Heads and Tails

by Slysheen

Summary

Rila Bong's witch powers were discovered when a recon crash nearly killed her. The attending medical witch noticed and recommended her be trained, three years late. Now she's struggling with powers unfamiliar to her as a new recruit to the 501st JFW. With their help she will tread the waters of an escalating conflict that will stretch Earth's military forces to the limit and demonstrate that glory and sorrow are two sides of the same coin when the world's at war.

Notes

I started writing this after finishing the (current) entirety of Strike Witches Quest. While an excellent read I felt it strayed a bit too far from the witches themselves. This fic is my attempt to make a happy medium between feel-good camaraderie and the realities of war.

This will be as much a WWII fanfic as it is a Strike Witches fanfic since they go together far too well to separate. The Neuroi will actually fight tactically instead of flying straight at an installation as they do in canon, and I've tweaked things around to make the Witches into a force that fits into the tactics of war instead of a jack-of-all-trades elite organization that decimates everything with no effort. (I've also made a considerable effort to build the world from the ground up so those unfamiliar with Strike Witches can enjoy it.)

Female OC ace arch-type Richard Bong. Also there is a near-certainty I will be exploring homosexuality in this work so if you find that offensive, this will not be the story for you.
(Naturally as an AU I have rebuilt most canon concepts from the ground up, some relatively unchanged and others completely, do not expect consistency with the source material outside of characterization.)

(M rating will be for fairly in-character profanity along with graphic violence as I tend to make injuries as realistic as my knowledge can manage.)

I will be throwing in references to almost everything I like throughout the series see if you can find them all! :) 

Now let us begin, hopefully you all will have as much fun reading this as I did writing it!

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Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

A freshly arrived Bong arrives at Castle Barin, and receives an...enthusiastic greeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1- "Meat" and greet.

June 16-1943 Kent, Great Britain.

I shifted my leg again for what felt like the thousandth time, never liked cars, or desks, or anything that involved sitting for a long while for that matter. I either fall asleep or start jittering uncontrollably as evidenced by my right foot thumping softly against the floor of the taxi. it wasn’t like I was a sports freak or anything, I just fidget like life decided to take all the actual energy I had when I was little but left the impatient skittishness.

The ocean splashed softly over the music and I decided to take the ear speakers out, I placed the device on my lap carefully, about a foot long by 10 inches and made of some patchwork metal, dad had joked about giving it a name but like always he never did, I still couldn’t think of a proper name for it. Music box? No, that already exists. Radiograph? No, the graph doesn’t mean anything. I resigned with a sigh and laid back, listening to the ocean.

Britain is very...green. I concluded tracing the rolling hills. It was strange that it could be so earthy when people had lived there for thousands of years while Chicago was a forest of metal and concrete and yet had only been around for 100. The paradox drifted away as a building, no, a castle reached up above the trees yet still somehow blended into the scenery.

“Wow.” I noted, the first thing I’d said for a good 4 hours or so.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” the driver asked with a wheezy chuckle, a bright smile on his face.

“We don’t have anything this..scenic in Wisconsin.” I replied.

“Oh, I’ve never been there before, what is it like?”

“Cold and forested.” I summarized. “It’s more tame here.”

“You’ll like it here, nice and quiet.” he assured me.

Before I could fill in the silence a streak of fluffy white clouds shot a crossed the sky, the contrail of an airplane I assumed.

“A plane? Are the strike witches pilots?” I asked mainly to myself.

“Oh, you’re one of the 501st?” the cabbie asked curiously.
“Maybe soon I guess.” I replied noncommittally.

“Oh, then let me thank you in advance for defending our country.” he smiled and chuckled again.

“Umm, thank you?” I decided was the best reply, luckily he didn’t push it further.

I put the suitcase down by the gate and lifted my arms into a deep stretch resisting the urge to go into a full routine after the long cab ride. Now that I had to walk the anxiety was back in full force, I was a recon pilot for heaven’s sake the only time I’d ever been in battle was a Neuroi ambush in northern Canada. Memories threatened to suck me down, so I held on to the anxiety, lesser of two evils I figured.

I hoped my state of dress would be appropriate, I didn’t really have a change of clothes aside from my standard fatigues. Standard woodland camo that a hung a bit more loosely than I’d like, they couldn’t really pretend to give an ass about corporals but it did its job I suppose. The boots I liked much more, black leather that seemed hellbent on keeping my feet dry, seeing as northern North America had two seasons cold and wet this was much appreciated. I folded the sound-box under my arm and took the first step towards the gate.

The first thing you notice is the eye popping green, whoever designed this base didn’t skimp on the aesthetics, several medium sized trees peppered the grassy carpet some bushes dotted the walls but early February wouldn’t let those garnish flowers out until it had its pound of flesh. Cobblestone lined the pathways, very British but with a subtle filing that left it flat on the top and easier to walk on, efficient too I added. Greenery was nice but it was sure to attract- I swiped my hand up and smacked myself in the left cheek, the offending insect took a leisurely route by my ear just to rub it in. “Why you-” I started before failing to come up with a scathing parting line.

I was further interrupted by a loud laugh and something heavy falling on my shoulders driving me to my knees. I would note that if it didn’t sound so young I’d call it a cackle, but I was too busy trying to not get kneecapped. My unknown assaulter didn’t give me much time for contemplation however as the small hands immediately grabbed my breasts. All I could get out through a stunned diaphragm was a strangled “Yeeckk!” before swinging my left arm trying to dislodge my tiny assailant.

Instead it just provoked more laughter, she finally bounced off where I could see her clearly. Fairly short but stuck in that grey zone between child and adult I chose 11, darker green hair pulled into two sidetails, black eyes but there might’ve been a bit of green in them. Skin was a healthy olive, Italian maybe? She was wearing what was either a long shirt or short dress and was clearly struggling to do its job, not helped by her apparent decision to forego pants.

“Hm not as big as Shirley…” she sounded disappointed.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you.” I tried to growl but dissolved into another coughing fit. I guess she could’ve been someone’s daughter, after all if the strike witches were all female it wouldn’t be surprising.

“I’m new here, could you please take me to the commander?” I asked sweetly ignoring my urge to grapple her back. For some reason the question made her laugh even harder.

“Sure nice lady.” she responded voice dripping with sarcasm, I revised my guess to 12. She waved me over behind her and marched for the castle singing something softly.

Chapter End Notes
Exposition chapter is expositiony.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don’t know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
A New Kind of Pilot

Chapter Summary

After Lucchini's enthusiastic greeting our heroine enters the castle to meet her new superior officers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2- A New Kind of Pilot

The castle was just as immaculate indoors, heavy oak doors, red carpet hallways, armor suits, the whole shebang. Once again I questioned how this could possibly be a military base. Not that I minded the change of scenery, I was just used to military bases being a tent village.

The girl led me to an oak door standing alone,

“Heyyy~ Minnaa! I got someone here, says she’s new!” she explained before dragging the door open with a series of grunts.

The office was what I expected, old shag rug, heavy desk, some other artifacts and keepsakes that I somehow didn’t believe belonged to the woman behind the desk. It was a bit odd seeing someone with red hair and eyes not look menacing in any way. As opposed to Willis Woad my old boot instructor, he’d been just about as ferocious as his nickname’s counterpart, kept trying to pick “volunteers” for weaponless doctrine unless we all refused as loud as possible, I guess it made us pay attention though. It was hard to tell from sitting but I expected I was still slightly taller than her, 18 I decided.

The other woman was an odd sight, slightly shorter than me with dark hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and immaculate bangs, the tunic of a service dress whites uniform and if she was wearing any pants they were the smallest pants I’d ever seen my life. She noticed me and stood back up with a jolly smile which also revealed the eye patch over her right eye. I’d like to think I was open-minded but that eyepatch sent a chill through my spine, what kind of shit did someone as young as she looked have to go through to lose an eye like that? And to that point why was she carrying a sheathed sword in her right hand?

Seeing as the red-head also was watching me I had the nagging suspicion that I was supposed to be doing something. Crap! I snapped to attention as quickly as I could.

“Uh, Corporal Rila Bong of the American Northern Recon Corps reporting! Serial number: 82-” Eye patch was laughing, a jolly laugh that for some reason didn’t make me want to sink into the earth and become a mole as most laughter would.

“Relax,” she smiled I put my hand down thankfully.

“I’m major Sakamoto Mio, battle commander of the 501st. And this is Wing Commander Minna Dietlinde Wilcke, commander in all other ways.” she laughed again.
Minna was studying me closely with a faint smile but the eyes betrayed the analysis, I think I understood more of why she was in charge. It vanished as she got up to shake my hand along with the commander.

“Thank you pilot officer Lucchini.” Minna offered

“Yup~” the girl smiled. All I could do was a double take, Lucchini doubled over with laughter, “Your face!” she gasped before leaving with a cheery wave.

“Don’t worry, they are always surprised.” Mio laughed.

“So. Let’s get down to business, what’d they tell you before you left?” Mio asked.

“Permission to speak freely?” she nodded.

“Jack shit.” I clarified earning another laugh. “All I really know is that the 501st are strike witches and I may join em.”

“Eh guess we aren’t as omni-present in North America. Hey Minna, I’m gonna take her and give her the 4-1-1.”

“Mhm, nothing more to do now anyway.” Minna acknowledged.

Mio led me through the halls pointing out rooms and what was in them.

“Alright, time to get to the point. You know what a traditional witch is right?”

“Cauldrons, spells, predisposition to being burned by angry villagers?” I was starting to get the sense that I wasn’t funny and Mio just had an easy laugh, eh who cares?

“Close enough, but we decided that brooms wouldn’t cut fighting an alien airforce, so a scientist Miyafuji Ichiro made our striker units to even the field, his daughter is actually in the unit too, you’ll meet her later. Kept brooms in the emblem though, good to acknowledge our roots.”

“So you’re a witch, does it run in families?”

“WE’re witches and it sometimes runs, sometimes leaves, sometimes sits and hides from its mommy; magic’s finicky like that.”

“You know that quickly?”

“Physical contact gives us a taste, yours is a bit gimpy but we’ll see if we can perk it up.” I’m glad she for one was confident.

A little further we reached windows that gave an unobstructed view of the sea, something caught Mio’s eye.

“Ah look.” she indicated a patch of blue sky. Nothing immediately stood out, I turned my head to ask but she started lifting the eyepatch. I snapped away to give her privacy but she just laughed again.
“Don’t worry I still have the eye.” she clarified. It was just as intact as her other aside from the undulating purple/pink color of the iris. I followed her gaze and finally noticed the contrail streaks twisting and turning over each other, break offs, scissors, standard fighter maneuvers. I could register a couple of flashes and blurs but no form until one of the participants pulled into a wider turn. I spied brown hair and a pair of metallic...things on her legs, no cockpit or anything to suggest a plane.

“Completely unassisted?” I directed the question to Mio.

“No, striker units.” Mio clarified and put the eye patch back down. “You’ll understand soon enough, one thing at a time though.” she motioned down the hall and I followed.

I don’t know at what point it happened but the castle architecture gave way to more metallic “military” walls. A massive hangar took up the center of the base, instead of planes a row of racks stood against the back wall with I assumed was a striker unit in each. The rest of the space was filled with shipping crates, toolboxes, some other disassembled machines, and a small office/control room near the doors. All in all it was a combination of hangar, storage, workshop, garage, and stockhouse it seemed, good thing it was so big. The dull roaring of plane engines began as three people entered all with strange machines on their legs.

The blonde was in the lead, oval glasses, sharp yellow eyes, immaculate hair, blue jacket, white mailcoach tie, black pantyhose, everything about her screamed upper class, or maybe snob but I try to keep an open mind.

The taller of the remaining two seemed okay, hair that couldn’t decide whether to be blonde or brown, deep blue eyes a neutral smile, reminded me of a doe, big and pretty but a bit timid. Dress shirt, tie and sweatervest under an overcoat, sharp but not too formal. The green and red leggings were another story, would fit right into a tacky christmas party, but well nobody’s perfect.

The shortest girl was probably the least striking. Messy brown hair that looked like she just got out of bed, chocolate eyes and a bigger smile, good girl would be the impression. She couldn’t have been much older than Lucchini so I once again wanted to ask why we had navy pilots in early puberty. She had on what appeared to be the top to a naval or serafuku uniform and it didn’t quite go down far enough, from the lamination I assumed she had on one of those standard issue one-piece swimsuits under it, guess it made sense in a naval environment. Once again no one was wearing pants it was starting to get weird.

“Perfect score as always Major Sakamoto.” the blonde reported with a smug smile.

“Yes, I was watching you did very well Perrine.” Mio smiled. The blonde beamed even brighter and was clearly taking the compliment way too seriously, whatever awkwardness was present Mio just glossed over.

“And Yoshika excellent high yo-yo from rolling scissors.” she added, the brunette beamed too but this one was more what I’d expect from a father praising his daughter. The blonde’s, Perrine I think it was, glower was immediate and I made a mental note to keep my distance from her.

“Who’s she?” the quiet one asked her voice reinforcing the doe impression.

“Corporal Rila Bong, our newest member, maybe.” Mio introduced, “Speaking of which I called the general meeting for 4:15 so we best get going.”
We followed Mio through more identical halls. Perrine seemed content to drool over her and doe seemed to want the silence reinforced. Yoshika finally plucked up the courage to break the silence.

“So where are you from?”

“Ah America.” I answered with a smile.

“Like Shirley than.” she noted, though not to me in particular it seemed.

“So what about you? I guess Japan.” I stabbed.

“Mhm, so is Major Sakamoto.” she replied.

“You do seem to get along well.” I observed but immediately regretted it as Perrine made the temperature drop 20 degrees.

“Well, Major Sakamoto gets along well with everybody.” Yoshika tried to salvage the situation and the atmosphere got a little better.

“Just like you Yoshika.” Doe offered with an easy smile, they really should adjust the heating in this place.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I was expecting to make Rila a bit more timid but she had other plans...

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
We made it to another nondescript oak door without Perrine's malice giving us frostbite, progress! Though with all of these identical doors I was going to get lost. It opened into what I would kneejerk describe as a chapel, well maybe not, aside from rows of desks and a podium there wasn’t much resemblance. A few billboards decorated the back of the room with precious little on them. The rest of what I assumed was the unit filled the seats though that amounted to much less than I was expecting for a military unit, just eleven people. Mio, Perrine, Yoshika, and Doe milled about to where I assumed their normal spots were and Minna motioned me up to the stage.

“Attention everyone.” she called clapping her hands together.

“As noted on our last meeting, Neuroi attacks have increased dramatically over the past three weeks. Command has also approved our concerns regarding more recruiting to offset low operational capacity, this is our newest candidate Corporal Rila Bong from America.”

“Pleased to meet ya all.” I offered with a small bow.

“As is custom she will be promoted to Sergeant, Lynne, Miyafuji look after her.” Yoshika and doe nodded.

“Now in here is your papers, clothing, ID, rank insignias, and service pistol.” she indicated the lockbox on the podium. I let out a low whistle, the box was a varnished pine, the good stuff, not the shitty old ammunition crates they gave us under the guise of hand-me-downs. Sitting on the lid was a Walther PPK a bit small for my hands but it would do. I picked it up and went through the mental checklist my brother taught me. Muzzle to the ground, safety’s on. I pulled the magazine and found it empty, a final pull on the slide confirmed nothing in the chamber.

“Ammunition is in the lockbox.” Minna clarified.

“Thanks.” I replied putting the PPK back down, she smiled.

“Now Major Sakamoto if you’ll wrap it up?”

“Dinner is in two hours so a schedule will not be necessary, practice until then your choice of what but I better not see any slacking.” she threw a look at Lucchini sprawled out across her desk with a bored look on her face, she reminded me of a cat.

“Miyafuji, Lynn, show Rila around the base help her get her bearings.”

“Yes ma’am.” they responded in unison.

“Dismissed.”

I had barely bent over to pick up the lockbox before small feet pattered behind me and there was a distinct lack of Lucchini in my peripheral vision.

“No, no!” I roared pulling my arms back to my chest just in time for her hands to slap helplessly
against my forearms.

“Awww.” she drew out into a sigh burying her forehead into the small of my back. Another woman let out an easy laugh and leaned over the podium with a look more mischievious than predatory.

“I’m sure you got at least one measure in.”

“Third, a little bit smaller than Lynn.” Lucchini offered, voice slightly muffled.

“Better watch out Lynn.” the platinum blonde in the second row warned with a good-natured snicker.

My eyes returned to the woman on the podium, I had to admit that while we were almost identical height she kicked my ass in the buxom department. Bright orange hair that framed her face like a portrait, baby blue eyes and an hourglass figure most women would kill for. Thank god they weeded the vain jealous side of you pretty damn early in the military but deep down I couldn’t help but resent it a bit. With that smile she could probably melt most men and some women effortlessly, even in her flight officer uniform, once again minus the pants though, hell that could probably do it on its own, plain,light blue...Focus Rila.

“Flight Lieutenant Charlotte E. Yeager.” she introduced herself extending her hand. As I took it I saw that competitive gleam, she tried to crush my hand in her grip and I reciprocated.


“Oh, so you have heard of me!”

“Small world.” I admitted before my mind had a chance to get too starstruck. “Northern corps recon pilot. World record for sitting on my ass.” I asserted with as much authority as I could. That got a good laugh out of her, could’ve gone worse.

“Yeah, the USAAF isn’t keen on stimulating flight assignments.” she drew out. “Part of why they kicked me out, something about “unauthorized modifications”.” she grinned impishly.

“Army than? East or West coast.” I grilled.

“West.”

“Than maybe we can be friends beach bum.” I grinned.

“Likewise popsicle.” she finished with a playful bow.

I shifted my attention to the platinum blonde still sitting on the desk behind Lynn, she was holding another girl up, this one with silvery hair in a shaggy bob cut. She was trying to fight off sleep but losing badly, like Germany losing. The blonde had a light blue flight jacket and white pantyhose, I suppose it was better than just underwear, that when combined with her skin and hair made her almost ghostly, aside from the lavender eyes that was.

“Eila Ilmatar Juutilainen. Finnish flying officer.” she rattled off with a small smile, it should’ve been timid but something helped prop it up, maybe her eyes. Silver stirred slightly in her arms, a slight nod off before righting herself again, eyes still closed. Her uniform had some more blacks in it along with black pantyhose so she wasn’t as whitescale as her companion.
“This is Sanya Vladimirovna Litvyak, Russian flying officer.” she introduced.

“She’s a night witch, usually asleep right now, I’ll go tuck her in before dinner.” she offered.
“Mmm.” Sanya responded softly.

“Alright, nice to meet you two then.” I offered. Eila nodded softly and took her leave.

“Coulda sworn there were two others.”

“Hm? Oh, flight lieutenant Barkhorn and flying officer Hartmann.” Charlotte clarified amid a lazy Lucchini using her bosom as a makeshift pillow. “They’ll open up to you later, Barkhorn’s really focused and doesn’t really fret over socializing and Hartmann’s...odd. You’ll see soon.” she laughed again. “Let’s go fix the air intake Lucchini.” she offered softly. Lucchini let out a massive yawn and followed suit, definitely a cat.

I stretched my back out with a soft yawn before my eyes met Yoshika and Lynn again.

“Oh yeah, let’s go see the rest.” My eyes wandered to the lockbox”...starting with the bedrooms.”

Paperwork, paperwork, and more paperwork. Minna took a second to collapse into her chair and take a deep breath. *I'll take my damn time thank you.* She toyed with how long she could continuously inhale letting it fill her. When she rolled her head back forward the stack seemed shorter than it had. She didn’t fancy herself a zen artist but well, a break is a break. What she didn’t expect was Mio leaned casually against the doorframe watching with an impish smile on her face.

Minna jumped slightly but praised her wounded pride she didn’t yelp as was the custom of Mio’s visits.

