn’t dead on some dusty French road -- he was alive, healthy. Bright-eyed and stifling his laughter in her arms.

She pushed Rodriguez away. Mourned him for another minute, but then Bucky’s mouth met hers again and the world existed only in soft sighs and the yielding of his mattress underneath him, as he sat and she leaned, hands on his shoulders. “There are” -- she swallowed, the beginnings of a confession tasting sour on her tongue -- “parts of my past, Bucky, that I want to forget.”

His jaw tightened, hands winding around her hips to draw her an inch closer. Heat sparking up her spine when their knees brushed. “Is he one of them?” Bucky asked, biting out the words. “Something you want to forget?”

Pushing back a dangling curl from his forehead -- his hair was so much softer after a bath -- Elle hesitated. The truth, so often, hurt, and she had no desire to ever cause him pain. But her silence could cost more. “I… I don’t know yet. I’m sorry, love,” she whispered, tracing her fingers up to touch his chin, stroke her thumb against the dimple there.

Disappointment shadowed his gaze, but he tugged her closer all the same, easing her down to settle on his lap, even as he slid back to lean against the headboard. The position was new for them, and far more daring than anything they had attempted even in their pressed-close supply closet embraces. Bucky studied her face as she got comfortable atop his legs, shyly glancing up as she adjusted the hem of her nightgown more modestly around her knees. “Bucky,” she said, flushing as his hands found hers. Entwining their fingers in a tight, sweet braid. Palms pressed together until he blushed, too. “If there’s anything you wanted to ask me, you-you can.”

Bucky stroked soft circles against her hips, her sides. Played with her hair and brought her lips down to his for a brief kiss that somehow seemed to last hours, days. Years. The lingering blaze of his mouth against hers was always a fitting, a yielding in sighs. Two edges coming together, as though they were always meant to be thus. As though everything in Elle’s life had led to this midnight vigil, this stolen hour of him. Of them.

“Yeah, baby?” He smiled, grip tightening gently against her waist. “You got time for that?”

A deep breath, to fortify her against the tide of her past. The force of the boy, pulling her back to who she had been, whence she had come. Poor Rodriguez, and a thousand other broken men like him -- she let go. And sank into the warm embrace of the blue-eyed boy who seemed, rather, to love her. Who wanted to know her.

Courage and desire and the warm firm reality of him beneath her. Bucky looked up at her with something new in his eyes, something very close to wonder, and she had never, ever seen that in a
gaze directed at her.

The truth of it choked her -- his admiration weighed so much. Trust, too.

But love? Love was a question, a question and a kiss and a hand against his clean-shaven cheek: “What do you want to know?”

An hour passed in traded questions and flushed skin. Elle inched closer, it seemed, with each response, until Bucky had stretched out on his back, and she had curled around him against the pillow. Fingers slid under his shirt, resting against the smooth planes of his chest and belly, tickling lightly now and then, smiling as he sighed. Gasped. She watched the muscles tighten and jump under her subtle ministrations.

“Favourite colour?” he asked sleepily.

“You already asked me,” Elle murmured, snuggling closer against his chest. “Purple, remember? And yellow.”

A yawn brought out the boy in him, and Elle tipped her head back to see. His eyes crinkled shut, face scrunched with his own exhaustion -- he’d been ready to go to bed, she guessed, before she’d barged in. Pink and warm and freshly-scrubbed, utterly spent from the mission, from the days in France, and here she was, stealing his sleep. Gently, she moved from his embrace, but not before pressing a kiss to the centre of his cotton-clad chest. “Goodnight, love,” she whispered, reaching for the summer quilt to tug up around his shoulders -- but his hand closed around her wrist before she could.

“Don’t go yet, darlin’.” A rumble and curve to his voice made her shiver; it was new. “I’ve got more questions.”

Bucky pulled himself up, leaning in to bring her lips to his again. This kiss was deeper than the soft pecks they’d indulged in deliriously since her arrival -- this kiss twisted and turned, burning bright in her belly and kindling pretty sparks against her skin. This kiss pushed her back into his arms, him sinking down against the pillow, taking her with him. This kiss made her whimper against his lips, a sound he swallowed, lest Gabe or one of the other nearby Commandos be woken up.

“Tell me about your family,” he whispered, still with that Brooklyn drawl that made Elle hope for a home she had never known. “No brothers or sisters, right?”