“How the hell do you do that?” she asked exasperated. *I swear I can’t open that door at all without it waking up everyone in the base.*


“Need something?”

“Well if you want privacy…” Mio offered with a deep shrug and turned to leave.

“No, no, you just surprised me that’s all.” she sighed, she knew from that smile that Mio had no intention of leaving, just another barb to force her to admit she was startled. Further reinforced by the sparkle in her eyes as she turned back towards the desk. *Like a mischievous puppy.* Minna thought with a small smile to herself.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Mio offered.

“Regarding what?”

“Your signature of course. You’re starting to make your “L” loops smaller, fancy fancy, have you been writing some love letters on the side?” the older woman assessed with the only indicator of sarcasm being a slight gleam in her uncovered eye. Minna once again wondered how she could come up with a divergent train of thought so quickly and stay completely deadpan, with her jolly demeanor it was easy to forget that her rank of Major was well earned and her tongue sharp.
“Ah, Corp- Sergeant Bong,” she repressed a sigh. It felt like every single time, every non-witch pilot always seemed to be a smartass; she contemplated again whether the air corps only took big mouths or if the act of flying without a striker unit somehow gave you a big mouth and couldn’t find any satisfactory evidence to support either. She came back to Mio finishing with “-lame.”

“Sorry?”

“Well, the spark’s there but we have to do some poking and prodding to see if we can get a fire out of it.” Mio repeated. Minna sighed.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yes, she’s 16 if it took this long for someone to notice her gift-”

“-than it might not be worth attention at all.” Mio finished with a slight frown. “I like the girl, hopefully we’ll get something to work with.”

The atmosphere took on almost sepultureros feel, and the stack of paperwork suddenly seemed double the size it originally was.

“I need a good soak.” Minna concluded pushing the chair out. Mio stood lost in thought for a second.

“I could do with one too.” she added holding the door open for the Wing Commander. Even with Neuroi attacks, supply shortages, and induction paperwork, Minna couldn’t help but look forward to a long soak in the misty bath with Mio, Just for a little bit. She asserted to herself.

Chapter End Notes

The Minna/Mio conversation wasn't actually planned in any way, it came out pretty much as is and was one of the first instances of a story "writing itself" really cool to finally experience that personally.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
“Shit, do I have to pay rent too?” I asked Yoshika as she opened the door to my room.

“No, they even pay you!” she beamed. The room wasn’t quite something out of a fairy tale but it ran laps around a damp tent in the snow. Dark hardwood floors, non descript walls, a decently sized wardrobe and,

“Dear Christ a real bed.”

I fought every fiber of my being not to sink into it and forget the world existed forever. A small wooden nightstand stood to the side, I put down the lockbox and contemplated whether to bring the PPK or not. My rational sense finally trumped my paranoia and I left it sitting on the box.

“I’ll be back for you later.” I smiled at the bed like it was a newborn baby.

“Hm, I think you’re between Shirley and Barkhorn and Hartmann.” Lynn noted.

“Three rooms?”

“Ah no, Barkhorn and Hartmann share.” she clarified.

“Hopefully they aren’t too loud then.” I poked in.

“Well, Barkhorn is a bit noisy in the mornings but that shouldn’t be a problem.” Came the response and I fought to suppress laughter. Better she not know I suppose, one of the first skills you learn in the military is slipping in snide comments about the Brass without being obvious enough to court martial for insubordination. Or as we called it Boo Hoo the enlisted men hurt my feelings. Of course I wasn’t implying that Barkhorn was in a scandalous lesbian relationship and had trouble containing her voice, not at all.

“There’s a small town near the base that sells decoration if you want some for your room, I’ll take you sometime if you want.” Lynn offered.

“Actually I would really like that.” I took her up, she smiled softly.

“This place have a shooting range?” I asked as we approached the front hall.

“Ah! I know that we sometimes use the old anchor off the airstrip as a sniping point but I don’t know if there is an actually combined weapons range.” Lynn said.

“And I try not to use them too often…” Yoshika added.

People never seem to understand how windy it gets when you go higher and the top of the base was absolutely breezy. The channel stretched out below, crystalline blue and in the distance the mountains of France towering above like a nightmare long forgotten, though something else also caught my eye.
“What the hell is that?” I asked moving to the other side of the balcony.

“Hm?” Lynn joined me. I squinted and could only make out a black shape.

“Can’t tell something’s flying out there.”

“Plane?” Lynn asked trying to find my gaze.

“Too big unless we have a B-17 coming in.” Lynn kept scanning and finally found my mark, she gasped and darted toward the central spire and pulled a heavy lever, we sprinted for the stairs as the distinctive wail of an air raid siren began.

The entire base was a cacophony of different sounds, Charlotte came sprinting by and nearly clotheslined Lynn, neither acknowledged it and kept running. It reminded me of an ant hill in chaos. Lynn slammed open the door to the office and managed to gasp “Neuroi!” before doubling over trying to breathe.

“We know, you two and Perrine are on standby.” Minna ordered holding the headset closer. After a few acknowledgments she slid a manilla envelope across the table to me.

“Neuroi, they’re aliens, fire lasers, want to kill all of us, you know stuff they taught you.” she rattled off in between coordinating the attack group. The envelope was full of pictures, a black and white photo of a sleek looking craft, all angles and pointy bits under something that looked like a bad storm cloud.

“That’s a hive, it spawns them. Eats land so Britan was perfect for a staging area.” The next picture was another craft, but this one was in color showing it to be composed of hexagonal panels and a section where it appeared to be blown away. Within could be seen a large gem, hard to tell how big from the scaling but it glowed with a red light. Along it’s side was a witch that looked like Barkhorn.

“That’s its core, you have to destroy it to kill it permanently, otherwise it will fix itself. Wait, what the hell do you mean there’s no core?” Minna growled. “Okay, okay, ah yes it’s to the east, I’ll take Perrine, Miyafuji, and Lynn. Hey Bong!”

“Yeah?”

“Take the radio and help us coordinate, all channels are open, just talk.” she tossed the headset to me and motioned for Lynn and Yoshika to follow her as she dashed for the hanger. The headset buzzed faintly until I could finally hear Mio yelling something.

“Wilcke, Wilcke!”

“Hey Major.” I had to take the set off to keep her from killing my ears.

“What the hell are you doing Bong!”

“Wilcke’s taking care of the core, talk to me Major.”

“We’re holding steady but this thing is being one hell of a berserker, ask Wilcke if there’s anyone out there.”

“Sitrep on allied forces?” the roar of engines in an enclosed space dominated the feed for a bit before finally clearing.
“All I got is a battlecruiser and two escorts, the HMS Benbow was supposed to be bring supplies it’s probably them.”

“Tell em to get out of here.” Mio ordered after a quick relay. I scanned through the channels until finally getting a signal.

“HMS Benbow this is 501st base Folkestone, come in Benbow.”

“This is Captain Tenre of the Benbow reading loud and clear Folkestone.”

“Benbow, combat operations being held in your sector, requesting permission to direct you out of engagement zone.” a short pause.

“Direct us to engagement Folkestone, we will assist.” I swallowed a curse.

“Negative Benbow, the 501st have it well in hand, however target is still berserking, once again requesting permission to guide you to safer waters.” Hotblooded idiots.

“Negative Folkestone, we are able bodied to assist, repeat, direct us to engagement.” Great they made this into a pissing contest.

“Repeat negative Benbow, your presence is unnecessary, proceed to point E8.” Well shit I just did naval equivalent of calling out a small penis.

“We are an admiral class battlecruiser Folkestone, we don’t need your guidance.” And so the chest thumping begins.

“Benbow, class is irrelevant, this is not a matter of combat capacity, now allow course adjustment before I have to bother someone who can order you to.” I couldn’t tell at this point whether the cracking sound was the table I was squeezing or my teeth grinding. Another long pause.

“Very well Folkestone we are in your hands.” Finally.

I always wanted to apologize to the radio ops back in America, everyone gave them shit for sitting on their asses but no one ever seemed to notice this coordinating shit is hard, especially with the edition of a passive-aggressive battlecruiser.

“How we doing Wilcke?”

“Target in sight, final approach.” a minute passed. “Core neutralized, sitrep first engagement?”

“Talk to me Major.”

“Yup, target’s dissolving returning to base.”

“Roger strike 1, over and out.”

“HMS Benbow, target has been neutralized no combat zones within 100 nautical miles, return to previous orders.”

“Acknowledged Folkestone.” they replied before immediately cutting contact.
Well fuck you too. I ripped the headset off and let myself flop into the chair to let my poor brain recover.

Chapter End Notes

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
I may have dozed off a bit, or the blonde head observing me curiously could teleport. I would’ve called those eyes childish but something about them gave me pause. They were blue but not quite as bright as Charlotte’s, or maybe it was the lightness of her hair.

“Hm, you don’t look like a communications officer.” she observed and some nuance of her tone made it sound like a question.

“Wha-” I groaned disoriented. She made a show of sniffing the air.

“Don’t smell like one either.” The fact that I couldn’t tell whether she was joking or not was a bit unnerving. She twisted her mouth into a puzzled expression and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. She perked up before she could ask another question.

“Ah, dinner!” she smiled and got up like she forgot I existed. I followed her little skip to the door and something Charlotte said came back, *And Hartmann’s...odd.* Well, at any rate dinner sounded good so I decided to let her lead the way.

“For someone so tall you’re pretty slow.” she noted as I kept stride.

“Well I don’t know where to go.”

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully,

“Okay.”

She took a couple more turns and we entered a wide dining room. They’d taken it and added a worn table with a bunch of wooden chairs, set a refrigerator in an alcove behind a long service counter. A massive cauldron sat off to the side containing rice it looked like.

“Natto and rice tonight Rila!” Yoshika announced over the clatter of plates and creaking of chair legs. The rice was typically white but the beans were a particularly unappetizing brown and the smell, well strong was an understatement.

“Natto, it’s good for you.” Yoshika said and for the first time there was a shortness to her tone. The culprit was behind me making exaggerated faces at her own plate, I’ll give you three guesses as to who it was but it rhymes with “Marine”.

A seat at the end of the table was open so I took a sit to more efficiently convince myself to not eat this. I was close to a still whining Perrine but luckily not directly across, small comfort. Natto was even worse up close, strands of...slime connected the beans like some kind of disturbing biological extract, well I spied Wilcke acrossed the table eating them more or less happily. Well, if I die I’m going to die full. I justified and dumped a spoonful in my mouth trying hard not to inhale through my nose. The taste wasn’t as bad as the smell led me to believe but dear christ the texture, the beans were just as slimy as they looked. I finally choked it down and readied another, but wait, maybe there was
a reason for the rice surrounding it. I took the rest and rolled it up into a little snowball and tried it that way. Still slimy but surprisingly better now that it didn’t feel like eating a slime eel.

“Ey, thish is oky.”

“Ah, good!” she perked up. The temperature dropped again I was starting to suspect Perrine was a wizard. She kept staring at me sharp eyes behind those glasses so I did what I did best and made my eating louder and more obnoxious. She groaned in disgust.

“I can’t believe you! The major gives you a tour and you’re already treating this like a vacation you..you country hick!”

“Excuse me princess but the correct term is “Appalachian American.” sorry if I hurt your delicate sensibilities.” I offered but continued to munch my food the same to signify I meant no such thing. She finally growled, stormed off and I couldn’t help but give off a satisfied smile.

“Thank you Miyafuji it was good.”

“Well you were..uncharacteristically late for dinner.” Barkhorn noticed. Hartmann shrugged and picked at her Natto absentmindedly.

“Was meeting the new girl, plus Natto isn’t sweet I miss Shirley’s cooking.”

“Only because it’s full of salt, fat, and sugar, hardly the diet of a proud German soldier.” Barkhorn nagged. Hartmann moaned and when no better food choices immediately presented themselves began to eat.

“So what’s the new girl like?” Barkhorn asked after a few more bites.

“Dunno, she was asleep.”

“Hartmann…”

“Hm, she’s a bit light on her feet and moves a bit slow, but that’s probably because she’s in a strange place with people she’s known about four hours. She was asleep so I expect she has a hard time keeping up with her own energy, or maybe she’s just had a long day.” Barkhorn elected not to object as the younger ace’s intuition was usually right.

“She could be fun to watch though, she’s interesting. Also,” she took another bite, “It doesn’t look like Minna likes her.” Barkhorn did a minor double take and cast her eyes over to Minna and couldn’t see anything unusual. Still, someone Minna didn’t like immediately was a rare occurrence.

“I’m gonna take a bath.” Hartmann announced and headed for the doors. The rest of the cast followed suite at their own time, I followed after another helping of rice.

Seeming to follow the theme set by the rest of the day the baths were located in a large room with its own storage area. Well I guess a locker room would be more accurate. A tan shelving unit filled the north wall each housing a small wicker basket. Evidently for clothes as Perrine’s distinctive blue uniform sat folded neatly in one and a jumbled mess with a dark flight jacket indicating Hartmann.
I grabbed an empty basket, made my fatigues and underwear comfortable and made to pull the clip out of the folded ponytail. And immediately regretted it as the sweat soaked lower loop plastered to the back of my neck. God I hated leather seats.

Now everyone has some doubt about their body type, luckily they weed that out of you in the army damn quick too. I may be a bit on the heavier side, but hell we’re soldiers, how bad can it be? Well that was my train of thought before I was immediately confronted by a nude Charlotte and let’s just say the officer’s suit didn’t do her justice. Defeated, I slunk to the massive bath and submerged, determined that even if my body image was shattered I would at least have clean hair.

The water was nice and warm not as hot as I’d like but with northern warfare when your bath comes in “cold” and “colder” any warmth was like the second coming of Christ. I was content to lay on my back and let my eyes wander. A statue on a pedestal towered above a pool taking up most of the floor, the pool itself was probably a foot and a half deep, enough to lounge back and let the water come up to mid-chest. Well maybe a bit more than that for the shorter ones. I may be a bit taller for a woman but at 5’6, but that also invited in the weight. I’d like to think a nice combination of fat and muscle but lately I’d started to notice hints of a gut creeping in, sitting in a recon plane isn’t the most rousing activity. Despite the curves as a solid marker of the fairer sex, I still wasn’t going into a modeling studio without being asked where the hell the coffee is.

Charlotte now she was made for the camera, it was no wonder virtually every single piece of pro-witch media featured her. A can-do gal with full hips and an even more full smile, people ate that up. Yoshika and Lynn were chatting a couple of feet away. My mind reached back to the meet and greet, Better be careful Lynn. Well she was bigger by a bit, but I excused that as me having an all around thicker chest in general, she was more scholarly and I was well… country hick for lack of a funnier term. Yoshika was what I’d expect, probably a late bloomer, she and Lucchini would probably fill out later. Hartmann too maybe she wasn’t much less wiry. Eila was a happy medium between the lates and the early’s like me, a light frame but enough meat to seem “complete.” Perrine was sat up straight like a fence post hair wrapped up into a complicated bun, didn’t she ever relax at all? Whatever she had in hips was clearly at the expense of her chest, hopefully it’d even out over time. Barkhorn was showering next to Hartmann, now she was a bit more what I’d expect from a soldier, still had some modest curves but you could see the muscle shaping her back and arms, but only if you looked closely.

“New girl’s staring at you again.” Hartmann noted drawing her fingers through her hair. Barkhorn sighed. Again?

“This wouldn’t happen if you’d talk to people more.”

“We’re soldiers, we shoot things and do what we’re told, we don’t need to know everyone’s little nuances.” she turned and Rila immediately averted her eyes again.

“I’ll be right back.”

Her hair was a bit odd out of its normal twintails, well I guess mine would be too. Wait, why is she coming over? She was crossing the pool, unfortunately in my direction, I racked my brains for anything I could have done to piss her off. Nothing came to mind, but still I couldn’t help but notice she had a good chest size, just enough to be fun without it being her defining feature...focus Rila.

“Bong.” it was odd having a shorter woman towering over me that much.
“Yea- yes Barkhorn?” I stuttered.

“I know you’re new, and everything is strange and different but could you stop with the insistent staring, it’s uncomfortable.”

“Uh yeah! Sorry to cause you undue problem- distress si- uh ma’am!” I flailed.

“Yes, yes, I know.” she snapped and turned tail. The rest of the bath seemed mercifully ignorant of the exchange aside from the embarrassed heat in my face and my subsequent attempts to pretend I didn’t exist anymore.

“Well you handled that well.”

“Quiet.” Barkhorn mumbled.

“I’m sure Miyafuji stared at you more when she joined, why does Rila bother you so much?”

“I don’t have to be consistent Hartmann.”

Hartmann just gave an amused chuckle and neglected to say anything more.

Chapter End Notes

The obligatory bath chapter! Nothing too racy yet we'll see if it stays that way...

Hartmann is an interesting character, she's one of the few that don't fit completely in a mold. (Miyafuji IS Naive!Hero! Barkhorn IS strict!overperfectionist! ect.) It let's me have alot of fun with her, I wanted to highlight her slight cloudcuckoolander tendencies. Not too much of course but enough to throw off the other characters occasionally. And of course, the teasing of Barkhorn.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
The best option now was to be alone, get my nerve back and I almost did it too.

“We need to talk Sergeant.” Minna ordered just out of the bath. She led me to the familiar office I first met her in.

“Sit.”

“Bong.” she sighed, “Your behavior to the Benbow during combat operations today was completely unacceptable. They are our allies and are due the respect you would show to any American officer or myself.” Which wasn’t much different. Hung in the air like a stinking miasma.

“Then what would you have had me do?” I asked biting back the real line I wanted to say.

“Excuse me?” Minna shot, giving me a chance to withdraw.

“They would not accept reason so I saw what I had to do and took it. If you noticed another option it may be useful for next time.” I mentally cringed at the submission.

“A little civility goes a long way in such situations.” I wrestled with my urge to scream “Bullshit!” into her face.

“I tried professionalism first, then they kept insisting on assistance despite my assertions it was unnecessary, further petty argument would have led to possible collateral damage.”

“That was not your call to make.”

“It was when you insisted I operate the radio.” I deflected, her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“I’ll be sure not to make that mistake again Sergeant.” came the curt reply. The rank card, the only thing I could do was go with it. I snapped into a very unwilling salute.

“Is that all Wing Commander?”

“Dismissed Sergeant.” she concluded and returned to her paperwork.

Well I managed to piss off a Flight Lieutenant and Wing Commander in under 8 hours, that must be a new fucking record. I sighed, I need a drink, or 4.

“Bong.”

“What now! Oh hello Major.” I offered meekly to a puzzled Mio climbing the stairs.

“Something wrong?” she asked and I couldn’t help but get a little watery eyed.

“That bad huh?” she smiled softly and upon indicating consent, let me hug her. I let go after I was able to compose myself well enough.
“Thanks.”

“Anytime. Feel like sharing?”

“Minna didn’t like how I handled the Benbow, and made it brutally clear at that.” Mio oscillated back to puzzled again.

“Odd, I’m usually the bad cop. Well, sure you were a bit...brutal but I can’t say I would have done much better. Try not to let it get to you, Minna is quite particular about how she does things.”

“I’ll try.” I promised. “Major, do you keep any...harder drinks on base?”

“Are you old enough for that?” Mio asked. I shrugged.

“Our old CO always said if we were old enough to give our lives for our country than we were old enough to have a drink.”

“I like this CO of yours, hopefully I can meet him sometime.” Mio laughed. She leaned in closer a mischievous glint in her eye, “The freezer nearest to the wall, padlock code is 4280, don’t drink too much though, your training starts tomorrow and I don’t want you hungover.”

“You’re a saint Major.”

I had just finished getting out a beer and a small plate of rice to stave off the munchies

when I detected movement in my peripherals. The night witch Sanya I was introduced to earlier in the day was leaned against the doorframe. Now that she was awake I was able to notice her brilliant green eyes I could swear they almost glowed.

“Ah you’re awake now.” for some reason my voice came out soft like how you would coax a shy fawn.