Golden sun and a blanket stretched wide; joy in small baubles and sweet berries.

Elle ran one hand tenderly through his soft hair, warming again when he chased her touch. With the curls pushed back from his forehead, she could better see the blue hope of his eyes. His sweet, loving eyes -- what would her mother have thought of him, she wondered? Bucky was nothing like the boy -- open and honest; loyal and true. He saw the world for what it was, not what he could twist it to become.

And Bucky saw her for who she was, accepted her in the ways she had presented herself to him, the stories she had told. In moments small and soft, and moments gaping wide and raw with pain. He had washed Rodriguez’s blood from her hands with comfort and care, the same delicate touch with which he mapped her throat and mouth with kisses.

Her father would have adored him; her mother would have admired him. And the boy would loathe him.
But Elle -- Elle loved him. Her bright-eyed soldier with his kind words and his Brooklyn drawl. The man who could not, it seemed, stop kissing her, touching her, sending her spiralling and reeling with the lightest of grazes. This knowledge, sweet and heavy and full as ripe fruit, slid lower in her belly as she inched forward, nestling her head against his shoulder. And she told him, as much as she could:

“No, it was just my parents and I,” she murmured, feeling his heartbeat increase under the warm press of her body against his. “We lived in the...in the city, but we spent some time in the countryside, as well. Where my mother was from.”

Bucky nodded against the crown of her head. “And what were they like? Your mother was a nurse, wasn’t she?”

Healing hands and swift decision; Elle’s mother had been a veritable force to be reckoned with. Shimmering blonde hair, down to her waist, and eyes that blazed with certainty. Her mother, Elle told him now, had never once faltered. “She always knew what to do.”

“And your dad?”

*Merry*. That was the only word for her father. Merry and blithe, lit from within by a poet’s soul. “Everything was a story to my father,” she laughed quietly. “Everything was an adventure.”

*My little lady, my honey, my gem.*

“What did he do?”

*Carved worlds from words; gilded the old past with new splendour* -- the explanation was bright on Elle’s lips, but how would Bucky understand? Her father was a singular sort of man, not easily captured in ordinary words. And the ache in her heart was cutting far too sharply for her to delve any deeper than this. In a voice trembling on the edge of soft tears, Elle explained that he’d been a poet, her father. A poet and a tutor. “That’s how I met...the boy. My father tutored both him and his brother privately.”

An elbow to the front -- that’s the boy’s memory. Crushing forward with that cold intent, squeezing between Elle and Bucky and chilling the rising heat of their embrace. “Tell me about him,” Bucky whispered.

She closed her eyes, willing the tears to stay at bay. “No.”

“Baby,” Bucky pleaded, sitting up properly now. Cupping her face in his hands again, tilting her to meet his gaze. His insistent gaze. “Please. At least tell me his name.”

Names held power, and too much weight. Elle shook her head, leaning into his touch. “I’m sorry, I won’t tell you that,” she said. “I won’t make him even more real for you. Just know that he’s...” She bit her bottom lip. “James, I can’t lie. I did love him. Or thought I did, at least. But he wasn’t always very...nice.”

Bucky’s eyes darkened. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” Elle said firmly. Reassuringly. “Not physically. But...” She cast back, dipping into memories she’d long since tried to suppress -- the teasing, the mocking. Keeping her on the cusp of commitment for too many years. The way the boy had stroked her want to furious heights, only to let her crash alone and trembling. “He’s vain and selfish,” she decided. “And sometimes that means he makes selfish decisions. Chooses his pride over anything else. Over me.”
It was not quite the half of it. Elle’s childhood was bookended by the boy -- from their first meeting; to their first kiss, when she’d felt that lurching ache in her soul. He’d pulled back, she recalled now, surprise bursting bright in his eyes -- which had quickly narrowed with scarcely-concealed delight. He’d found a weakness, after all.

With Bucky, pleasure was in sharing; in knowledge. In the twofold awareness of the ways in which their bodies fit and moved, the sweet collision of warm skin and the faint sheen of sweat upon his forehead when they parted breathlessly. Clinging to the ragged edge of desire. Soft smiles and softer words; promises he knit to her skin, to her heart.

Such delights were halved, for the boy. Cut through with pride, with ego and arrogance. Loving Elle had been a challenge and a prize all in one. A girl on his arm when his brother was bereft; someone by his side, someone who would always take his side. Her loyalty to the boy ran deep, threaded through her soul as an old instinct. For so many years of her life, there had been no choice: only the boy, and what he wanted. What she thought she wanted with him -- but now...now there was Bucky. Bucky and London and the war. A family found in a dark cage, in flickering hope.

Love coming in at the edges.

The boy was the past; Bucky, the future. Tender words and his new love and his rapid heartbeat under her traipsing touches. That crooked smile, crinkled eyes. An hour of questions, endearing in their innocent curiosity. Favourite colour, favourite food. The best book she had ever read. If she could go anywhere in the world, where would she go?

**Wherever you are,** she’d whispered.

He probed deeper now, wanting more. Delving into her history in the ways in which Elle could permit. Still, he touched her gently, kissing her neck and twining their fingers again. Anything to be closer, anything to reduce the scant but torturous distance between them. As though, even if they were to climb tenderly inside the others’ veins, they could never be near enough.

“What happened to them?” Bucky asked. Voice lowered to a deathbed decibel; he rubbed circles onto the warm, bare skin of her arms, where they escape from her light summer nightgown. Impropriety prowled about the edges of their quiet moment -- two unmarried SSR service-members, clasped together by lamplight.

But there was a bruised kind of beauty to the picture, one that didn’t escape Elle’s notice. Bucky, her wartime romancer, peeling back the layers of her life, her history, and doing so with love. Love and kindness; wanting to understand her.

And so she told him, of how her mother had died of a fever and a strange illness. Sweaty and stern even as she faded away. Her father had followed, not long after -- “of a...I think he died of a broken heart. And after that, well...he...was all I had left. I clung to him more than I should have. Depended on him to be my entire world.”

Bucky swallowed. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said softly. “I wish I could’ve…”

*Been there? Held you?* Elle thought about the way she had crumbled to ashes in the boy’s arms, after her father had slipped away, leaving her with cold green eyes and an empty soul. The news that her father had given her, just a day before -- slipping in her veins like new poison.

If Bucky had been there --

She kissed him. Twisted in his embrace until she could will him to taste the tears, taste the gratitude.
Taste the mystery of how this had come to be, how this had been sown in the cold, dank hold of an enemy prison. If Bucky had been there, after her parents’ deaths, after the unravelling of her own identity --

But there was no if. Everything that had unfolded in the wake of that loss had simply served to shape Elle into the girl she had been in Italy, in Austria. In Bucky’s bed now. Clad in thin cotton and swelling love, come to him to bare her grief, her want. Her need.

And it was need that drove them both now, as her eyes shone and she confessed what she could.

“Why didn’t you tell me about, uh, him?” Bucky asked, breathless from her kiss. “I’m not trying to pry, I just...I’ve told you about Bonnie, and Dot, and Emily. Back in Austria, you told me there was no one special.”

She had. After the beating, she’d looked Bucky in the eye and promised him there was no one special in her life. Insinuated that there was no husband, no lover. No sweetheart waiting in a factory, an office, or a trench. She had freed herself, in that one sentence -- the truest thing she had ever said. Until now: “I wasn’t lying to you, love. Or, at least, not a whole lie. He’s not special. And he belonged, it seemed...it seemed as though he belonged to someone else.

“Bucky, since Italy, I-I feel as though I’ve finally found myself,” she said quietly, with a hushed kind of reverence. “Not the perfect daughter, not the childhood friend, or...whatever it was we were to each other. I...I became myself. As though all of these disjointed pieces just finally fell into place. I understood my purpose, I suppose.”

Bucky smiled sadly up at her, that half-tucked one. The smile that made her think of easier times, of his hand swinging hers. The USO dance and the wedding. The promises nestled safe and sweet in bright, pure, cool blue. A deep breath, and she continued. Voice shaking between words:

“Before my father...died...he told me something about myself that changed everything,” she said. “Changed how I felt about myself and how I understood the world around me. It meant that people I loved and respected had lied to me for a long time, and enlisting -- coming here, helping the war effort, it was the right thing to do. It was a clearer purpose, a decision I made for myself.”