“You’re Rila right?” she smiled, where Eila was ghostly in form Sanya was ghostly in presence, her voice came out like the whisper of leaves on a summers night.

“Yup, something funny?” I asked.

“It’s just one letter from Eila, it’ll be funny when someone calls for you or her.” she observed with a faint smile.

She made herself a plate of leftover Natto and began to eat, the silence should have been awkward but wasn’t. She was content with eating and I was content with drinking. The beer gnawed at my tongue and I smacked my lips in displeasure, somehow you never stop drinking no matter how much it tastes like cold piss. It filled something in your chest. I alternated each sip with a spoon of rice and slowly felt the weight drift away. I finished one and began on the second and almost missed Sanya heading for the door.

“Be careful out there.” I said giving her a pat on the shoulder.

“Thank you.” she floated away towards the hanger.
I was almost done with the second bottle before Yoshika found her way to me.

“Eyy Mijafii.”

“Oh! Hi Rila, listen I heard what happened with Bar-, what are you doing?”

I took a long look at the almost-empty bottle,

“Reading good book, almosh done.” I offered when my addled mind couldn’t come up with anything funnier.

“You shouldn’t be drinking, you’re not old enough.” Yoshika tried her best to look menacing, hands on tiny hips. “Barkhorn getting mad isn’t enough for this.”

“Well, Wilcke was all rah rah rah and then rank card.” I justified weakly.

“Still, you don’t need to do that.”

“Nah, shometimes you need a little pick-me up. Back at home all the time.”

“Well this isn’t America, that doesn’t mean you can just do that.”

“Yesh, Mio gave me the code.” I replied indignantly.

“Oh really, what is it?”

“8410” I replied, “or was it 4850?” I tried again, slight panic setting in as the right answer proved illusive. Yoshika snapped the lock back on. I made a cry of distress and scrambled at the dial.

“See, now you don’t need it.” She smiled triumphantly.

“Damn youuu Mijafija!” I wailed.

“Now off to bed.” she insisted.

“You dun tell me what to do.” I sat and folded my arms refusing to take a step. Tiny hands braced against my back trying to get me to move.

“You have to go to bed! Major Sakamoto does training early in the morning!”

“Nuh uh.”

“Help me Lynn!” she wailed and another set of hands guided me towards the stairs. I considered collapsing on them but that would probably hurt them and I’d hit my head which would be un ideal for many reasons.

I swayed through the halls still slightly disgruntled but unable to escape my two escorts. They finally managed to get me to my room. The anger melted away as I noticed,

“That bed!” I shouted and flopped down on it and almost immediately fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Hm 9 hits, 9 more than when I started, thanks for reading,
also my first kudos, "and I love you random citizen!"

Minna kind of sounds like my mum at this point...
Also paved the way for some drunk shenanigans, how I do love the drunk shenanigans,
also assertive Miyafuji still finds a way to be adorable.

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I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I
can't see that without your view.
The first discomfort I awoke to was the wrinkles in the sheets pressing into my face, the second was a headache, luckily it was merely agonizing instead of crippling. I took a look around the darkened room, the moon was a bit further than directly up, early morning. I clicked the light on and took a look in the mirror.

Just as I feared the sheets pressed into my face making it look like a basketball. My grey eyes stood out of a crease surrounded by dark bags. I giggled slightly immediately thinking of a racoon. I spied a glass of water on the nightstand and immediately gulped it down. I owed Yoshika for this, as much as I wanted to deny it. I managed to use the bed correctly this time, put my clothes off to the side and sunk my head into the pillow.

...For 5 minutes it seemed, then Mio was pounding on my door with a jovial air that made me want to remove her kidneys with a spoon.

“Hey Rila! Time for training!” I made a noise in response between a bear growl and a hiss. She just laughed.

“Not a morning person eh? We’ll weed that out of you eventually!” she announced gleefully and finally left when she heard my shoulder hit the floor. I rubbed my head for a minute before I made my checklist. No headache, thank Christ, I’m going to have to thank Miyafuji extra hard. My face was no longer a basketball and the rings around my eyes had faded from “racoon” to “disgruntled owl”, acceptable. So now, Fatigues or workout stuff? After much deliberation and a check through the open window I concluded it was cool enough for the fatigues. The summer uniform wasn’t quite as thick as the winter but still did its job. I grabbed the canteen and started the long walk to hell.

Mio was waiting in the entrance, all fresh smiles, I was surprised there wasn’t bubbles, rainbows, and a majestic unicorn in the background. All right be nice Rila, she’s your new booze ticket. I tried smiling but it came out more as a wide eyed grimace, she just laughed again.

“You kept us!” she swept her arms at Yoshika and Lynn who were looking quite a bit better than I did.

“I’m crushed.” I offered with enough sarcasm to melt the oak door behind her. She just laughed again, seemed she was giddy in the morning. She led us outside to a rocky shore, quite pretty with the sun rising even I had to admit.

“Okay, now for a first test we need to figure out what your stamina is like!”

I swayed my head in boredom following each word.

“So run.”

The mood switched like a skipping record. A dark shadow crossed her face along with a smile that I can only describe as predatory in the most primal sense. The smile mutated to a sneer and she honest-
to-god drew the katana and started waving it a few inches from our necks and foreheads.

“Now.” she insisted, and laughed but this one had a more maniacal unstable feel to it.

Now I knew that murdering her subordinates wasn’t going to happen, but that look was enough to send all three of us scurrying from that nutcase. She pursued and what a few minutes ago sounded like a normal laugh suddenly became a madness mantra. The gate loomed up ahead, I grabbed one of the bars and swiped my body around darting for the runway, in retrospect I should have held up for the other two but well, in life you don’t need to be faster than the lion, just the smuck next to you.

When we hit the airfield Mio-Hyde became Mio-Jekyll again with a sheath of the sword. Gradually the burning pain faded in a rush of endorphins and I settled into a pattern, occasionally punctuated by a “Faster!” or “One more!” from Mio.

“What do you see?!?” Mio barked on god knows which lap.


“What’s beyond the sea!”

“France!”

“And what’s the situation in France!?”

“Occupied!”

“Yes! We need to get it back, and to do that you need to train, train, and train some more!”

Finally the sadistic woman let us be done, I didn’t have to double over too long though which cheered me up, maybe the gut wouldn’t be as big of a problem as I thought. Push ups followed, Lynn fell after 7 sets, Yoshika after 9, I got to 15 but still 3 less than Mio demanded. She put us through a bit more hell till the sun was high in the sky and I was beginning to regret wearing the fatigues.

“Good job you three! That will do! Now we can have lunch!” and it was then that I realized with ire, only amplified at the sight of a napping Lucchini in a tree, that she pulled us out without breakfast.

The Natto was just as unpleasant smelling as the night before but went down much easier. What part of that was due to experience or the hunger I couldn’t tell.

“Christ, does Sakamoto do that often?” I asked Lynn.

“Um, just when a new recruit comes again I think.”

The creak of a chair announced Charlotte skidding to my side.

“Mio pull the sword on ya?” she asked with an amused grin,

“Yup.” I verified, she laughed.

“Damn I missed it, how scary was she this time?”
“About the same.” Yoshika offered.

“What about you Rila?”

“Didn’t quite shit my pants but it certainly didn’t leave them any fresher.”

“Aw, should’ve seen Lynn, poor girl fainted her first time.”

“Shirrleyy~” Lucchini whined pulling on her left arm.

“Oh, coming Lucchini~. Striker training should be next, best feeling in the world, have fun.” she said before attending to the whining Lucchini.

“Okay! Flight training! Lynn, you and Miyafuji begin standard maneuver training! I will introduce Rila later.”

Lynn and Yoshika leapt feet first into the two metal tubes they were wearing yesterday. A set of propellers spun to life on the end of each, and projected a circular rune around the base. What I wasn’t expecting was Yoshika growing a set of triangular dog’s ears and a short stubby tail and Lynn following suite with a pair of cat’s ears and a longer tan tail. The roar filled the hanger and the pair hovered down the runway taking to the sky.

“Um, what was with the…” I wiggled my fingers in the shape of the ears hoping she would get the message and I wasn’t just hallucinating from some headache-less hangover.

“The ears? What’s a witch without her familiar?” Sakamoto asked and shut her eyes. A pair of longer black ears emerged from her hair and a slightly longer tail than Yoshika’s.

“Don’t worry too much about summoning yours now, the striker’s magical engine will make it manifest.”

She leapt into another unit to my left and nodded to an unattended one on my right.

I leapt into mine but ended up smashing my feet against the bottom, they came up to about mid thigh and were sending an unpleasant sensation into my legs, like trying to muster the courage to reach into a hot stove.

“Now search through your mind and find your power.” Mio instructed which told me about as much as I already knew. I decided to humor her, Alright, if I were a hidden power to save humanity where would I hide?

I was scratching somewhere around my parietal lobe when I felt...something flair to life. it felt like well, power it was a bit hard to describe. An even stranger sensation was a release of pressure on my head and lower spine followed by what i could describe best as having a tail, despite the fact that the last time I had a tail would probably be 25 million years ago. I put thoughts of electrocution to the back of my mind in case it could smell fear or something spooky like that.
Whatever I found was apparently what I was looking for as the striker immediately rumbled to life. Mio was giving me a quizzical look,

“What?” I mouthed to her.

“Nothing, just have never seen a tail like that before!” she shouted over the props. I craned my neck around and noticed the ringed pattern of a raccoon tail starting from slightly above my buttocks and trailing down to about the back of my knee. I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Are you okay?” Mio shouted with a look of slight unease.

“Yeah, just reminded me of something I thought of last night!”

“Okay then, the striker responds to magical energy, feed it a bit more to approach take-off velocity!”

I put forth a little more, like when trying to convince people you’re awake when woken up in class. I gave a startled yelp as the engine revved and popped me about 5 feet in the air.

“Too much! Just give it a little gas like driving a car!”

I eased up and the striker stabilized a few inches above the concrete.

“Good! Now lean forward to pick up speed, give it a little more to keep it from scraping the runway!”

I complied and began hovering faster and faster down the runway. About halfway several things happened at once. The mildly uncomfortable anticipation were replaced by intense heat, I threw my hands up reflexively and the striker engine immediately choked sending me bouncing acrossed the runway. The striker separated and rolled away with a slither of metal against concrete. I finally slammed into the ground and braced my head with a loud groan of pain, which evolved into distressed yelps as I slapped the burning embers on my fatigue pants.

“Bong! What happened!” Mio called coasting up next to me, she winced at the welts on my legs and lent me her shoulder to get back to the hanger.

Chapter End Notes

Now finally to the strikers, being Strike Witches there will still be no pants, that's the series calling card after all, but it's time to add some element !Science! to the universe, you'll find I'm quite neurotic about making systems that make sense.

For instance, I cut out the "legs go into alternate dimensions" nonsense out entirely, to me alternate dimensions are a cheap saving throw for poor world planning. Naturally this makes the strikers much bigger and also opens the way for me to try some interesting stuff like "roles" for the strikers and extra equipment like drop tanks, rocket rails, night fighting equipment, oxygen masks for altitude ops ect. (Higher than the sky comes to mind, no life support equipment at the edge of the atmosphere, all my rage!)
Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
“Sorry, I forgot to mention why we don’t wear pants.” Mio apologized. I would have responded if I wasn’t focused on how odd magical healing felt. Yoshika was crouched before me, eyes screwed up in concentration, hands held out in front of her like she was warming them in front of a fire. Whatever she was doing was maintaining a sphere of blue energy around my charred shins, and it was a bit unnerving to watch the raw red patches get swallowed up by the surrounding skin. What weighed more was the itching, dear god the itching, I resisted tearing at my skin for the moment, at least while Yoshika was doing her thing.

She finally pulled away with a long sigh, the dog ears pulled back into her hair and the light faded leaving shins that showed no evidence at being burned at all.

“Wow, so that’s your magic, dead useful.” I observed scratching my shin.

“Thanks, for last night too.”

She gave me a weary smile but nodded.

“You can rest until dinner Miyafuji.” Mio offered.

“Thank you ma’am.” Yoshika sighed letting Lynn help her up and bring her into the base.

“She’s such a good girl.”

“That she is.” Mio laughed. “You mentioned something about last night?”

“Oh, she was the reason I didn’t wake up with a raging hangover.” I clarified explaining Yoshika’s unorthodox method to keep me from binge drinking.

“That sounds like our Miyafuji.”

“Now anyway.” she moved on. “The magic and witch interface the striker needs necessitates skin to skin or almost skin to skin contact. It allows for greater stability and acts as a heat sink of sorts as you...discovered.” I winced at the sensory memory. “Sanya and Eila have pantyhose because they often operate at night and even with a striker it gets pretty cold and the thinness doesn’t sacrifice much capability.”

I sighed, Well I guess it would eventually come to this. I reminded myself and stripped the ruined fatigue pants off. I did my best to shut down the alarm signals going off in my mind. You shouldn’t be able to feel the breeze on your upper thighs something is wrong! Fortunately Mio did not visibly react and I was thankful for two things, one that I didn’t do thongs and two that I always wore pants so I didn’t have an obvious tan line. It’s the small things in life.

“Remember your training it should be better this time.”

I leapt into mine but instead of the smashing foot pain I was anticipating the drop slowed until the rim
came up to a comfortable mid thigh length. I could liken it to standing in a pool of cool water, I never touched the sides of the striker in any direction but it still offered no space for wiggling or sliding.

“You’re right this is much better.” I observed and reached through my mind for my magic. Again the strange sensation of having ears and a tail. I fed the power more slowly this time letting it go into a more controlled hover instead of a jolt like last time.

I was about halfway down the runway before I was airborne, much earlier than I was used to. It was going to be hard to kick the habits I’d formed as a recon pilot, a notion further supported when I wobbled dangerously from a muscle memory twitch. The runway shrunk with altitude until finally a few fluffy clouds were close enough to touch.

I knew what Charlotte was talking about now, there was something primally invigorating about flight. Except for the sensation of my stomaching dropping like a stone as whatever brain region was responsible for orientation shrieked at me. We are not supposed to be feeling wind this hard, what’s happening? ARE WE FALLING?! I shut it down as best I could and focused on flying.

“Good Bong!” Mio came through the earpiece. She pulled up to wingman height and held steady, an easy grace I couldn’t help but be jealous of.

“Now everything will feel different due to a striker not being a fixed wing aircraft, you’ve probably learned these before but they’ll be much different in execution. Now first is the Immelman, watch closely.”

***

“That’ll do Bong, return to base.” Mio concluded. Not a bad day, a few disorientation dives but nothing too serious.

“Aw, already? I was just having fun.”

“Aren’t you tired? We’ve been out for five hours.” Mio asked curiously. I felt around, aside from the general agitation of not being able to move my legs at the knee nothing stood out.

“Nah. Not really.”

“You youngsters.” Mio laughed and led the approach to the runway.

Okay, you can do this Rila I assured myself as I approached the dining room. None of these people ever wear pants, you’ll fit right in. I had managed to reduce the blinding panic down to a dull fluttering but there was still that edge that made me feel like my heart was going to jump out of my chest. The door sounded much louder than usual when it swung open, aw crap they can see me. Luckily everyone was focused on either their food or each other. My far too exposed butt finally hit the seat with relief and a sense of minor triumph,

“Hm black, fancy.” Hartmann noted from my left with an impish smile. Goddammit Hartmann. my face lit up like a christmas tree and I focused on my food as hard as I could. Some girls can make a blush cute, little red under the eyes, makes em look younger, not me. Mine gets all blotchy, eyes get watery makes me look like I have a head cold. At least Hartmann seemed to be in a good mood,
though that was likely due to the red lollipop she was idly twisting. I let her have the comment, having all three German aces after my blood was not in my best wishes.

The press of something warm and soft pulled my thoughts back to the misty bath. It wasn’t hard to identify even before the teasing voice.

“So I heard you went five hours your first time.” Shirley insinuated so forcefully you could see the cheshire cat grin through the back of your skull.

“Sounds hard~” Lucchini added.

“Five? I couldn’t even go three!” Miyafuji chimed in with enthusiasm that threatened to make me crack up.

“Well ladies, it’s just a matter of stamina.” I thought I heard a snicker from Shirley.

“Well you did have Mio along for the ride after all…”

“Oh she was a great, taught me all kinds of maneuvers.”

“I’m glad to see you were able to take it.”

“Oh I did fine, but Mio seemed a bit more tired than usual afterwards.” Shirley finally laughed and that set me off.

“Well played popsicle.” she wheezed after our bellies were nice and painful.

“Filthy Yeager, absolutely filthy.”

She made her way back to the showers chortling softly to herself. Miyafuji just looked at me curiously.

“I think I missed something.” she suspected threatening to send me over again.

“You’ll understand when you’re older.”

I watched the gears in her head work for a bit before it snapped into place with a gasp.

“Rila, that was lewd!” she exclaimed and the laughter bubbled up again.

“Yup.” I confirmed wiping the tears from my eyes noticing a Pierrine shooting me dirty looks, probably from the noise, but since her emotional scale seemed to run from “disgruntled” to “spiteful” I was beginning to learn to ignore it. Miyafuji was oddly quiet.

“So your first time?” the question caught me much more off guard than it should have, after all she seemed so innocent.

“Yeah, let’s not mention that ever again.” I deflected, my face getting hot again. Got a little better when I realized nothing too damaging got out, I only wanted to sink into the floor forever.

“Sorry.”
“I hope you were at least safe.” a less familiar voice chimed in from behind. Eila watched with an amused smirk on her face.

“Christ how did you do that?” I asked.

“Practice.”

“Oh, and yes.” I answered. She found that endlessly amusing, she apparently was a shaker and it was a bit disconcerting seeing all the signs of laughter but hearing no sounds coming out.

“You’re pretty strange.” I observed.

“Comes and goes.” she insinuated with a final laugh, or spasm.

No matter how exhilarating flight was, there was one thing I hid, I was damn tired too. I didn’t think it was possible but the bed was even more inviting now than it had been last night, well I thought at least, was still a bit foggy about that. The strip down routine went as usual until my hands caught on a pair of phantom pants which were probably enjoying their new life in the refuse. I sighed and pulled down the underwear instead. This bare thighs thing is going to be harder than I thought. I put the PPK on the nightstand, clip out just in case Mio decided to drag me out of bed next time. Accidentally shooting your commanding officer was also not conducive to my health. The Ka-Bar knife went in it’s sheath on the bedpost and I finally melted into the mattress. As sleep dragged my mind down I realized that for once I didn’t feel like I needed a drink.

I forced away an edge of panic as I opened my eyes to sunlight streaming through my window, if Mio wanted me out of bed I’d be out of bed, probably twenty feet below my window with the bed on top of me. I snuggled back down and savored the cushy heat before another outburst reached my ear, no doubt what woke me in the first place.

“Hartmann! Wake up Hartmann!” a voice boomed through the wall next to my headboard, I groaned in annoyance a sound echoed by a voice I assumed was Hartmann.

“No! This is not befitting of a proud German soldier!” she repeated after another unintelligible mumble. I finally summoned up the will to get up and approach their door. I couldn’t quite get around to knocking probably like when you always slow down for a crash on the freeway, you can’t turn away.

“Fine! Be a marshmallow, just stay on your side of the Siegfried line!” she concluded after a few more arguments and I heard footsteps quickly approaching the door. I bent back into the hall as the door opened revealing an immaculate Barkhorn, hair perfect, clothes wrinkle-free all that lark stuff versus my early morning cracked eyes and messy hair. She took a quick look at me before groaning softly in exasperation and I may have a caught a “her too!” before she threw up her hands and marched off.