Tearing herself away from the familiar had not been easy -- the decision to go to war, to fight for a cause most could scarcely understand beyond notions of freedom and peace, had been fraught with tension, arguments. The boy had thought her hopelessly foolish and headstrong, idealistic to a fault. His brother, contrarily, had been supportive, as had his mother. Believing that Elle’s determination to serve was something to be admired.

To comfort, to care. That was all she had ever wanted -- to use the gifts her own mother had spoken of. And it was that comfort and that care that had, somehow, brought her to this moment. A shared heartbeat and shallow breaths -- wonder and want in his eyes, all for her. And a question, inevitable, really: “What did he tell you, baby?”

*My little lady, I’m so sorry. But you know this changes nothing -- nothing -- about my love for you, or your mother’s. We adore you, my honey. Our child. This story is nothing more than that, just a story.*

It didn’t matter, not anymore. Not since she had claimed herself anew, forged herself as someone different. Someone who could heal and help; someone who could fall in love. Someone without ties to bind her to a murky past. A woman who could happily embrace the future as it was shaped into being -- in large part -- by the love and affection of a good man.
And that’s what she told him.

“It doesn’t matter, Bucky, not for us.” She stroked at his hair, tangled herself in him. Breathed deep the scent of his soap and shaving cream. “But it did change me, and pushed me to come here. For the first time in my life, I had choices. Yes, I made those choices guided by my mother, but not...dictated by her. I chose where I went, how I helped. And things were different -- I-I could feel it. From the moment I stepped off the ship, it was as though I were meeting myself.

“My entire life had been so wrapped up in my parents, and in him …” Elle trailed off, mired in memory. In her own ancient history; the rhythm of her past melting away in the firm rocking of the sea beneath her. Bringing her to her own future. “For the first time, I got to choose things; how I behaved; how I responded. Even...even how I spoke” -- she laughed, remembering the first time she had allowed herself to curse aloud, feet stuck in the mud of a late summer rainstorm -- “I didn’t have to impress anyone, stand on ceremony. And when I met you...no one else had ever made me feel the way that you make me feel, love.”

He felt like a privilege, threaded gold in her veins. Heat and want and desire braided together in a sweet liquor. That they could do this at all was a mark of how far they had come together, something she could never do with the boy. He would’ve taken her loss and her worry, her heavy grief and her clumsy apologies, and he would have laughed. Poked fun at her. Made her beg.

Bucky just tightened his arms around her and whispered sweet nothings into her ear. Reassured her that he felt the same. That she was always safe with him, always loved. Always cared for, in small ways and grand. And then he asked, voice cracking with some emotion, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on -- “Got time for two more questions?”

She nodded, wriggling up in his lap again. An uncertain smile blooming on her lips as he bit at his. Watching her movements with a faint fascination. “Alright,” he said softly. “But first, close your eyes.”

Elle obliged, and gently, he shifted her from his lap, placing a swift kiss upon her cotton-covered shoulder. “One minute, doll,” he murmured. She listened for his careful steps upon the floorboards. The creaking slide of his dresser drawer. Soft brushes of fabric. More footsteps. “Okay, question number one: is there anybody special in your life now?”

He was standing directly in front of her, she knew, from where she sat on the edge of his bed. Knees brushing hers -- the sharp scent of mint cut with something so uniquely him it made her dizzy every time they were close. It warmed her that she could find Bucky even in the dark, even with her eyes closed.

Anybody special.

She smiled, leaning forward, hands outstretched, for him. To brush her fingertips against his chest, feel those subtle shivers under her touch. “Yes, Bucky,” she said softly. “There is someone incandescently special now.”

A pause. A pause he broke with a shaky breath, the yielding of some resolve. The trembling threshold of something new, something marvellous, something that flipped joyfully in her stomach as though he had already asked. “Elle,” he whispered. “Open your eyes.”

Gold and ruby. Small, just a chip of a gem, but oh, it shone. Bucky held it up in a quavering grip, face tightened in concentration, in anticipation. Tears brimming in her eyes, Elle touched his wrist, awe bursting deep within her. Bewilderment, too. “Second question,” he choked. “Will you marry me?”
Time melted, a languorous unfurling that seemed to warm her from the inside out, chasing those familiar sparks of pleasure against her skin as Elle sank into the perfection of the moment. Bucky in front of her, all hot flesh and pounding heart, boyish in his hope, in the quirk of his shy smile. A smile that faded at her silence, at the widening of her gaze. “I-I’m sorry,” he stammered, running his free hand through his hair distractedly. “Oh, damn it. Look, I had a whole plan, sweetheart, I promise. For your birthday, you know? Dinner, an-and a new dress, and a real proposal, but the mission, and then today…”

She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t muster anything beyond the swallow and crest of tears, running down her cheeks as she looked up at him in disbelief. This sweet, sweet man -- this wonderful, wonderful man. Offering her forever in the clutch of his hand.