“Good morning to you too fearless leader.” I grumbled before catching Hartmann’s attention with a quizzical shrug. When Barkhorn mentioned “Siegfried Line” she wasn’t kidding, one side of the room was almost bare with a bed a small closet and nary a nightstand. A split in the middle of the floor gave way to Hartmann’s side where I was pretty sure she stacked every one of her possessions together randomly like the aftermath of one of those stories you hear of the kid putting all his stuff in a closet claiming he cleaned his room. On a barely visible mattress a reclining Hartmann shrugged
back, and for a second I thought we were having a moment before I also realized she was bottomless. I quickly shut the door as my blood scalded my face.

Chapter End Notes

Now for some actual striker flying, most of the moves and tactics are going to be reminiscent of WWII fighter maneuvers, altered slightly due to the decreased size and increased maneuverability of course. I'm also going to really tone down most of the witches power, they were kind of ridiculous and as much as I love Trude no amount of handwaving can justify being able to carry two MK 108 autocannons, much less use them effectively. Most witches will carry 7.76mm and it's neighbors. Some heavier witches with strength powers or good physique can carry 12.5’s. Some specialized heavy attack witches will carry 20mm autocannons, and only the extremely talented and specialized "tankbuster" and "giant killer" witches like Hannah Rudel will be able to handle 30-37mm cannons and even then it's going to be extremely hard.

Naturally Tank Witches have measures in place to bring bigger hardware but that's for another time...

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
After only trying to put pants on twice by accident I finally made my way to the dining room. Mio wasn’t going to deny me breakfast today I resolved. I waited outside the door less than yesterday, I never thought I’d actually get used to not wearing pants, much less this quickly. I entered preparing for the horrible stench of Nato but was instead greeted by the tantalizing scent of meat. The goddess on earth this time was Eila humming softly to herself making a plate of open sandwiches.

She gave a small wave of greeting as I zeroed in.

“Made them as a treat for Sanya last night, might as well make use of the leftovers,” she smiled at my rabid stare and finally addressed it and for a moment I saw the mischief in her eyes and the consideration of denying me, now where could I hide a body?

“Yes you can have one.”

I resisted the urge to kiss her with difficulty instead opting for frenzied thanks and a retreat to the table to acquaint myself with my prize. There’s a huge difference from eating for pleasure and eating for sustenance and the first heavenly bite of roast beef, tomato, and cheddar spread couldn’t make it more clear. It shouldn’t have been good going off of the individual ingredients but there was something about a good sandwich that brokered a great and lasting peace that could easily be mistaken for Eden. I rolled it every which way trying to get a taste from every angle. I couldn’t suppress a shiver of pleasure and I came out of it to a quizzical look from Eila and my immediate neighbors.

“You okay?” Eila asked. I nodded enthusiastically and fit another bite of sandwich when able.

“Okay.. I’ve never seen anyone that...enthusiastic about breakfast.” she chuckled.

“I love meat.” I said with a blissful smile.

After the first sandwich bid its tearful farewell I began on a second.

“You get the paper here?” I asked Lucchini, she wrinkled her nose in distaste and motioned towards a currently reading Wilcke before taking another bite of her sandwich. She slid it over after a few minutes and left with a stretch and a groan.

_The Daily Herald_ the title announced, most of it trumpeted the various victories in the theatre and other local news I didn’t care about, “New German industrial capacity grows by 70%, leadership quietly optimistic.”, “New run of M4A3E2 “Jumbo” Shermans approved by U.S. Army.” “1 Dead and 7 Missing in Dunwich Massachusetts.”

One story in particular caught my eye.

“Japanese society to move to aircraft carriers.” I read with a mixture of confusion and amusement. Shirley raised an eyebrow and bent over the paper with me.

“Due to the ground covered by Neuroi forces over the great war Japan’s technicians have unveiled
their plans for a series of “super carriers” designed to carry entire subsections of native populations on a permanent to semi-permanent basis. Specific details are unavailable but experts compare it to a self sustaining city with military training centers primarily designated for armored warfare.” I couldn’t read anymore and started laughing at the mental image of a garden on an aircraft carrier.

“Bye Honey, I’m going to take the Sherman to work!” Shirley snickered. “Well they got one thing right, Neuroi eat land, live on water!”

“They should make it fly next.”

“And make an aircraft carrier for aircraft carriers!”

“A headquarters, it’d be perfect! What would they tell the bombers!”

“They should make a team, a multinational team with attitude!”

“Give em a talking dog and have them solve crimes!” I cackled.

“Hey Mio! Your country’s weird!” Shirley announced as a bemused Sakamoto entered with a tired Lynn and Yoshika in tow. She snapped up the paper and began reading expression shifting between incredulous and baffled.

“Shit they’re actually doing it?” she slammed the paper back down on the table.

“I’ve told them FOUR times that the material and R&D would be MUCH better suited for the war effort!” she growled before into exaggerated nonsensical angry sounds.

“I’m okay now.” she piped up after her outburst. “It just needs we’ll have to be that much better!” the gleam in her eye was back with a vengeance and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“Bong!” Aw hell nah. I tried making an exaggerated motion of eating before I could answer.

“Yesh?”

“Hurry up, we’re doing more training!” it took all of my willpower to not roll my eyes. I made a point to order seconds but to no avail as she came back halfway through the meal and dragged me forcibly away from my plate, my protesting all the way.

The range was about 500 meters with targets about a meter acrossed encapsulated in layers of cinderblocks to stop wayward shots. Mio led me to a rough wooden counter with three fairly large guns lined up on rough fabric.

“Today you’re going to meet your new best friend! It will be your rifle, your gun, there are many like it, but this one is yours! It will be your best friend, it will be your life! Without you it is useless and without it, you are useless! You will need to fire straight and true, straighter than the enemy trying to kill you!” I fought the urge to applause sarcastically but Mio beat me to it.

“I’ve always wanted to give that speech.”

“Dramatic, you should get an Oscar.”
“Can’t claim credit for it, an old drill sergeant I knew would do it all the time.”

“Still around?”

Mio’s face darkened.

“No, died in the first Neuroi war.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be, he was married to the military and I’m sure that’s how he wanted to go.” Mio gave a wistful smile.

“Anyway! I assembled a nice sampling of the weapons most of the 501st use, we’ll try each of them and see which one fits you best. Now, I know you were a recon pilot Bong, have you ever fired a gun?”

I thought back to the long days of hunting with my brother in the mountains, and the time he snuck me to his base’s shooting range and promised to bring me again if I kept it “Our little secret.”

“Well, I did hunt back home with a Springfield my brother got for me, he’s in the pacific, so I think I know a bit.” I offered but was cut off by an almost missed dismissive snort.

“Pathetic.” Barkhorn didn’t look back but I had a sneaking suspicion it was a response.

“Huh?” I replied trying to avoid making it sound accusatory.

“Nothing.”

Barkhorn continued preparing one of the two guns sitting in front of her. Thin and gunmetal grey they were about as wide in the barrel as the entire firing mechanism, their triplet sat in front of me away from its brothers.

“Oh, what branch of service?” Mio asked.

“USN, actually he’s the reason why I joined the Northern Flying Corps in the first place.”

Trude took out an unholy hybrid of two drum magazines and slapped it into the top of the gun with a snap.

“He taught me everything he knew about hunting, shooting, flying I wouldn’t be surprised if he was an instructor by no-.” I was interrupted by a sound I can best describe as someone tearing their pants into a speaker. Aside from the general absurdity of the statement, the sound resolved itself into the machine gun fire Barkhorn was laying down, every individual shot blended into the next at a speed my ear couldn’t keep up with.

The poor targets never stood a chance, the gun rattled against Barkhorn’s shoulder, wrists hardly moving and when the clip ended with a cracking echo she switched hands and let loose with another. By the end of the barrage they were more hole than substance the second falling forward sadly like me after six beers.

“Holy shit.” I offered when nothing else came to mind.
“That’s our Trude.” Mio laughed, I barely saw Barkhorn’s jaw tighten. She began to replace the barrels.

Mio snapped her fingers by my temple drawing my attention back to the table. She indicated the rifle furthest to the left, looked like any other military rifle, pure metal with a fairly thin barrel.

“This is a Browning Automatic Rifle, it’s what Shirley uses 40 round magazine decent rate of fire.” I picked it up and played it about in my hands a bit, I was pleasantly surprised how light it was. I found the safety and set the bipod before Mio placed a hand on the mechanism.

“No, from the shoulder, what are you going to brace it on at 3000 meters, clouds?” Barkhorn gave a dry cough. I closed my eyes and slowly pulled the trigger. The BAR thudded against my shoulder with a sharp crack but luckily it was much slower than the storm from Barkhorn’s weapon. I switched to full auto and was pleasantly surprised how easy it was to control.

Mio handed me the triplet of Barkhorn’s guns, this one was much heavier, but with that much metal it was hardly surprising.

“This one’s an MG42, heavier, used by our German witches and well, you’ve seen what its like.” I braced it and closed my eyes hoping that it wouldn’t knock me on my ass and kill someone. The gun kicked quite a bit, but the actual burst didn’t bite into my shoulder quite as much as I was expecting. The accuracy was another story the brick walls were littered with spent rounds, the actual target was much more bullet free than I would’ve liked. Barkhorn gave a sigh halfway between resignation and exasperation and immediately started marching back to the castle.

“No.” she asserted and the room slowly came back into focus, her heart pounded and she attacked the cleaning with renewed vigor.

I’ll kill them, all of them.

The door slammed open and an irate Mio entered.

“Was that really necessary Trude?” she asked and while she never went into a rage the Japanese witch could make her displeasure just as bad.

“She can’t even shoot Mio!” Barkhorn justified.

“Nobody can shoot when they first join! I couldn’t, you couldn’t, Marseille couldn’t, Takei couldn’t!”
“This is a Joint. Fighter. Wing! This unit is made to hunt down and destroy Neuroi by disciplined and skilled soldiers! This isn’t basic training!”

“We’re stretched too thin, where are going to get new blood Barkhorn!”

“We need witches, not cannon fodder!”

“In order to get new witches we have to train them!”

“We don’t have to do shit! Training isn’t. our. job!”

“We’ve done this for years, and it seems to have worked well so far!”

“Oh ja.” Barkhorn snorted, “bringing in Miyafuji was a great idea.”

“Oh please, even you can’t be dense enough to not notice her potenti-”

“MIYAFUJI’S NAIVE!” Barkhorn roared. “A soldier’s weapon is meaningless if they can’t pull the trigger!”

“Yes, we have to train her to not be!”

“We don’t have time for that! Germany has fallen, France has fallen, Britain is being attacked daily, America is getting attacked! Your country is preparing to evacuate for god’s sake! WE DON’T HAVE TIME!”

“We don’t have a choice Barkhorn, the witches are at the limit!”

“I don’t want another Chris!” Barkhorn was glad they were in a yelling match so her grimace wouldn’t be noticed, feelings regarding her sister were always a bit difficult to deal with.

“So that’s what’s bothering you, when are you going to forgive yourself, IT WASN’T YOUR FAULT!”

“I could have done something! If we had more witches it wouldn’t have happened! I will fix this once I become a squad leader.” hot tears started burning her eyes. Mio offered a shoulder but she jerked away.

“Well, I guess it’s good for Bong and Miyafuji I am squad leader.” Mio tried to diffuse. Barkhorn offered no response.

The beautiful scent of meat met my nose again along with baked potatoes.

“Oh Christ Shirley, you’re going to kill me.” I moaned weakly as she filled my plate with delicious beer belly builders.

“Don’t see you complaining.” she smirked.

“You seem to think I have willpower.” She laughed,

“Fine I’ll cut you off at seconds.”

“For the best I guess.” I sighed in defeat.
The closest seat found me next to Hartmann, she almost matched my ravenous pace, the food was more to her liking I guess.

“Hm, no Barkhorn?” I noted after the food stopped taking my undivided attention.

Hartmann gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Did she blow up on anybody today?”

“Well, maybe?”

“Got annoyed, huffed off, that sort of thing?”

“Oh, guess so.”

“Ah.” she replied sagely through another mouth full of baked potato.

“Trude does that sometimes. No Mio either, that must be it. She’s a perfectionist, and when she has to train with the meat she finds it...how do you Americans say, “cringy”?”

“Cringe-worthy?” My mind went back to that exaggerated groan of disgust and the embarrassment combined with some hot anger to make a cesspit of shame in my stomach. “Maybe.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Hartmann added, “She always does this, forgets some people take some time. Not everyone is a super ace like us, and others just can’t do it at all. But.” she took another bite of roast beef.

“Best get good quickly, you make her uncomfortable.” she concluded with a giggle at the mixture of embarrassment and trepidation on my face.

A hot bath did help loosen that tension but a single smudge made like glue and stuck with me. Darkness slowly fell over the castle and times were getting desperate. My eyes found the party fridge and I gave in.

“Well, one can’t hurt.”

Chapter End Notes

Famous last words, and now for the shoutout portion of the evening! Some may have noticed the Girls und Panzer tie in, (fantastic anime for a WWII nut like me btw.) it’s not going to be a crossover per say as GuP takes place much later, but they do exist in the same universe. (It tied into the marvel reference nicely I think.)
I wrestled with this chapter for quite a while, I might have been a little rough on Trude and Mio's reaction but I decided that the stresses a solider faces in combat could probably account for some frayed nerves and harsh words.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
“Bong! Wake up!” Mio’s voice cracked like a whip and I crawled through the haze back to the surface. I saluted wearily. Beside me Lucchini gave a great yawn and shifted her legs on the desk slightly. Ten pairs of eyes swiveled around to stare at me curiously but I was too far gone to care.

“M here major.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Mio sighed.

“Again, you are assigned to flight training.”

“Alright, when we going?”

“Oh no, I have some requisition forms to process, you’ll be flying with Barkhorn.”

My mind immediately snapped out of it as if Mio had just told me there was a bomb under my chair. Barkhorn made no motion to turn around but the room grew 5 degrees colder.

“Uh Uh, do you think that’s a good idea?” I stammered desperately. Mio gave me a questioning look.

“I mean, Barkhorn’s probably busy, Shirley would probably be just fine too right?”

Silence would normally indicate something is wrong but the utter lack of murmurs or even the brushing of clothes or creaking as they changed position elevated it to imminent death levels. The eyes observed me, some quizzical, others shocked. I picked out Barkhorn’s steely gaze she snorted dismissively.

“I should have guessed you Americans would want to feed off of each other’s inadequacy.”

“Together, unlike you, pretty lonely at the top when you have to leave everything behind to get there.” Shirley countered coldly.

That hit a nerve, Barkhorn’s face flushed red as she sputtered angrily. I expected Shirley to be smug or smile but the look on her face was just as frigid as the one Barkhorn gave to her. Instead of
retorting Barkhorn gave an unpleasant smile,

“Well I suppose you would be busy too, why not pair her with Sanya, as neither of them seem to do anything but sleep.” Shirley’s expression shifted to confusion mixed with outrage but it was Eila’s voice that rose above the others in a hoarse demand.

“DON’T TALK ABOUT SANYA LIKE THAT!” she had one foot on the back of a chair and the other on her seat, her normally pale face red with rage, teeth bared, and eyes filled with righteous fury. All eyes roved over to her, even Lucchini and Sanya were awake, faces filled with bewilderment and surprise respectively.

“THE ONLY REASON YOUUU!” she jabbed a finger at Barkhorn. “CAN SLEEP SOUNDLY AT NIGHT IS BECAUSE SANYA’S TIRELESSLY PATROLLING! WHY DON’T YOU TRY IT THEN, OOOOHH THAT’S RIGHT YOU CAN’T OPERATE IN THE DARK!”

“YOU-” Barkhorn managed to get out before the room exploded and I tried very hard to stop existing.

Barkhorn and Eila were trying their best to break each others ears. Shirley was trying to call attention, probably to defuse the situation. Hartmann was trying to defend Barkhorn, Miyafuji and Lynnette were wailing trying their best to get everything under control, and Lucchini had her hands clamped over her ears, a notion I found the most agreeable. Mio’s voice finally roared out of the din,

“AUCTUNG!”

The effect was immediate, the German witches immediately snapped to attention and the rest glanced up.

“I ORDERED YOU ON FLIGHT TRAINING WITH BARKHORN AND THAT’S WHAT YOU WILL DO BONG!”

“Yes ma’am.” I managed to squeak.

“OFF TO YOUR STATIONS, MARCH!” Mio roared in lieu to her normal “Dismissed!”

I followed Barkhorn through the halls as I would follow a grizzly bear, trying my very best to avoid any attention.

“Quit dragging.” Barkhorn snapped. “I don’t like this any more than you do, the sooner we get there the sooner we can be done.”

She leapt into her striker two floppy dog’s ears and a short tail manifesting before she roared out of the hanger, a well-practiced maneuver that took no more than eleven seconds. I gave a resigned sigh and struggled into mine before following suite.
Mio went into a rant in her native language, it always seemed too fast to unattuned ears Minna thought, all barks, yips, and clicks like some kind of morse code, or a made up language children would make. She took a few steps into her childhood, to her days of Kindergarten in Posnania when she and Kurt would search for the brightest bugs, using a silly language to keep them from suspecting. She shut down the memory quickly before it could threaten the fragile peace she painstakingly crafted within herself. Mio finally burnt out and flopped down onto the chair. Minna followed suite and when found it to her liking, stayed there until Mio spoke again.

“I need a drink.” she concluded wearily. “Dammit Bong you might not start the fires but you know how to fan them.”

“Everything she does seems to turn out that way.”

“No.” Mio shook her head. “Remember that expression? She panicked, or she’s the most convincing social sabeuter I’ve ever seen. Fault on both sides.”

“If you say so.”

“We can baby them all we want, give them all the comforts we can, but sometimes the seams will rip.”

“So what do we do about it?”

“Well I, am going to have a bath and then drink. You’re free to join if you wish.”

“Nein, I just want this stuff done.” Minna indicated the stack on her desk.

“Suit yourself.” Mio shrugged and closed the door quietly for once.

“Keep up!” Barkhorn barked from somewhere up front, I fed more power into the striker to match her speed. A couple minutes later my strength started to ebb like emptying water from a bathtub and about 40 minutes later I was lying on the tarmac not quite gasping but clearly unable to move.

“What the hell’s wrong with you? I thought Sakamoto said you could go 5 hours.”

“Not at that speed.”

“That was 370KM, nothing. A good one can go 500.”

“Well bully for you then.” I snarked. Barkhorn sighed in frustration.

“Did they actively search for someone as weak as you? I don’t understand.” she mused but not through anger but genuine curiosity. I didn’t bother to grace it with a response. Luckily my self-loathing was interrupted by Charlotte announcing dinner. Barkhorn left being sure to shoulder shove her on the way out.

“You okay Bong?” she crouched over me just enough for a lovely crotch sho- focus Rila.

“I’m alive I guess.” I sighed wearily, a gesture returned in kind.

“Yes, Trude gets like that. You have to understand, she’s a perfectionist and anything that interferes with that tends to frustrate her.”
“A bit bloody counterproductive having her train me then isn’t it?”

“I think it’s some inane plan of Mios to fix any problems with “quality time”.” she mimed with an eye roll. “A lot of words can be used to describe her with blunt being the kindest, her thinking does get...manned at times.” she clarified with an expression of cringed doubt, something I really wasn’t used to seeing on her usually jolly face.

“But still 370KM, I’m more understanding than Trude but that’s just not going to be enough.” she shrugged helplessly.

A visit to my good friend Mr. Bottle was in order, following a mercifully uneventful shower I stalked the halls of castle Barin searching for my prey. My heart soared at the ajar door to the dining room and I threw it open with zeal only to find my spot taken.

“Mio?”

She slung her head back clumsily with a loud snort.

“Eeeey! Boing! Glad you liked guns n’ stuff, usually they say dem men don’t want us to gun but screw em I can gun if I want, I can also fly, can they fly!?” she demanded face ruddy. Whatever she wanted she apparently saw in my face,

“No! They can’ fly so they can gun, so I can too.” she concluded with a long slur and a snorting giggle.

“Yeah, do you...need anything?” I offered and immediately wondered why the hell I asked someone so drunk off their ass.

“Yur so shweet Brong!”

She threw arms around me like a vice.

“Yurk, yeah, Mio, please stop trying to kill me.” I grunted. Her face blanked in confusion followed by a grin I could only describe as mischievous, or in drunk “someone’s going to the hospitable.”

“Hm, how about THIS THEN!” she darted for my mouth.

Drunk people typically don’t factor gravity into their exploits and Mio was no different. She lunged for me with a thundering “HEE-HAW!” and sent me crashing to the floor smashing my spine and landing on me drawing a heavy “Unngf!”

My moan of pain was cut off by her lips and the world went up in fireworks. She wrapped her arms around my neck and started nibbling my lower lip softly, she forced my mouth open with her tongue but couldn’t seem to think of what to do next. She tasted of alcohol and rice and for the moment that sounded heavenly, well, it would be if not for a small voice,

“Am...am I intruding?”
My blood turned to ice and I ripped my eyes over to the door revealing a baffled Sanya. I braced myself for a thunderous greeting from my drunken assailant but instead had the deafening silence broken with a trailing snore. The pressure on my chest resolved itself into Mio’s sleeping head, my brain went into overdrive and deciding random flailing of the limbs was clearly the best course of action. When that predictably failed to dislodge my commander/drinking buddy/tonsil hockey opponent I tried another approach.

“Mio?” I sputtered trying to wake her as blood seared to my face.

“Nerk Nurk.” she snored helpfully. Poking in her in the temple finally got her to raise her head groggily.

“You taste good Bon!” she crooned with a dopey smile I couldn’t help but return.

“You too, still though, at least get off me before you french me again.”

She screwed up her eyes in concentration and I could practically hear the slide whistle of her sobering up.

“Nah, you’re American, Perrine’s French!” she distinguished looking far too proud of herself. She gave me another thoughtful look.

“You’d make an awful French, too nice.” she took a deep sniff. “Smell too good too.” My nervous smile was interrupted by a squeak of horror and the only person that could possibly make the situation worse appeared next to Sanya.

Chapter End Notes

Annnd the conflict ball is in plaayy! I had to put in drunk!Mio, she's just too rich to ignore. Not quite as feisty though, maybe next time. The characters are starting to branch out a bit, add a little genre-saviness, put in some base traits and cook well.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
Perrine’s face was an interesting mixture of anguish and fury that contrasted strangely against the thin babydoll she was wearing. I considered for a second applauding and suggesting she be in theater but my voice was quickly overshadowed.

“What are you doing to the Major!” she shrieked into a range I was sure most dogs would cower from. Mio winced and finally found her in the door.

“Eeyy~Perrine! She would make a bad French right?” she searched for verification. Perrine sputtered like a steam engine starting and stopping sentences several times.

“Yo~ you mutt! You peasant! Do you have no shame!” she exclaimed shrilly.

“Hheeyy!~Bing is a person, not a dog!” Mio roared, Perrine managed a small squeak of horror as she rose from on top of me, but paused as Mio seemed to lose herself in thought. “Cause dogs have paws, Bang has no paws, see?” she raised my hand, helpfully demonstrating that I indeed had no paws.

Perrine’s expression shifted to mesmorized confusion,

“She’s drunk off her ass.” I replied helpfully and immediately gave myself a mental smack to the face as she refocused on me, I could practically hear the steam whistle on the pain train.

“You INTOXICATED the Major?! I am going to kill you!”

“I don’t control the bleedin’ booze! She was drunk and I happened to be there if you were earlier it might have been you!”

Her mouth gaped open and I could see the beginning of tears as she processed the possibility.

“The hell are you three screaming about?” demanded a disgruntled Shirley, hair somehow messier and eyes squeezed shut against the light, evidently roused from her bed due to the bubblegum pink bra and panties. A bit frilly but it seemed to work on her made her curves seem softer...focus Rila. I kept expecting her to suddenly react to the fact but she just monitored the mortified Perrine with a general irritation.

“Really now, people are trying to sleep...” another voice groaned and a weary Minna appeared. She’d forgone the usual uniform for a simple white dress shirt, while it didn’t make her stand out next to Shirley’s...assets it did show off her thighs nicely, I’d never really noticed how nice and toned...dammit Mio now i’m all inflamed.

The star of the show was snoring into my chest again, I repeated the temple poking until she snorted in confusion following my finger as I pointed to Minna. She broke into a smile and lurched for her knocking her forehead into Minna’s as she hugged her.
“Mii~nna.” she slurred happily.

“Yeah yeah.” Minna replied softly running her hand over the top of her head. “Let’s go to bed now.” she offered sweetly it reminded me of baby talk.

“Mmm.” Mio almost fell asleep again.

“B-BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PERPETRATOR!” Perrine managed to finally yell getting a groan from Mio and a wince of pain from Shirley.

“Just a bystander.” I raising my hands in front of me, Minna sighed again.

“She does this sometimes, nothing to worry about.” she explained and half-walked and half-dragged Mio to the stairs.

“BUT IT’S HER FAULT!”

“I think I have a better understanding of this situation than you Flying Officer Clostermann. It is time to retire, dismissed.” Minna ordered sternly. Perrine let out a shrill growl and stalked off finishing with the heavy slam of a door.

Shirley sighed and rolled her eyes before striding over and pulling me to my feet,

“I’m going back to bed.” she mumbled with a lazy wave over the shoulder.

“Sure.” I answered letting my gaze rest on her rump just a little bit longer.

Sure the bed was comfortable but my brain decided to stare at the ceiling and try to figure out what the hell was going on. Minna may have followed suit with drunk Mio’s shenanigans but the rest seemed almost surprised. Was it the argument? Mio didn’t seem to be one to take to drink that easily. Well, I guess that’s why she was so understanding that night I wanted one. Still, even drunk and with Sanya interrupting that was dangerously close to being my best kiss. Where did she learn to kiss like that? Most military units are segregated. I guess it could’ve been earlier, she was three years older than me after all.

A muffled “Hee haw!” issued from above me followed by a quick yelp from Minna. It was a nice enough place I suppose, aside from Perrine I didn’t really feel too scrutinized. My mind drifted off to sleep and I remembered I still didn’t get that drink.

“A muffled “Hee haw!” issued from above me followed by a quick yelp from Minna. It was a nice enough place I suppose, aside from Perrine I didn’t really feel too scrutinized. My mind drifted off to sleep and I remembered I still didn’t get that drink.

“Bong! Bong!” Miyafuji called up to me.

“Hm, wuz it?”

“Mio sent me. She said if you didn’t get up she’d come and get you up!”

I weighed the option, another kiss from Mio was tempting, but more likely she’d drop me on my head instead.

“A muffled “Hee haw!” issued from above me followed by a quick yelp from Minna. It was a nice enough place I suppose, aside from Perrine I didn’t really feel too scrutinized. My mind drifted off to sleep and I remembered I still didn’t get that drink.

“Fine, fine.” I grumbled and leaned forward into a front flip landing on my feet. The closet opened at my touch revealing my uniform jacket. it was a bit more snug than I would’ve liked, but at least the
shiny bits of metal tended to draw the eye.

Castle Barin was sleepy as ever in the morning, the beautiful aroma of cooked beef wafted through the halls, I followed my nose to the dining room with a chipper, “Morning!”

“Morning Bong!” Mio responded with equal zeal cooking beef in a frilly white apron. Only a frilly white apron, I traced the muscles of her back with my eyes before I was presented with meat and promptly forgot.

“Night flight go well Griz?” I asked the chestnut grizzly bear seated next to me.

“Quite well Wing Commander, thank you.” he growled after lapping up the rest of his tea. He reached for another glazed doughnut and I appreciated how snugly it fit around his pointer...claw. We ate in content silence for a few minutes.

“Say, why do you call yourself Griz? Wouldn’t something more creative be better?”

The tabby cat acrrossesthe table cut in before the bemused bear,

“Says the lady named after a tobacco smoking device.”

“Damnit Mr. Snuggles I had no choice! Lord that didn’t get old in school.”

“Merely suggesting you aren’t in a position to throw stones.” he purred. *Bloody cats.*

A flash of brown passed by my head and a clattering announced the flying squirrel landing on the table.

“Message for you ma’am.” he squeaked holding out a letter. As soon as I started reading a deafening buzzing started, the return of the bees to their hive in the corner.

“Listen. These bees are interrupting my train of thought, so you need to go to the quartermaster and tell him to stop it, just, stop it. We have enough bees for at least three months. This is total overkill. And why the hell do you call yourself “Griz?”” I asked my wingmate, “That’d be like me calling myself “Wing Commander Hooman.””

“People seem to ask that a lot.” Griz answered thoughtfully. “I find a good mauling tends to bring perspective.” he continued with equal wisdom. I decided to respect with silence that had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that his claws could be represented with machetes taped to a frying pan.

“Well you’ll find the new bees are actually bumble bees.” the flying squirrel reported breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Oh, well they’re fuzzy and buzzy so that’s okay.” I concluded as one specimen landed on the table grabbing a sugar cube to bring back to the hive. “Thank you for your hospitality wing co- wake up you mutt.” it buzzed angrily past my ear.

“Well if you’re going to be an ass don’t expect special treatment. And I take back what I said about your adorable fuzziness.”
Following my crushing defeat of the grumpy bee that acts like a wasp I finally dumped my plates into the massive honey pot in the corner, courtesy of other less assholish bees on the base.

“I’ll be in my office.” I muttered to Mio with a quick peck on the cheek.

“Arnish is up for flight training today, don’t be late.

The day was beautiful, a rust-red sky with blue clouds. I approached my usual tree and began climbing, a small tree-house of yellowed planks peeked through the leaves, a trophy of the great cedar war of 1812 where brave Canadian lumberjacks protected us all from the horrors of allergies.

No sooner had I sat down a filter of green announced the arrival of the balloon-animal train, each car carrying more bullets for the cause.

“No no no! I already told you don’t carry bullets in the balloons, it makes them nervous!” some slight quivering from a set of 37’s drove home my point. The balloon-locomotive gave a long whistle of frustration,

“Wakey wakey mutt!”

“Oh you too huh!?” I snarled and introduced it to the woodpecker on my desk. It gave a concussion “pop!” and the bullets fell out of sight, tiny wails carrying on the wind.

“Sorry!” I wailed after them, but instead of peeping out of the window I flew backwards. Expecting the crash of wood I braced myself but instead continued rocketing up until the castle was a pinprick.

“No, this isn’t right, I’m not in my striker unit yet!” I explained to the grinning green sun.

“WAKE UP YOU RACOON-DOG!”

I lurched my feet up in time for my stomach to smash into the hardwood floor. My knees exploded into pain and I gave a groggy groan. A weight smashed into my spine in the form of two feet, all the air in my lungs burst out and I finally heard her over my wheezing.

“No Yeager to save you now mutt, it’s time for me to avenge the Major’s honor.” she snarled.
I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
Thursday morning found me naked, face down on the floor with a French nutcase standing on my back squashing my stomach into the floor, all in all not the worst morning I’ve had. Better footing wins fights. I recalled with grim anticipation. Perrine wound up her dainty foot to kick me in the head, I took a breath and thrashed like the coil of a whip. She let out a startled shriek and landed with a thud. I rolled and pounced before she could recover, arms pressed into her shoulders and my nose about 7 inches from hers.

“Good morning to you too tart.” I snarled. She grimaced, glasses askew and tried to kick me in the kneecap with a soft swish. I grabbed for her hands, she squirmed trying to get her legs out from between mine, I finally managed to control her wrists, she growled and let me pull them together before her ears appeared with a soft “pop”. A soft glow started she forced her hands close to my chest as if to push. I felt something in me struggling to get out, I let it and felt my ears come in with a similar pop.

I was suddenly flying through the air, the room passed in a blur and the sound of splintering wood as I hit the wardrobe. I landed on my already abused knees for the second time in far too short of a time, my right arm and fingers twitching involuntarily. Perrine was staring at me across the room hair slightly frizzy and face blotchy, at least it looked like that through the gun metal grey disc that had somehow appeared between me and her. It was about 3 feet in diameter and had an outer circumference inscribed with some symbols I couldn’t recognize.

Perrine clambered to her feet smug smirk back in place.

“It seems you are lucky, but skill has to win only once.” she held out her right hand with a soft snapping of static. I feigned disorientation staggering to my feet loosely, Perrine’s smile went from smug to confused and maybe a hint of worry. I threw myself bodily at her, she panicked long enough for me to knock her off her feet again. A second round of grappling started, I made more notes this time to keep her hands away from me. She kept twisting away but I finally managed to pin her enough to where I could keep her hands away, she growled in frustration but the fight was close to over.

“Enough, enough.” a voice from the side ordered and an arm pulled me off of Perrine.

“Aw, I wanted to see who’d win.” Hartmann said from the door. Barkhorn folded her arms and glanced over us in turn and it was only then that I realized I was still naked, I tried to play off the massive blush as post-fight adrenaline.

“What the hell is your problem!” I shouted at Perrine, still glowering at me from the other side.

“You’re not good enough for the major! You’re nowhere close to good enough for the major you peasant stocked-”

“Maybe that isn’t your choice to make! I don’t care, if you weren’t such a spineless tart maybe you’d actually act like a human being around her!” She snarled at me in a rage I would compare to a
chihuahua's.

“What I do care about is blonde lunatics assaulting me while I’m asleep!” Barkhorn’s eyebrow started twitching in annoyance at all the shouting.

“Perrine, get back to your room and prepare for duty, stop letting your emotions interfere with your work. Bong, put some clothes on, we have work to do.”

Perrine stalked out of the room running a shoulder into Hartmann’s along the way. Trude gave an exhausted sigh and left, Hartmann gave me a puzzled shrug and followed suite.

Putting on the uniform was difficult, my fingers tingled unpleasantly and I almost ripped a sleeve. I scowled into the mirror and drew back my hair into its usual style. I thought I knew Perrine enough to at least sleep safely, but still, what the hell was that disc thing I managed to pull out of my ass? I didn’t mind not getting fried by lightning but I wasn’t sure I liked the implications of something working on reflex like that. Not that I would mind shooting lightning at Perrine but when I did I wanted it to be known 100% to be intentional.

The doorway to the courtyard had a distinct lack of Mio this morning. I almost considered sneaking off and snagging early breakfast before a shuffling approached and a threadbare Mio entered the hallway, eyes cast downward and eyepatch disorganized.

“You kept me waiting Ms. morning person!” I announced with sadistic glee.

“Har har.” Mio groaned through the hangover and gestured to the door. “Let’s do this quickly so we can get breakfast.”

“Finally something we can agree on.”

My hope for early breakfast came and went with the sets until I’d finally worked myself into irritated silence. Mio finally called in the towel and I stalked off in search of food. The muscles in my arm had an unpleasant tendency to tighten when I left them loose, I tried to keep a handle on it but my concentration would slip every thirty seconds or so drawing out a wince and a growl. The dining room was packed as usual, Shirley glanced over her shoulder, eyebrow raised but no one else reacted.

“Ah, good morning Rila!” Yoshika said from the counter but trailed off and shrunk at my approach. My heart sunk a bit but I tried to loosen my expression a bit.

“Thanks.” I mumbled and took my seat at the table. I examined the bread for a second before the piercing gaze rekindled my ire again and I met Perrine’s gaze from acrossed the table. Her eyes bored into mine and I returned in kind, steel-blue into hawk-yellow. I rested my chin on my wrist and ripped a chunk out of the bread, making sure to be as messy as possible. She took an overly dignified sip of tea, eyes still fixed on mine. The rest of the world was meaningless noise under the clash of two animals, both poised to strike at the slightest advantage.

Shirley tried to get my attention but luckily pulled back. The door creaked open and I saw Perrine’s eyes dart upward before returning to mine, it had to be Mio. I focused as hard as I could to not smile. Come on Mio.

“Good morning Perrine.” Yes. Perrine perk ed up and returned a stuttering, “Good morning Major!” I
leaned back and let the smile wash over me like a badge of victory. Perrine tried to return to our contest but instead glared ineffectually at my visage of victory. Mio’s gaze went back and forth, “Did I miss something?”

“Not at all Major, not at all.”

I was almost finished with my eggs when the siren began. Silverware clattered to the table and Barkhorn was already wrenching the door to the dining room open. Mio began shouting, assigning the usual roles I prepared to lounge around the comm room again.

“Bong!” *Here we go.*

“You’re with us! Fire support!”

Chapter End Notes

Finally the first combat sortie, honestly I was surprised Brat!Perrine never got in a fight in canon, time to fix that.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don’t know if you like what I’m doing or not. Let me know what I’m doing well and what I need to improve on, I can’t see that without your view.
The early morning sun reflected off the waves below like a field of broken glass. The soft lull of the waves was interrupted by the roar of half a dozen striker engines. My hands twinged and I realized for the third time I was holding the BAR too tightly. I scanned the horizon searching for the contact, despite my nervousness I was curious to see a neuroi in person. Shirley listed back and forth about 40 meters away, neutral smile in place. Mio flew in front talking to Minna and I was once again blown away how small the radio transmitters we used were. Hardly larger than a hairclip and not much heavier it was a welcome change from the massive 40+ pound radio packs the northern corps used.

Mio kept talking, banking occasionally as she adjusted the formation’s path. My mind started wandering, enjoying the ocean breeze and sun. They said only one contact, who do we need half a dozen for this? I mused. Eh, they’re just going to show me the ropes. Dip, don’t plunge after all. Mio and Minna’s voices faded into the background and I took in how flight in a striker was different than my old P-38. That was a good plane, nice and stable, leg room too. My mind strayed to that snowy flight and I forcibly yanked it back to home. August, Riley’s probably starting school now. She did say something about a boyfriend right? Crap, please don’t let her get pregnant, mom would flip her lid. Actually, just the school part might be the problem now that I’m thinki-

Mio’s voice eased into my ears with a slightly higher pitch. That was a question wasn’t it?

“Bong?”

“Yeah?”

“Quit daydreaming, target is two miles out, prepare to intercept.” she ordered and put the eyepatch back down.

The formation tightened and Mio scanned the horizon.

“There!” she called and jabbed a finger towards 10 o’clock. A small black dot stood out against the sky, growing steadily larger as we approached. Pictures are pretty good at describing things, better than words, but no picture could capture the wrongness of that craft. It grew larger and larger until it was twice the size of a B-17, jet black like a blot of ink, somehow profane when contrasted to the soft sky or calm sea. It was made completely of angles, sharp jagged edges that looked like the result of an artistic depiction of what the opposite of “organic” would be.

Despite our approach it continued toward England, another degree of unease fell over me as no engine sound roared in the distance.

“Incoming!” Mio roared as several small specks broke off from the main craft and struck towards us. The best I could describe them were black “darts” like you would find in a hobby shop, crimson lasers hissed through the air. The tingling in my chest came back and the grey disk rematerialized
blocking one, a pressure grew in my head like a pounding headache but faded when the dart stopped firing.

Mio gave a hand signal, Hartmann and Barkhorn broke off. The tearing sound of MG42’s filled the sky and I watched the darts in front of us erupt into silvery motes. The rest angled upward and tore towards Hartmann, she pulled into a hard climb and just when the tips of the darts began glowing with the coming shot she cut her striker’s engines and pulled over into a dive. The blue-balled darts began tumbling in a stall, scattering, trying to recover, Barkhorn dived in from above, twin MG42’s blazing and another cloud of motes drifted softly toward the water. The entire maneuver couldn’t have taken more than 12 seconds and they managed to make it look as easy as riding a bike. Now I was starting to understand Barkhorn’s...intense...standards.

The massive Neuroi finally seemed to take notice of us, it turned slowly to face us, red hexagonal hatches began to light up and more lasers shot across the sky, we broke down the middle and I banked right, following Shirley. It made a sound, one I could best describe as a wail I suppose, it started high and climbed into a blood-chilling screech like the call of some terrifying prehistoric bird. Another mote drifted past my face, glistening like a snowflake. Snow...It was snowing.