He sighed. Shoulders sinking in visible dejection. “It’s too soon, isn’t it? I know we --”

“Yes.”

The word sat so lovely between them -- acceptance and elation pillowed in the lithe shape of it. One word could change them, move them forward from two bodies learning the other in the dim, cramped world of a supply closet. Move them from teasing kisses and rapid heartbeats, simmering only to fizzle.

Move them to every wonderful, joyous thing to come.

Bucky swallowed, fumbling with the ring and a broad, brimming beam. “Yeah? You want to...you want to get married?”

Laughing, trying her hardest to keep quiet, she stood, wrapping her arms about his neck and pulling him closer. “Oh, Bucky -- yes, yes!”

He took her left hand in his, bringing it to his lips before slipping the ring on her finger. Right hand still around his neck, Elle kissed him. All chasing mouths and soft sighs, pressing down laughter and tasting joy on his lips and on hers -- on the sweet, chaotic muddle of not knowing where one ended and the other began, so that it was natural, it was so natural, when his hands came around her waist and pressed her against him, torsos flush and the curve of her breasts causing a groan to burst from him.

Mind buzzing with contradictions, Elle sank down against Bucky’s pillow, bringing her with him -- savouring the acute pleasure of the soft mattress beneath her, and the hard, aching weight of his body on top of her. This was new, it was so new, and then his lips found hers again. She yielded to the comfort of the familiar. Open-mouthed kisses, peppered through with gasps and sighs, tangled intricately, intimately together.

“Baby-doll,” he breathed, chasing kisses to the underside of her jaw -- sucking on a particular sensitive spot until she twisted in his arms, hips grazing hers with the arch of her back. “Baby- doll.”

Heat between her legs -- pounding, relentless, and then he was there. The ache had been there so long, driven bright and searing by his presence, his touches, the rumble of his voice in his chest. The quirk of his smile; the tender poem of his endearments. Her desire for Bucky had spun out in tortuous beauty these past months, and now, now -- it was soothed by the press of his lean belly, the slide of cotton against cotton; slim hips against hers, fitting so perfectly between her thighs, as though he was always meant to be there. A roll, a clumsy, accidental glide, and she arched again -- nightgown inching higher. “That okay?” Bucky asked hoarsely. “Are you okay, honey?”

There were no words -- no words to hold the heady, fulsome wonder of not knowing where to put
her hands. Whether she ought to rub against the searing skin of his shoulders, or trace the length of
his back. She compromised by tugging at the loose fabric of his shirt, snaking her fingers underneath
to scratch gently at the skin, earning another groan -- this one pulled deep from the flexing muscles of
his pinkening chest. A deep stain that flooded his neck and collar so delicately, she wanted to taste it.
“Baby, angel, sweetheart,” he babbled, dipping his head with another rock of his hips. An inch away
from where she truly needed him. “Tell me if it’s okay, please. Say yes or no, Ellie.”

“Yes, Bucky,” she croaked. “Yes, please, please.”

“Then you gotta be quiet for me. Don’t want to wake anybody up,” he said, voice husky and low,
teasing kisses chaining down the strained, curving elegance of her throat.

One hand fumbling behind her, Elle struggled to move the pillow, needing more room, more room to
hold these feelings, this building pleasure. Bucky noticed and reached over, pausing in his
movements, to tug it down to the floor -- but they pulled futilely in opposite directions. His stifled
laugh tasted sweet on her tongue, though she worried for a minute Gabe would be woken by the soft
thud of the pillow against the floor.

And then Bucky moved again.

She pulled him closer, wanting as much of him as she could have, wanting him flush against her, his
chest against hers. Hands sliding against his sweaty skin, his heartbeat pounding beneath her
fingertips. Bucky hissed, slipping gentle endearments into her ear as he rocked his hips again and
again -- and, oh, ye gods -- the contradictions were dizzying, intoxicating, better than the cider; silky
and rough as brandy in her belly as Bucky moved against her; hot, wet kisses against her lips, her
neck, lower on her collarbone that he had ever gone before. He chased her heartbeat with his mouth,
chuckling when she moaned against his shoulder.