I flew through the darkness, the hum of the engines through the airframe made a nice contrast against the empty landscape. The tower comms buzzed faintly in my ear and I idly clicked the trigger for the camera. I disengaged the autopilot and banked slightly, heading for the next recon zone. 3:14 crowed the dim face of my watch, my eyes itched and for the eighth time that hour I wanted to be in my bunk. I reengaged the autopilot, checked the heading, and took a nice long grunting stretch to shift the hotspot in my jacket. The moon glowed in the sky, a pool of mercury casting light over the fresh snow. The stars twinkled dimly, some fading away before finally shining back out again. The back of my neck itched uncomfortably, and I eyed the stars with suspicion.

“Greely, are we expecting company tonight?” I asked trying to play it off.

“Negative Skadi, none scheduled until thursday.” the reply came.

“Any packages going out?”

“No.” the response came slower. “Do you have visual Skadi?”

“No, no.” I said. “Must’ve been my imagination.” They waited for a minute.

“Bong, what’s up?” he insisted, I sighed.

“Nothing Jack, I thought I saw something against the stars, but it’s 3:22 and I’m bored, mind’s playing tricks on me.”

He only seemed partially mollified. “Keep the controls unlocked.”

“Jack…” I started.
“Please, just for a few minutes, it won’t kill you.” he said. I grumbled in displeasure and took the yoke, the Lightning shuddered in response but kept cruising.

“Jack this is stu-” I began before a red flash stabbed out of the darkness acrosied the left side of the canopy, a tortuous metal screech assaulted my ears, “FUCK!”

I banked left, the engine leapt from a gentle roar to a snarl. Another beam arced out of the darkness to intercept the turn. The entire canopy was red, I swung right, the airframe shuddered in exertion. I could see the attacker, weapons glowing like the eyes of a nocturnal beast. The glow grew brighter, I hit full left rudder, the beam streaked past melting a line acrossed the canopy, the bitter smell of burnt plastic filled the cockpit. I threw the Lightning into a dive, *Fuck, why do the recon models of these go without weapons! Wait, a BAR?* The monster was right behind me, I aimed into its soulless eyes and pulled the trigger.

The BAR thudded against my shoulder, each punctuated with a loud “crack”. The monster seemed to hesitate, it let out an unearthly scream that ran my blood cold, I slammed another magazine home and kept firing. Someone was screaming in my ears, my mind swam desperately, *Jack?* I wondered before I finally realized it was me.

I fired until the trigger clicked uselessly, maybe a metaphor for life. A final beam glinted in the darkness, almost agonizingly slow. So this is what death looked like, a simple red point of light? On second thought it was kind of comforting, like a gentle sunrise.

The “whoosh” became a heavy “crackle”, I opened my eyes to see Barkhorn’s form silhouetted in blinding light, hands projecting a blue disc, angry red energy streaming around it like a roaring river.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?” she screamed hair fluttering around her face.

“Uhh, uh” I mumbled ineffectually blinking like a newborn baby. Another roar began and someones iron grip tightened around my chest.

The harness cut into my shoulders, the Lightning whined softly, growing louder as the speedometer approached 500. *Hold together, please.* The snow loomed in the canopy, I pulled the yoke back. I slammed into my seat, the Lightning roared through the sky, pine trees below me moved far too fast. Another flash and I looked to the side to see a beam cleanly bisect the left side of my Lightning, molten metal highlighting the compartments of the sliced engine like a training cutaway. The world was suddenly quiet, like a resigned sigh, the snow grew ever closer to the left, I pulled my hands off the yoke, waiting.

The Lightning slammed into the ground, the world became a cacophony of screeching metal, my head slammed into something hard, I tried to scream but it was torn from my throat. There was one final moment of silence and then a massive crunch and the world went dark.
I was flying over the ocean, Shirley flew off port, expression wooden. Nobody said anything.

“You should have told me the neuroi have mind control.” I half joked to the air.

“They don’t.” came Mio’s brittle reply.

I felt like I was the worst person alive, the battle came back in painful pieces, the BAR thudding against my shoulder. Barkhorn’s enraged face, Shirley saying something into my ear. I wished I could stay here forever, a serene flight over the sea, away from the hell that awaited me back at base, and found it distantly amusing how a debriefing could loom menacingly like being caught stealing cookies.

My feet finally hit the ground of the hangar, I stowed the striker away as quickly as I could, my hands wouldn’t stop shaking, too late. Barkhorn walked towards me feet dragging.

“I wanted to be proven wrong.” the disappointment in her eyes was worse than any shouting, like a kid being denied candy and I saw, she was waiting for me to prove myself. The bravado, the yelling, all of the abuse was her own twisted way of trying to encourage me, and I failed her.

“I thought you were going to be like Raisa, just needed a good kick and you’d come out fine.” her voice started climbing.

“But at least she could take orders. She understood what being a member of a combat group entai…”

I immediately 180’d from sorrow and disgust to fury, *she had no idea, none of them do*. She was yelling now, same as always, that condescending frigid bitch.

“COME ON BITCH!” I shrieked and sent a right cross speeding for her face, ready to finally show her that she wasn’t at the top of the world, that she would bleed like the rest of us.

The world slowed and her enraged eyes grew cold and flat like a shark’s. She slammed her own arm against mine sending it sailing uselessly to the side. I heard my nose break before I felt it, a gristly wet snap. My head reeled back and my balance failed. My skull bounced off the concrete floor and the world exploded into white hot pain. I lay sprawled on the concrete grinding my teeth, hands clinging to the sides of my head trying futilely to make it stop. When I manage to open my eyes Barkhorn was closing the door to the hangar and I thought I could make out tears against her cheeks.

Chapter End Notes
I've been waiting for this chapter for a long time, finally some backstory. I spent weeks researching flashbacks so hopefully I got it right.

Reviews and comments are most welcome, without them I don't know if you like what I'm doing or not. Let me know what I'm doing well and what I need to improve on, I can't see that without your view.
My pride hurt, my head hurt, my nose hurt, I said nothing as Minna escorted me to her office, said nothing as she sentenced me struggling with all my might not to cry. *Assault on a superior officer, six days of confinement.*

“*Don’t give me shit on this Bong, I don’t want to court martial you.*” They brought me back to my room and quickly left, fleeing the uncomfortable silence. The weight in my chest shifted trying again to move me to tears, I fought it, because of pride or pigheadedness, who the hell knows why. I sat on my bed choking down emotion until a soft creak of the doorframe announced Miyafuji entering.

“I-I’ve come to fix your nose Bong-san.” she stuttered eyes lowered and nervous. I broke.

Hot tears flooded my eyes and I got out a couple of sniffs before collapsing onto her shoulders, her tiny bony shoulders that reminded me so much of Riley’s and cried great heaving sobs. Miyafuji tensed up,

“Ah, ah ah Bong-san if-if it hurts that bad I’ll get the nurse!” she offered frantically.

“I need to cry dummy.” I sniffed into her shoulder before another wave hit. I cried for me, I cried for them, I made up for what I didn’t cry at that damned funeral. It all came pouring out in a stream of blubbering and grunting. One thing the books always got wrong, when you cry, really cry, it isn’t pretty.

Miyafuji stiffened in surprise but started patting my shoulders awkwardly giving me the general “there there”. I sobbed and she crooned, a melodic rising and falling that I didn’t expect Japanese with its beeps and clicks to be able to make. She slipped in something that sounded like “Bad day” every once in a while, and as ridiculous as it was it made me feel better.

“I didn’t know Japanese was a singing language.” I muttered into her shoulder.

“Ah! Uh it’s something that Bachan, ah Grandma used to sing to me when I was sad.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!” she smiled so brightly and I once again wondered what someone like her was doing in the military.

I laid back on the bed and tried to convince myself this was going to be fine.

“This might hurt a bit Bong-san.”

She yanked up and there was a grisly crackling sound of cartilage. I bit back the scream into a hiss digging my fingers into the blanket. She trembled slightly but furrowed her brow in concentration as the infernal itching began again.
“Done.”

She pulled her hands back with a sigh of exertion. I tweaked my nose a bit, aside from a few new bumps and creases it was back to normal. I pulled her into a hug, she stiffened in surprise.

“Thanks Miyafuji.”

She melted into my arms and pulled herself a little closer.

“Please don’t break it again, watching you on the floor was awful.”

“I’ll try.” I replied truthfully for once.

“I don’t like it when people get hurt.” she sniffed.

“Then you might not be in the right line of work.” I echoed my thoughts.

“No, if I’m here I can protect everyone!” she asserted with surprising force. I decided to say nothing and just hugged her a little tighter like a rock in a tidal surge.

I finally let go what seemed like hours later.

“You should apologize to Barkhorn-san.” she offered cautiously. My mind immediately wanted to snap “No!” but I choked it down, for her sake.

“Please Bong-san, she didn’t want to either.” she begged and her soft brown eyes won me over.

“When I get out of here then.” I compromised, she smiled in relief.

“Barkhorn-san isn’t bad, she just isn’t super nice at first.” she trailed off as the logic sank in.

“Rila.”

“What?”

“This “Bong-san” stuff is a bit awkward, just call me Rila.” I smiled.

“Rila-san?” she tried.

“That works too I guess.”

“O-okay.”

She slipped off the bed and headed for the door.

“Sorry Miyafuji.” I muttered.

“Yoshika.” she smiled and shut the door softly.

I flopped back onto my pillow, completely drained, it felt like years since Perrine pushed me out of bed that morning. My eyes wandered to the calendar by the nightstand,
“six days” Minna’s voice came echoing back. I tweaked my nose again and thought back to what Yoshika said. Sure getting my nose broken made me want to break hers that much more but somewhere deep in the back of my mind, maybe where it hit the floor I realized that I probably deserved that, I was kind of being an ass back there. Dad’s words came back about understanding when you’re older and I vehemently denied that I was actually being mature about something for once, even in my head.

I considered requesting food but a wave of fatigue made me feel 50 years old. Six days was a long time so sleep would probably be one of my favorite activities for the duration. Lord knows I’ll need it once I have to explain myself five times over.

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“I don’t know why the hell you keep asking me Mio.” I repeated. Mio kept pacing, her face a strange mixture of frustrated and baffled.

“I freaked the fuck out, it’s never happened before and I have no idea why it happened then.”

“Well there has to be something you can tell me about it.” she tried again making broken records look undedicated. I sighed in annoyance and flopped onto my back.

“Fine, I felt fine when we took off, little nervous but that’s normal. Got bored and zoned out while we were closing the distance, snapped out of it when you spotted it. Sure it was weird and creepy but there were eight of us, it’d be fine. Then the damn thing did that...that screaming shit and I was back in my P-38.”

“Clarify.”

“Like a dream, or some vivid memory, my mind went through the motions again but somehow I still kind of knew what was going on. I knew somewhere that the neuroi was in front of me and I was not in a Lightning but I couldn’t focus, the dream kept pumping me full of adrenaline and I guess I...panicked or something. All I knew is I had a gun so I started firing, when I ran out I came to in time to see that blast coming, I still didn’t really know where I was though, like those twilight moments you get when you wake up at a weird time.”

“Anyway, I’m pretty sure if Barkhorn didn’t come up I would’ve died, I couldn't remember how to shield, hell I couldn't remember how to dodge. So she takes that and it started...dragging me down again. When I lost consciousness in the dream I came back to reality.”

“And assaulting Barkhorn?”

I winced, “I don’t know why I tried to hit her, actually nevermind I know exactly why I wanted to hit her. She’s been hounding me ever since I came here, normally I’d just brush it off to ehh brass but my heart was still hammering in my chest, I couldn’t think straight, and when she immediately started ripping into me. I dunno, maybe I was feeling vulnerable but I just got so angry all of a sudden and
She nodded, “Okay, I’m scheduling you for a psych evaluation, tomorrow at 5:00.”

My throat dried out and my hands got clammy.

“Like hell-”

“I already did.” Mio cut me off, face the sternest I’ve seen it since Barkhorn walked off the firing range.

“Why? Damn it, I opened up to you Mio!”

“That doesn’t magically make it better Bong.” she shook her head and cleared her throat going into officer mode.

“The reason why the 501st has done so well in the field isn’t just because of Striker units or magic. It’s teamwork, esprit de corps, every member understands each other and it makes sure that we trust each other utterly and can predict each others actions, have you heard of the Sacred Band of Thebes Bong?”

I jumped slightly and racked my brains.

“No.”

“They were a band of 300 Greek Warriors, they were also the first force to defeat a Spartan force in battle, they showed the world the Spartans weren’t invincible, and they were also outnumbered at least 2 to 1.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” she asked anticipating my question with a smirk.

“The Sacred Band of Thebes was made up entirely of gay lovers. They fought a seemingly invincible enemy and won by the bonds of love and fighting spirit. Now I can’t claim the 501st is made of lovers but our situation is similar, we need to fight to show the world the Neuroi are not invincible, and to do that we need every member to understand her comrades as well as she understands herself.” her expression became stony again.

“So we can’t have our members ignoring orders and hallucinating during battle without warning, it may have turned out fine but to put it bluntly, you were given a task, your comrades were relying on you and you failed.”

Hearing it from Mio’s normally jolly voice hurt more than any shouting, I desperately tried to tell her anything to make it better, an excuse, a justification, or even just an apology, but the lump in my throat was too big.

“Sorry.” I managed to squeak, tears clouded my vision, and my voice sounded pathetic even to me.

“Me too Bong. Base infirmary 1700 hours.” She left and the slamming door was the most desolate sound I could imagine.
Drama continues to be dramatic, I'm glad I was able to put in the part with Miyafuji though, Rila needs a friend right now.

Regarding scheduling, I've got away from the weekly schedule, yeah yeah, the sky is also blue I know I know, I wasn't happy with what a self-imposed deadline was doing to the quality of my work and I'm a bit of a neurotic perfectionist so it was just making everything stressful. So now we go to a "when-it's-done" type schedule. Don't worry the next chapter shouldn't take a month to come out, I hit a bit of a rut and even with everything I looked up I'm really dreading writing the next chapter. Apologies to all two psychologists in the audience that are gonna rip on me for not getting 40's psychological evaluations correct. :P

Once again I have no idea if what I'm writing works aside from a vague feel based on kudos to view ratio, not too scientific I know. So any feedback would be a great help, things you liked, things you don't like, suggestions, criticism ect. I think it's fine of course but after all the reason I put it up was to share it so I'd like to make sure you at least like it.
I took the long walk to the infirmary, each footstep sending my teeth gritting. *Alright Rila, you can do this, not every shrink is Freud, maybe this one will be different.* I thought back to my childhood, the calm voice droning on and on, spikes of false enthusiasm *Yes, that’s good!, So how does that make you feel?* I rolled my eyes deep into my head. *Not likely.* the snide voice in the back of my head assured me. *Every problem is because you don’t have a penis and want to have sex with your dad right?* I grunted in irritation and the door squeaked open.

The room was very similar to Minna’s office, a nice mahogany desk tucked into a corner, a dark blue carpet, and a massive portrait of Sigmund Freud there to greet me.

“God damn it.”

“Good evening Miss Bong.” the man seated in a small rolling chair called out. He didn’t have a beard thank god. Steel blue eyes behind his glasses surveyed me with interest, I crossed my legs a little tighter, he had a clipboard and pen in hand and a thick lab coat

“I am Doctor Malcowitz, but you may call me Scott if you like.” he offered bringing the clipboard to his knees.

“Come, sit! Can I get you anything, a glass of water perhaps?”

“No thank you.”

I contemplated asking him if I could instead sit on the window sill and fall out but decided better of it. I sunk into the far too mushy couch and focused on trying to form coherent thoughts among the several variations of “this is stupid.”

“Now, I’ve been told you’ve had some troubles recently, you’re scared and confused and you don’t know *why.* It’s okay, everyone has these little bumps in life and you’re no different, together we will figure out what’s going on in that head of yours.” I fought back a “like-hell” with difficulty, he wrote something down and switched gears.

“So how was your day today Rila?” he asked.

“Shitty.” I said.

“Eloquent, but I’m afraid I can’t do much with that.” he said. “So what about your day today is *shitty?”*

“Fine, I am halfway through a confinement sentence for randomly going insane, I’m pretty sure 50% of my unit hates me and I’m worried about my sister.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard was it?” he asked and I suppressed the urge to wring his neck. “Now we can work out each problem one at a time, but first I need to get a baseline of who you are so I have a
“A slightly meatier vagina.” I remarked at the dot chart that looked like the one before it, which looked like the one before that. Malcowitz sighed in resignation,

“Are you always this combative, or am I a special case?” he’d finally stopped telling me he was trying to help, it saved time.

“Combative? You’re the one with the wacko picture collection.” his frown softened a bit.

“One more than and you’re free to go.” he sounded more relieved than I was. I tried to make out anything else in the mess of frustrating dots, “a random dot diagram” he didn’t bother writing down the answer.

“Well Miss Bong, I can’t say it was a pleasure without laughing so it was...something. On a more helpful note you seem very worried about your sister, writing her a letter might help.” It was the best suggestion he had all session.

***

Until I had the damn paper in front of me, I’d never been good at writing letters, and every intro to Riley I could think of didn’t give me confidence in my sanity. Dear Riley, I am under house arrest, bring some pliers, a party hat, some baking soda, and maybe some chocolate too. She’d do it without question too, it was her most endearing quality to me but also the one that made me nervous. She was my sister and I loved her dearly but she was also sort of dumb as a rock. Sis, what’s a quickie? No smug smile trying to make me uncomfortable, just clear eager anticipation, completely innocent. I smiled to myself and began to write.

Dear Riley,

It’s been quite a while, sorry to worry you with what happened in Canada. I’m in Great Britain now, it’s alot wetter than home, I kind of like it, the rain’s relaxing to listen to. I’ve been flying for about a week or so, flying in a striker unit is much easier than a normal metal plane, I’m still not too good yet but there’s plenty of practice. Strangely the officers of the base are a Jap and a Jerry, yeah I was waiting for the punchline too, they’re okay though. Charlotte Yaeger’s here too, you know the one I told you about with the land racing. The two senior aces are also Jerries, one’s about as German as they come precise, curt, and serious. The other’s even lazier than you I’m kind of surprised the castle is still standing. Oh yeah, the base is also a retrofitted castle, not really storybooky but it beats a tent in the tundra. They have people from pretty much everywhere here, France too unfortunately, she attacked me in bed didn’t even wait for a fair fight. The Italian is a total perv, Lucchini and she’s younger than you are, no idea how she handles war maybe that’s what the groping is for. She usually hangs out with Yeager though, and she seems to tolerate it well enough.

The Finn and Russian look like they should be sold as a matching set, both are really pale, almost ghostly. The Finn is so blonde it’s almost white she has these strange lilac eyes I’ve never seen on anyone before. Oddly she’s pretty blunt and can get really loud if she needs to. The Russian is the
opposite of what I expected, her hair is either really light grey or silver and she has these beautiful green eyes, kind of like that stray cat we found when you were nine. Her voice is so soft, I feel like she could just disappear if she wanted to, she runs night missions though so I don’t know much about her she’s usually asleep. Yoshika’s from Japan too she’s an angel, gets along with everyone and no matter how low I get she always wants to help she kind of reminds me of a...sharper more soft-spoken version of you. That leaves the local Brit, Lynnette is tall and well homely would be the word I guess. She’s really shy but she gets along great with Yoshika and I think she’s warming up a bit to me too, she and Yoshika said they’d take me shopping soon.

I haven’t gotten anything from Richard yet, but I’m not too worried yet he forgets sometimes. I don’t know when I can get off next but I’ll come see Dad when I can, I hope you can come too.

Love Rila

One thing I did have to give the quack, writing to Riley somehow made me feel better, I put it aside to give to the next guard to bless my prison with dinner. Three days.

***

Minna surveyed the map, Great Britain and her surrounding seas, random chess pieces decorated the coast, each a defense installation with the black queen as Castle Barin. She glanced back at the reports and let a few more checkers slither out of her hand into a neat stack by a knight. The action repeated itself until each piece had a sizeable stack. Minna took a step back and studied the story the pieces told, it wasn’t pretty.

She bit her lip, escalation. Not only were there more pieces, they were also coming more often. Each represented the predicted heading of a Neuroi class heavy or higher, she counted 12 attacks over the last 30 days, normally she’d expect that many in total but that was just Barin. 8 more on Merston, 10 on the Isle of Wight, 5 on Dorset. Normally Minna would dismiss the frequency as human wave doctrine but something nagged at her from the pattern. Witch installations had almost twice the attacks, something for the brass to breath easily for of course it meant the Witches were doing their jobs and doing them well. Of course she had the typical nerves associated with being targeted but the chances of random chance faking a pattern of almost 50% preference was a long shot.

A chill ran down her spine, Mio had voiced similar sentiments over the month. The consensus among the brass were that the Neuroi entered our world disoriented and confused, fit for nothing more than a brute cudgel to crush their enemies into submission. Witches with their teamwork, precision, and staying power were seen as a perfect counter. Even among the covens their was the air of casualness or disdain even, the Neuroi were animals to be put down. Nevermind that they had overrun Germany, France, and Australia, it was a fluke, a perfect storm. It reeked of underestimation.

One good push by the Neuroi and they’d make landfall, one misstep or lost installation and
Britain would fail. They proved time and time again that fighting Neuroi on land was a crushing battle of attrition. The Afrika Korps and Allied Assault Group only held due to the combined efforts of Montgomery, Rommel, and Patton. Even then their position looked worse every month. Hell even half the Wehrmacht couldn’t hold them off Berlin for more than a few weeks. It made Minna want to throw wine glasses in the Staff’s faces until they would see reason.

A sturdy knock interrupted her brooding.

“Enter.” Doctor Malcowitz entered carrying a stack of papers on a clipboard, he took his customary place in the chair before her desk, his slouch was minor but noticeable.

“Have you been sleeping well Scott?” he sighed and cracked his shoulders.

“Were it so easy, I have my results on Sergeant Bong.” Minna took a breath, she honestly didn’t want to delve any deeper but the mission took priority, and being a Joint Fighter Wing Commander she needed to be picky.

“Fine, let’s have it than.” she braced herself.

“Determining anything about her was...difficult to say the least. She demonstrated varying degrees of hostility to the process but I think I have made some insightful but cloudy assumptions.”

Somehow she didn’t expect anything less from Bong. “Continue.”

“She immediately rebelled against any attempt to establish a trusting attitude, there may be many reasons for this but I believe it’s a reaction to previous analysis attempts, if so she might have deliberately tried to hinder me, in fact that is my assumption. One thread that connected the session was deflection, whether by non-elaboration or spoof answers, very stubborn. She often tried to make jokes in her answers but she didn’t seem to react to them in particular.”

“Power play, maybe narcissism?”

“That was my assumption at first, but she expressed visible discomfort on the self-reflection critic along with an assertion that she was “pretty sure 50% of her unit hated her.” if it was an attempt to cover it was the best I’ve seen in my practice.”

“Codependency then? A disposition for craving the approval of others?”

“I doubt it. She resisted all attempts to charm or nurture, very independent and quick to assert it. That leaves the most likely culprit as an expression of subconscious guilt.”

“Why? She’s never seen combat before coming here, family?”

“All alive and well.”

“Interesting, continue.”

“She had predictably avoidant responses to her hallucinations, significant discomfort, flat responses.

“And your analysis?”

“She admitted to indulging in drink but had been clean for three days before the event, naturally
withdrawal would be a likely culprit but her description of the hallucinations were too clear to be
delirium and I noticed no accompanying symptoms. She’s buried something, and as we know the
unconscious has many ways of being expressed.”

“Your recommendation than?” Scott sighed in defeat.

“She would be a fabulous soldier, the drive, tenacity, and independence is there, but that same
stubbornness is locking her into what she’s been trying to ignore. I don’t expect to see improvement
until she acknowledges that mental baggage.”

“How long would that take?”

“Depends, but it would definitely not be a short term process.” He turned a page and pinched the
bridge of his nose.

“Wilcke, I have to recommend stability. With a strong foundation she could shine but we are in a
terribly desperate state now and a strong chain is in my mind more important than a sharp blade. I’m
sorry.”

“I see, thank you Scott you may go.” He sat up and gave a slight bow, the door creaked shut behind
him. Minna liked the girl, even with the constant joking and the drinking. A few years ago, or even a
few months ago she would have been delighted to accept her into their ranks, she cast a dark look at
the pieces on the map. As a commander treating your subordinates well wasn’t hard, seeing them as
they are was, just pieces on the board, assets.

The word snaked back into her mind ignored for so long, ever since the weeks after the evacuation.
Ever since...Kurt didn’t come home. She’d waited in west London, right where he’d said they’d
meet, sealed with a quick goodbye kiss cut short by a stern Wehrmacht major. She felt like she
should’ve known his name, to have one for the person who took something so important from her.
Then the RAF HQ where she heard the news, all assets were lost. The matter-of-fact statement that
confirmed the deaths of 73 soldiers, men and witches who had risked everything to make sure every
last noncombatant made the hop to Great Britain, everyone including her fiancé reduced to mere
numbers.

In her commanding sense she understood that they had to simply things, it was the only way to
stay sane among the sheer weight of their responsibilities. But her visceral side wanted to slam his
face into the desk until he acknowledged her pain with more than a bland combat report. Two weeks
later she got his tags, they were somewhere in her trunk, exactly where she was happier not
knowing. She took another deep breath separating the roiling colors of her mind back into line,
decision making time.

“Shirley, please call Bong to my office.”

***

I was getting uncomfortably familiar with Minna’s office, it wasn’t a trend I was excited about.
I could bear it though, Miyafuji promised me we could go shopping on Sunday and as lazy as I was I
was starting to go a little stir crazy. Minna took out some papers and gave me a small smile. Alarm bells ran through my head Minna angry was business as usual, Minna smiling was an air raid siren.

“Good morning Bong.”

“Uh, good morning?” *She didn’t even call me “Sergeant”.*

“I assume you’re wondering why I called you here.”

“If you’re asking about the empty security fridge I didn’t do it.”

“No, and how did you know about the breach?”

“Me? The next county over knows about it, it sounded like a hell of a party.” I pouted.

“Whatever,” she snapped and I felt a little better. “I got your report from Malcowitz.” she said and the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

“You actually pay attention to those?”

“Of course, what else are they for?”

“Oh I don’t know, something parents make their kids to take to make sure they don’t go nuts and join the mob like mine.” I rambled frantically, she raised an eyebrow but made no other gesture.

“Aside from your...colorful responses to the open-ended tests we did manage to make out some patterns. An icy tip of fear stabbed through my chest.

“Negatives on narcissism and codependency, positives on will, tenacity, and independence, all traits of a good soldier.” the *but* hung in the air like miasma.

“But you’re stubborn, you’re holding onto something Bong and it’s heavy. You can’t do your job with it in the way like that and while I know you can work through it we don’t have the time.”

That empty feeling was back, the hole in my chest when I woke up after the crash, it didn’t hurt like most loss it was just a void. Like something was torn from you so entirely and utterly that the body forgot it was supposed to hurt and on top of that the feeble feeling of being lost. The brittleness that made you realize just how fragile you really are against the scale of fate and how meaningless your life is. Pain was good, it meant you were still kicking, if it doesn’t hurt be worried, you were probably dying.

Somehow I already knew her next line.

“We’re sorry Bong, but you just don’t fit the current needs of the 501st Joint Fighter Wing. You are to be transferred back to the United States at 11 hundred hours tomorrow, we hope you find success in your future endeavors.”

Short, specific, and neutral, well-rehearsed and practiced. If my mind wasn’t so empty I would’ve been offended. The plastic of her professional face cracked for a second and I saw some real emotion, regret, and something even worse, something I couldn’t, *wouldn’t* tolerate. I can take
disappointment, I can take screaming, I can take blows, but what I saw in her was worse than the crash, worse than Barkhorn’s fist shattering my nose. I saw pity.

Sympathy and pity are usually lumped together. Both are seen as empathetic, acknowledging the plight of others. It was the decent thing to do, knowing another’s pain, sympathy was good. Pity was its condescending counterpart, because you could see it in their eyes, the reflection of exactly how they see you. A stupid child, a being so innately inferior that it can’t function by itself. Something they have to dive for to keep from jamming a fork into an electrical socket, it needs your help, they sigh and shake their heads because it can’t help it. Anger seethed through me and it felt good. It helped fill that sucking emptiness in my chest.

Minna crept closer, “witches from all over the world apply but only” a sympathetic smile on her face trying to be reassuring, “honestly you were quite good just not the very best.” she reached out to place a reassuring hand on my shoulder, I glanced it off mine, she blinked in confusion.

“You’re not my buddy, sir.” I replied, voice brittle. The sympathy disappeared behind her mask as quickly as it came.

“Fine, be prepared at 08:30 tomorrow, you will ride with the supply pick up.” The functional numbness inside me threatened to break so I turned for the door before dismissal, and for once Minna decided not to call me out on it.

Chapter End Notes

Once again I have no idea if what I'm writing works aside from a vague feel based on kudos to view ratio, not too scientific I know. So any feedback would be a great help, things you liked, things you don't like, suggestions, criticism ect. I think it's fine of course but after all the reason I put it up was to share it, so I want to make sure you at least like it.
The First Clash

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait on this, a family member was recently diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Their prognosis is great but something like that can really kill your writing mojo. Have an extra-long chapter to compensate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The fog hung around long past dawn making the English Countryside into a haze of white. The chilling moisture hung in my lungs contrasting even more strongly against the warmth of the castle, it was hard to think that I’d never feel it again. Metal clashed as the supplies were unloaded, I threw the suitcase into the bed of the supply truck and sat miserably both dreading and wishing for the inevitable engine starting.

Barkhorn finished directing the unloading and took the clipboard from the quartermaster, farewells were exchanged, signatures were signed and the truck door slammed. Her eyes met mine and I felt like I had to say something.

“Barkhorn...I’m sorry for to punch you back when, you know.” her face spasmed strangely like she was trying to decide on something. Finally she took a breath and responded “Me too.” The engine roared to life and Barkhorn’s eyes flicked around nervously. She opened her mouth as we pulled away, but thought better of it and instead gave me a stiff wave.

***

As Castle Barin faded in the distance the thoughts I was trying so hard to ignore the night before returned. What now. I’d managed to fuck up that one so would they let me in another? If that didn’t work out I’d have to go...home. Home was not a happy place for me. It used to be, before I reached 12. Richard was there, dad was there, Riley was there, and then they weren’t. Richard joined the army, and Dad took Riley, and I was left alone with mom.

Those three years were the longest I’d ever felt. I wasn’t a daughter to mom, I was a pet. Everything I did was at the mercy of her judgement. Everyone I spoke to, everywhere I went, and all of my plans and goals were hers to shape me into her perfect image. An elegant god-fearing cookie cutter wife, married by 18 and grandchildren at 19. She wasn’t pleased when I made it clear I had...other plans. It had taken quite a few favors and some intervention from Richard, but I made it into the military and the important part was it was away from her.

The truck ground to a halt and the rumble of the engine subsided. Doors slammed and I hopped down to the asphalt. Brand new hangars and runways greeted me, too new to acquire that earthen
green look being in such a damp area brings. Fog still clung to the hills behind us but the fog over the ocean was thinning with a pale morning sun peeking over the hills behind us.

A C-47 Skytrain screamed by and clawed into the morning fog. Another followed. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“You uh...Bong?” he grunted looking over a piece of paper. I nodded numbly.

“Well took yer damn time didn’t you? Yer coming with us back to New York.” he explained. I grabbed my suitcase and followed him to another C-47.

***

The dining room was quiet, too quiet, Minna thought. The usual bustle of breakfast was absent, Shirley looked down occasionally to grin at Lucchini snuggling into her chest, but her gaze kept finding the bay window. Barkhorn picked at her food absentmindedly cheek in her right hand, even Perrine seemed to be sitting more rigidly than normal. She wrinkled her brow in surprise and approached the counter.

“Good morning Wing Commander.” Perrine piped up from the end of the table. Now that was a surprise. She gave her a motherly smile,

“Good morning Perrine you’re certainly chipper this morning.” and so she was, the blonde held her cup of tea to her nose breathing deeply before taking a dainty sip.

“I feel like today is going to be a fine day.” she explained and Minna found the girl’s optimism infectious.

“I’m glad.” she said and approached the counter in slightly better spirits. Spirits which fell when she met Miyafuji.

She wouldn’t go as far as to say the Japanese witch was “sulking” but there was a definite depression to her normally cheery presence, even her stubbornly untamable hair flaps seemed to droop like a sad puppy’s.

“Good morning Miyafuji.” she greeted as kindly as she could.

“Oh! Good morning Minna-san. Um, Fish and Chips this morning!” she announced as energetically as usual, but by the time Minna reached the end of the counter she seemed to be lost in thought again.

“Miyafuji, are you okay?” she replied in concern and placed a hand on her forehead checking for temperature.

“No, I’m okay I just...I just miss Rila-san.” she admitted.
“It’s okay Miyafuji.” Minna said, “She was your friend and comrade, there’s nothing wrong with missing her. It’s just-”

“I know.” she replied. “Only a few witches get in. I’m still surprised I did.” she trailed off. Minna smiled fondly, the stigma from Yoshika’s interruption forgotten.

“You joined the 501st so you could protect everyone, right Miyafuji?” she asked, Yoshika nodded the affirmative.

“So there will always be a place for you here.”

“But not Bong-san.” she said.

“Everyone wants to protect what’s important to them.” Minna explained. “But sometimes people need to do it in their own way.”

“How do you know what someone does best in?” she asked.

“Sometimes people try their hardest and it isn’t enough.” Minna started longing for the end of the conversation. “Not everyone has what it takes to be a witch.” she concluded and turned to sit down.

“You’re starting to sound like Barkhorn-san.” Miyafuji said. Minna didn’t have a reply for her.

She had just taken her first few bites when a jolly “Good morning!” announced the arrival of Mio. The silence after the sudden sound was deafening. Mio paid no heed and let out her signature burst of belly laughter. Minna chuckled weakly in response. Mio approached the counter and engaged Miyafuji,

“What’s wrong Yoshika? You’re so sleepy today. Good, it means you’ve been training hard!” Mio crowed, it was the closest she was probably going to get to reading the atmosphere. Shirley met Miyafuji’s eyes, face twisted into a sympathetic cringe. Hartmann snorted into her oatcake and started snickering through her closed hands. Barkhorn hardly seemed to notice,

“What’s wrong Trude?” Minna asked. The German witch jumped slightly,

“Nothing, nothing at all Minna, just a little tired.” she offered flimsily. “Got up early to sign off the..supply run.”

Minna nodded and returned to her food. Trude wasn’t in the mood to share, some nuance of her body language told her. Working with her for so long taught Minna her habits. She imagined Hartmann could similarly tell, though the younger ace usually used those to push her buttons.

Mio had mercifully left Miyafuji alone and took her customary seat next to Minna.

“Good morning.” Minna smiled, Mio nodded in acknowledgement and tore into her breakfast. Silence reigned over the room for a few more minutes.

“What’s everybody so quiet for?” Mio asked Minna. “It feels like a funeral in here.” Maybe she wasn’t that dense.

“Bong was here for a while, I guess they were getting used to having her around.”
“Ah, give it a day or two than. It’s always a shock to lose a comrade.” she smiled consolingly.

Minna was almost done with the paper when the alarm blared through the base.

***

Minna’s directions buzzed in Mio’s ear as she prepared her striker for launch. She threw her arm to the left.

“Perrine, Trude, Miyafuji, you’re with me!” she commanded.

“Elia, Hartmann, Yeager, Lucchini, you’re on point!” The assembled witches voiced their acknowledgments, missing comrades and personal vendettas forgotten.

“What are we looking for Minna?” Mio radioed in. The squad formed a loose finger-four, Perrine to her left and Trude to her right with Miyafuji in tow.

“Okay…” Minna’s voice crackled with the sound of pages turning. “Advance radar reports airborne objects on a heading-”

“Does fighter command need to use generalist terms for everything?” Mio said.

“Neuroi incoming towards the South-East coast, two heavies and unknown escorts, fix it.” Mio chuckled at Minna’s bluntness.

“Wait, did you say two heavies?”

“That’s what first contact says,” Minna said. Two heavies were...unusual.

“We should be able to handle it.” Mio replied. The break from routine did make her nervous though, neuroi didn’t do spontaneous.

Minna was wrong, it wasn’t two heavies. It was four. Two bloated ink blot carriers and two Excaliburs, so named for most of their mass being taken up by a massive energy emitter.

“Aw crap.” Shirley mirrored her thoughts. The carriers shifted, points of black bulged on their surface, triangles budded off and tore through the air individual shards shaping themselves into drones. Lasers ripped through the air, Perrine darted forward and grunted as a stream of lasers smashed into her shields.

“Trude! Miyafuji! Engage the carriers we’ll clear a path!” Mio ordered over the crackling energy and raised the Type 97. The rounds left with a dry popping sound and the nearest gaggle of drones erupted into silvery motes.

Trude and Miyafuji stormed through the gap, the air prickled unpleasantly as a deafening buzzing reached their ears.

“UP.” Trude hissed and yanked Miyafuji by the arm as an enormous crimson beam ripped
through the air with an earsplitting roar. She circled the circumference as the neuroi tried in vain to
aim higher, the storm of energy broke and the pair climbed upward toward one of the carriers shaken
but unharmed. More popping sounds and several puffs of motes appeared on the Excalibur's
fuselage. “Over here!” Mio yelled. The massive neuroi turned and Mio broke to the right, Perrine in
close accompaniment. *Buy time for Trude.*

The drones bunched up closer, just close enough. “Strum!” Hartmann yelled, torrents of wind
whipped around her as she blew through the formation. Drones blew off course and others exploded,
Eila followed behind eyes closed. She muttered directions softly under her breath wrapping her
shields around to blunt in coming lasers. *Right, left, left, down, LEFT.* She snapped her eyes open
and motioned to Hartmann. Another massive laser cut through the air.

Shirley checked the bolt of her BAR, Lucchini floated nearby humming a song under her
breath. She watched the Excalibur turn and fire on the golden-black speck that was Hartmann. She
snapped to the side and the beam smashed into the sea sending a massive burst of steam into the air.
A drone climbed away from the furball and bore down at her, lasers blinking. She jinxed to the side
lazily and fired sending the neuroi spiraling down to the waves. “Anytime Mio.”

The roar of MG42s filled the air as Trude went to work on the closer carrier, motes of silver
blew off as they slowly worked through the neuroi’s outer skin. Miyafuji caught two more lasers
with a whimper, *Please hurry Barkhorn-san.* The drones turned away, Miyafuji glanced about in
confusion. “Down!” she wailed at Trude and grabbed her hand as another blast ripped by. The
carrier gave a squeal of surprise and pain as the beam ripped through its
outer shell leaving a thirty foot hole. A red decagonal gem rotated slowly in the gash.

“Get it!” bellowed Mio over the radio and Shirley gave a wild cry of joy. She dove on the
carrier like a streak of lightning BAR roaring. The gem sped for the back of the carrier jinxing left
and right, Shirley growled in frustration and began firing blindly through the carrier’s skin when the
gem slipped out of sight. The BAR clicked empty and the carrier’s skin grew an iridescent white. It
shattered with a single note like the striking of a gong, silvery fragments and motes floated lazily
through the air. Shirley allowed herself a smirk of triumph which quickly faded when she heard
bullets whip by close to her. The swirling maelstrom revealed Trude with a similar smirk, Miyafuji
nodded timidly. *She’d missed.* Shirley bit back a curse and began climbing to altitude again to
prepare for the next one.