“Bucky,” she whimpered, desperately trying to keep quiet. “Bucky, I-I…”

He was panting now, stroking raggedly against her, rhythm stuttering unevenly with the clumsy
warmth of a kiss that just missed his mouth, and she laughed, faint and sweet, as he gently nudged
her thigh with his knee. “I-I -- uh -- know,” he groaned, dropping his head to rest against her
shoulder. “I know, I’ve got you.”

“Please keep going,” she whispered, running her fingers through his hair -- hoping the plea wasn’t
wrong, hoping it wasn’t wanton, and arching and moving underneath him. But this building, this
building -- silk and loving velvet against her, his undershirt shifting as he moved, and she pressed
one hand against his bare chest. “Bucky -- love -- p-please don’t stop.”

The world was him and her and this sweat-slick, heartbeat song. Under her trembling touch, Bucky’s
back flexed, muscles rolling tightly with the shaky, jerky increase of his speed. Breath ragged and
torn in her ear now, and her chest rose and fell rapidly --

And Elle thought of a bowstring. Taut and tense, straight and true. Her blood snapped with the bliss
of his next thrust; the hot, lean weight of him. His name burst out, and God -- it was the best way
he’d ever heard it, all thin around the edges, as though she had nothing else to give him. “Baby,” he
mumbled, nuzzling against her neck. “My baby-doll.”

On the word, the endearment -- one of so many -- she came, with a half-swallowed cry. Arms
wrapped around his back, pulling him closer, and Bucky pressed down against her, mind wildly
cataloguing the pretty twitch and tremble of her hips under his; the rapid pulse of her heartbeat; skin
tasting of salt and wonder as he grazed his mouth wetly against her throat, snuggled against the
warm, delicate juncture between her neck and shoulder. “I love you, Elle,” he breathed. “Love you
so damn much.”

Her own breath was gone. Seared and stolen from her lungs as pleasure throbbed through her every nerve. “I—I’ve never…” she murmured sleepily, heavily, as though her voice weighed far too much. “I’ve never done that.”

“Me neither,” Bucky admitted shyly, rolling over to his side, gathering her to his chest. “Was it...I mean, was it okay?”

“It was wonderful,” she slurred, a hazy smile blooming on her lips as she leaned forward for a kiss. “I love you, Bucky.”

Soft, gentle kisses; Elle reached up to wipe sweat from his forehead, pushing back his damp curls where they’d drooped against her face as he’d bent down to whisper sweet things against her mouth, her cheeks. To taste the pleasure upon her skin. “Did you” -- she chewed on her lips, face flushed with embarrassment now -- “did you…”

She didn’t have the word, didn’t own the language of that cresting wave, the thrumming ache low in her belly.

Bucky smiled and stroked one hand over the curve of her waist, the rise of her hip. “I’m fine, Elle. It’s okay. Got too wrapped up in you, doll.”

A slow, sated smile on her face, to match his. “You’re lovely,” she whispered, dreamily sliding one finger through the hair on his chest. “You’re so, so lovely.”

“And you’re gonna be stuck with me,” he said with a wink, cuddling her closer, rubbing soft circles against her thigh, where the nightgown had ridden up to reveal bare, warm skin. “Happy birthday, Ellie -- couldn’t think of what to get you, so how about a fiancé?”

A champagne laugh, one that left her tipsy in its wake. “We’re going to get married,” she whispered, faint with wonder, the gleam of gold and ruby on her hand catching the lamplight gently. “You’ll be my husband.”

He kissed her sweet and silent. “Only forever, Ellie,” he said softly.

And in the wake of that promise, there was practical fumbling. Nightclothes straightened and a pillow retrieved. Bucky stuck his head out his bedroom door, listening for any sign that someone had heard them, or was moving downstairs.

When he gave her the all-clear, Elle drew his mouth down to hers, giving him gratitude and promises and a goodbye in her kiss. On jellied legs, silk roses in hand, she made her way back downstairs to her bedroom, to fall against her pillow with the taste of Bucky on her lips, and a new shape against her soul.

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