Another mesh of lasers filled the sky trying to box her in. Mio dove as another blast from the
Excalibur cut in from her left. A massive storm of sparkles announced the death of one of the
 carriers.

“Minna, what’s going on?! Why are there four of these?” Mio yelled over the screams of the
other neuroi.

“What? *Mio, dammit, one second. We’ve got more on route to Warmwell.*” she replied.

“What the hell do you mean more? Can’t the Isle of Wight pull their weight?”
“Engaged by three heavies.” A chill ran down her spine.

“Wallop?”

“Being harassed by fighters.”

“So it’s up to us.”

“As it always is.”

She tore off the eyepatch and glanced over the three neuroi with her enhanced eye, a shimmering light marked the location of the core.

“Shirley, Lucchini! The core’s at the top of the car-” another volley of lasers struck for her, she performed a snap reversal, her second look found the core moving to the bottom of the carrier.

This isn’t working. “Minna, send Lynn to Warmwell, Shirley will meet her there. We can keep these ones off the coast.”

“Right-o.” Shirley chirped and spun about ready to put the speed of her custom striker to use.

All three neuroi snapped to aim and unleashed two massive beams and a net of smaller lasers. Shirley yelped in surprise as the lightstorm corralled her back to the battle. This doesn’t make any sense. Mio thought. She was the furthest away, why are they targeting her? The answer came as one fired off a barrage at Hartmann before focusing again on Shirley as tried to break out again.

“Minna, they’re fencing us in!”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Hurensohn! Mio, Lynn can’t handle a swarm like that on her own!”

“Send her anyway! We’re working on it!” Mio said. Trust me Minna.

She signaled the rest of the team by hand, the neuroi didn’t react. She gathered them into a large gaggle and nodded to Shirley.

“NOW!”

The grouped witches unleashed a volley and Shirley tore down behind them in a dive. The neuroi screeched and unleashed a volley of lasers. Groans and cries filled the air as they met shields. The formation scattered as two beams ripped through the air. Mio turned and saw the rapidly fading Shirley dodge the beams, the ocean erupting into steam where they hit, she gave a bark of laughter.

“Shirley’s away!” she reported to Minna, “and now, let’s finish these.” she growled lifting the eyepatch again.
Turbulence rocked the skytrain, the unlit cabin was as dark as my thoughts. We hadn’t even hit Greenland yet, this trip was going to suck. The mumble of voices grew louder and the plane gave another violent shake. I gasped as the harness bit into my shoulders,

“What gives?” I yelled into the cockpit. The voices continued ignoring me. I growled in irritation and unbuckled the harness, the plane jolted again and I braced myself against the bulkhead before crawling into the crew compartment.

“Oey, what’re yeh doing?” the radio operator asked as I walked by, I ignored him.

“The rudder’s down there.” I growled to the pilot. He didn’t snap at me, he didn’t even look at me. I followed his gaze to the massive neuroi assaulting a coastal base.

“Ah, not the problem than.” I muttered, my voice unnaturally high.

It was about two miles away, lasers tearing into the ground like a heavy plow. A pair of black shapes broke away from the main force and angled to intercept.

“Shit!” the pilot swore and angled the plane down, the air whistling. He pulled the stick to the right and I almost fell into the co-pilot’s lap.

“Does this tub have any guns?” the pilot shook his head. “WEP?” he shook his head again, “Anything?”

“Shove off lass, I’m trying to work!” he said.

“Enfield 2′s.” the radio operator replied gloomily drawing his revolver.

“Open the boxes Ed.” the navigator ordered handing him a crowbar. Ed just stared at it in confusion.

“We need this shite more than the yanks now, open them!” he repeated. Ed threw down the headset and stomped into the hold, I followed suite.

The first crate opened with a splintering sound revealing some machine gun ammo I didn’t recognize. The second larger crate had something metal and green, he pulled it out with a grunt. It was then that I felt what I imagined was divine intervention, an olive striker unit gleamed in the dim lights of the cockpit. The last crate had a strange weapon in it that looked like some sort of hybrid between a machine gun and a revolver.

“What are these?”

“Hm, says this one’s a striker unit prototype. An this one’s some Russian gun they gave’us to study, shee-cause or something like that.” I hated prototypes, most of the stuff we were given in Canada was stuff they were making for the 10th mountain division, and we were the guinea pigs. Something struck the plane, we didn’t have any options.

“Better than nothing than.” I decided and took off my boots.
“Yer a witch than?” the navigator asked helping me into the striker. The familiar coolness was back, I hobbled over to the loading door and put the radio in my ear.

“I am a witch.” I clarified for myself as much as him. He threw open the door and air rushed into the hold in a gale. I picked up the machine gun and two more ammo belts and lunged.

I tumbled through the air, the scream was torn from my throat from the wind, I focused and the striker finally started with a cough, maneuvering fins appeared on the sides where the wings usually were but instead were seemingly made of white light. I pulled out of the dive and started climbing to the C-47 I’d just jumped out of. The skytrain was being peppered with lasers from three neuroi, much smaller than the one I’d fought before. Another part of my mind seemed to flare to life, and the colors in the world seemed to flatten. I somehow knew the neuroi were exactly 722 meters away. I fed more energy to the striker and marveled how much easier it was to fly than the A6M striker I’d been flying back in the 501st.

I closed to what my mind said was 212 meters and fired. A heavier tearing sound filled the air as the streaks of tracers engulfed the nearest enemy. Bits of metal flew, the neuroi tumbled and exploded. The other two broke off and my blood soared, I wasn’t helpless anymore I was now the hunter. A metallic clanging echoed through my radio,

“Damn lass, watch where yer shooting!”

“Crap! Sorry!” I said and struck off after the one on the right.

“We’re gonna head for an emergency landing, give ‘em hell lass.”

The fighter before me weaved and jinxed, I kept pace marveling how much easier it was to cross one leg over the other to slide to the side in flight. That second sense told me it was about 175 meters away, I fired. The neuroi rolled and dove out of the stream of lead, I dove after it. The gun sounded similar to Barkhorn’s MG42, maybe a bit more of a thud to it. I took aim and fired again, sparks glanced off the neuroi’s wings, the gun clicked empty. I cursed and started feeding another belt of ammo in. That second sense flared sending my nerves tingling, somehow I felt like I should look right…

The neuroi’s wingman bore down on me, streaks of red hissing through the air. My eyes glazed over and I thought I could see snow…

No. I shut down the feeling that led me into memory and already got me fired once. Here and now. I whipped my hand to the side to meet it, red met my shields and spread to the sides harmlessly like waves on a cliff face. The neuroi tore over me turning into a wide turn for another pass. The one I was chasing turned into the circle to meet up with it. I whooped as the belt slid into place and the gun started firing again. The neuroi spun down down into the trees and exploded sending motes of silver through the tree tops. Two. It’s partner finished the turn and unleashed a storm of beams on me. I tried to get my hand around to shield, with a sputter the left wing of my striker failed and I pitched downward in a spiral.
Lasers hissed over my head followed by the low rushing howl of something going down far too fast. With another sputter the wing flickered back into existence, the fast approaching wall of green fell away and I croaked, scream still caught in my throat. *I hate prototypes.*

I pulled up regaining the altitude the death spiral had cost me. My second sense kicked in again, the neuroi was streaking towards me. A surge of hot anger ran through me, I spun around to meet it, pushing the engines as hard as they could go. The black speck grew, beams struck around me, I answered with the machine gun, tracers and lasers streaking past each other in a dazzling light show.

A groan of metal echoed and the gun caught. *Jammed.* My mind raced, the neuroi wasn’t breaking away. A folded piece of metal under the barrel caught my eye. It straightened into a 20 inch blade. *Why the hell would an aircraft gun have a bayonet?* My eyes found the neuroi still stubbornly engaging me in a head-on. *Ohh this is stupid.*

It was close enough that I could see the octagonal red ports it fired lasers from. It made a final course correction to the left. I took a deep breath and threw my right leg over the left as far as I could. I skidded to the right and swung with all my might. The blade bit into the right side of the neuroi’s nose and I watched black metal peel away in a jagged tear as it ran through its length, shearing the left wing off and almost pulling the gun out of my hands. The stricken neuroi spiraled down and exploded. I spun clumsily holding onto the gun for dear life. The bayonet was bent back at a 60 degree angle like a noodle, a unbelieving giggle bubbled up inside me.

My radio crackled. “*Did ya just get an air kill with a goddamn bayonet?”*

“*Gun jammed.*” I explained through light-headed laughter. *Three.*

***

Her stomach churned, the Boy’s rifle was a heavy weight in her hands. Even if Shirley was going to be there they were still only two. She checked the bolt again for the fifth time before assuring herself it was fine. A nervous habit she hoped. Water sloshed against the cliffs, the lulling song melding with the sound of her striker.

A dark shape appeared on the horizon, the trees gave way to an RAF airfield. A massive neuroi hung over it like a storm cloud, beams criss-crossed as they tore into the earth. Smaller shapes buzzed around the larger craft like gnats. Lynnette faltered, unsure if she should wait for Shirley. She scanned the base looking for some sign, a beam intersected a parked Spitfire in it’s earthen pen, it exploded into a cloud of flame and smoke. She steeled herself, she had to do something.

Her hands trembled but she kept going, she recalled the thought usually in the back of her mind that sometime defending her country would fall to her alone, maybe this was the day. One of the fighters broke off and charged her. The Boy’s rifle thudded into her shoulder, even with recoil
compensation it was heavy shove. The tracer clipped the neuroi but it kept coming, she fiddled with the bolt frantically.

The roar of airplane engines started dimly, a stream of bullets engulfed the neuroi and a blur of olive green swept by cackling with elated laughter.

“B-Bong!?” she stuttered at her former squadmate.

“I love this gun!” she said seemingly to herself before smacking it on the side. “Too much jamming though, hi Lynn!”

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Fell out of my plane, tell you about it later, I don’t like that black thing it’s big and scary looking let’s kill it.” she laughed at the feeble joke.

“I’m here Lynn!” a voice crackled over her radio, Shirley dove out of the sky panting.

“Bong what are you doing here?” she laughed.

“Plane was too stuffy, came out for a breath of fresh air.”

***

“Anyone alive down there?” Shirley radioed the base.

“Ah, quite lovely to hear your voices ladies.” the smooth accent replied seemingly unperturbed by the tearing earth and exploding equipment.

“What’s your status?”

“Oh we’re just holed up a bit by that bugger up there, we do have some Bofor’s along with some spare 88’s the Jerries lent us but we can’t rightly use them with those gnats buzzing about, be a good lass and give us a hand would you?”

“Read my mind.”

“Bong, on me we’ll pull the fighters away, Lynn, pound that whale’s underside, make room for the flak.” Shirley ordered and dove. A few black fighters circled the base taking potshots at the circular gun emplacements. Lead tore through the air and three fighters crashed to the ground, the rest screeched after us. I kept close, lasers swept over us. Shirley flashed a blueish shield and caught a lucky shot.

“You know the Thatch Weave Bong?” Shirley asked, I nodded and swung to the right. She pulled away, steadily getting smaller until all I could see was a speck of orange hair. I turned into her, she grew until she zipped over me prop wash ruffling my uniform. The neuroi slowed in confusion before bearing down on Shirley. She pulled back towards me, the first neuroi noticed too late and tried to climb away, I pulled the trigger and it exploded. The next homed in on me looking for
revenge.

“My six o’clock Shirley.” I said nervously as lasers hissed around me.

“Got it Bong.” she said, slipping away into the distance again. The neuroi kept firing, I caught lasers with a grunt.

“Six o’clock Shirley.” I repeated trying to swallow down my panic.

“I know Bong.”

My heart leapt into my throat as she struck for me, BAR blazing. The lasers mercifully stopped and I breathed a sigh of relief. I checked the gun again and found myself a quarter through the last belt.

“Runnin low on ammo.”

“Four more still.” Shirley said. The radio crackled to life.

“Bofor’s are working, mosey on back over here we’ll take care of the spares.”

“Okay but we’re in the front, don’t shoot the wrong targets.” I reminded him.

“Lass.” he said after a pause. “The crew have been working here for three years. They notice woman at 1200 meters, they sure as hell can tell you apart.”

Shells came whistling into the air, each followed by a sharp crack as plumes of black smoke marked their fire. I yelped as some shrapnel struck past my ear with a sound of broken glass. The neuroi noticed the obstacle too late and black smoke mixed with motes of silver.

“Um, I’m going to shoot at its belly, please fire into the holes.” Lynnette’s timid voice crackled. She braced the Boys and fired, each crack sending her frame shuddering. Shouts and clanging echoed over the base as orders were given and shells were slammed into breaches. The massive neuroi gave an echoing screech and the beams that were so contently tearing into the earth began sliding over to the gun emplacements.

Shirley perked up, “Bong!” she called but I already saw it. I nodded violently and darted toward the gun emplacement, placing myself between them and the neuroi. The massive beam of crackling red energy slammed into my shields.

“Hurry!” I snarled in half exertion, half-demand, the loaders redoubled their pace. Pain sizzled in my body at the sheer effort needed to keep the crimson storm at bay. The scent of ozone filled my nose, and I felt something wet roll down my cheeks but I was too bent on not succumbing to care about it. If I moved three people would die, if I was lucky.

After what felt like year, a single gonging note of a dying neuroi echoed through the sky, a storm of
silver hung above us like a raincloud. My chest heaved as I struggled to get enough air into my body, the machine gun dropped from my numb fingers to smash into the ground somewhere along the base. The striker sputtered and coughed but by some miracle somehow didn’t send me crashing to the ground. I focused on breathing until the muddy sounds in my ear resolved themselves into words.

“Damn fine show ladies.” the base commander said simply.

“You took that bullet for us, you’re just as much of a soldier as any.” one of the loading crews said.

“Great job Bong.” Shirley mumbled, she floated over slowly, flight uniform rumpled and disheveled, but the belt the hugged the bottom to her hips was perfectly fine. I nearly rolled forward and she caught me by the shoulder.

“Let’s go home, I’m beat.” she said.

“You home.” I clarified, some bitterness still in my voice, she chuckled weakly.

“Those clowns in the skytrain said you took out three, one with a damn bayonet. I saw you take out one, four by my count, that’s something precious few witches could do on their first real mission.”

“Um, actually Rila took out five, I saw one too.” Lynn piped up.

Shirley closed her eyes and smiled squeezing my shoulder.

“To be an ace you need five kills.” she explained. “If Lynn confirms that then you’re an ace in a goddamn day.” she laughed.

“If that doesn’t convince Minna to keep you, than not even Roosevelt himself could could convince her.” And somehow through her bravado I smiled, I was starting to believe it too.

The striker coughed and the left wing disappeared, I gave a strangled yelp as I starting sliding out of Shirley’s arms, she twisted and caught me, shoving the back of my head into her bosom. Even with the awkward flailing and the pressure around my neck I couldn’t help but feel envious of Lucchini for being able to do this at will.

“I hate prototypes.”

***

Castle Barin came into sight finally, I was finally able to fly under my own power, barely. We touched down and Shirley helped me out of the striker, I wobbled on legs unsteady from both exhaustion and inactivity to the hangar and took a grateful seat on the tarmac back against the thin metal of the door.
Minutes passed and I finally heard the buzz of more engines. The rest of the wing returned in pairs, each more exhausted than the last. Mio was yelling something into her radio, subject of which became clear when another massive neuori pulled down out of the clouds with a challenging screech. I attempted to stand but my body gave me a firm “not happening.” I could only watch as the black dot grew bigger and bigger.

Mio tried to launch but the striker didn’t even start, Hartmann gave an unhappy shrug as hers gave the same result. Another engine roared to life, I glanced to the side in time to see a streak of red and green thunder down the runway and resolve itself into Minna’s hair and jacket flapping above a striker.

“Let’s go Lynn.” she ordered, voice grim. The British witch answered with an equally resolute “Yes.” and fell in formation.

Minna closed her eyes, her power tailed into the sky like a set of searching fingers. She felt nothing aside from the 35 meter long neuroi.

“Lynn, I need you to make a hole.”

The younger witch nodded.

“About a third back from the nose!” Mio bellowed into the radio.

Lynn steadied the rifle, the neuroi was so close now and only she and Minna were there to stop it. The same situation as 1939, the Battle of Britain. A burst of defiance filled her. The German’s couldn’t take my home and neither can you! She fired, each shot rocked her like running over a pothole, each round tore through the air in a bright streak shattering the neuroi’s armor. The gun clicked empty, but the neuroi glowed an incandescent white and exploded prompting a yelp of surprise from Minna. Lynn looked right and left, but no other targets presented themselves. It’s safe for another day, I think they’d be proud. She smiled.

The soft drone of her striker’s engines was finally interrupted by the revving of another.

“Lynn-chann!” the voice droned and Lynn found Yoshika clung firmly to her, the Japanese witch pulled her into a spin bubbling with happy laughter.

“That was so cool Lynn-chan!” Lynn couldn’t help it, she laughed too.

***

Minna let Lynn land first amid applause and Mio’s barking laughter, she deserved it. She’d never seen a neuroi attack that relentless before, the simple fact that everyone was safe and unharmed was enough reason to celebrate. Still, she’d noticed an unfamiliar striker in the hanger she couldn’t help but be curious. She noticed the supposed pilot sitting against the hangar door, a very familiar pilot. She chuckled,
“I had a feeling I’d see you again Bong.”

Chapter End Notes

The Tactical Significance of the Witch

--While functional Striker Units have existed since the Great War, the true tactical role of the Witch was not cemented until the Second World War and following Neuroi conflict. Due to the relative independence from large amounts of supplies and ease of use, the Witch fits best in the military hierarchy as a quick-response interceptor. The Witch is also a natural Dogfighter as her vehicle has almost unparalleled maneuverability, however she suffers from insufficient numbers and limited firepower which makes her familiarity and finesse with arms paramount. Range is also an issue as there is only so far her stamina may take her and recovery is far more complicated than traditional air power.

With certain powers these weaknesses can be reduced, but usually at the cost of some performance. Regardless this flexibility makes the Witch a very capable fighter able to integrate to almost any tactical situation. With the discovery of Witch powers suited for night interception the role of the Witch is ever expanding, even more so with the Neuroi conflict as their unique movements through the field of combat make them deadly adversaries for unskilled pilots.

_____________________________________________

Once again I have no idea if what I'm writing works aside from a vague feel based on kudos to view ratio, not too scientific I know. So any feedback would be a great help, things you liked, things you don't like, suggestions, criticism ect. I think it's fine of course but after all the reason I put it up was to share it, so I want to make sure you at least like it.
“Yeager, report.” Minna said. Shirley stepped forward from my left. She explained our little encounter and return flight. Minna nodded impassively and turned to me. I explained my side. She nodded and agreed at appropriate times, until I got to the bayonet kill and I finally got to hear what her laugh was like. A snort turned into peals, a high clear sound like a bell whether natural or trained I couldn’t guess.

“Oh my.” she muttered brushing away a tear. “Normally I wouldn’t believe something that ridiculous but after the pacific report about a witch tearing a plane in half with a shield ram, let’s just say I’d expect something that ridiculous from you.” she leaned back in the chair lacing her fingers.

“Once we get a hold of these C-47 crewmen you were with we can clear up the kill count records. I don’t suppose you still have the prototypes?”

I winced, “They can have the striker, sure is pretty but I need something whose wings don’t disappear. As for the Red’s machine gun, it’s lying somewhere in Warmwell.”

Minna sighed. “I wish you’d have kept it, but I suppose a RAF base is harder to build than a machine gun.” she favored me with a smile. “You should be proud Bong, not many Witches walk away with four kills on their first mission.”

“Um, five, she shot one that was closing on me too.” Lynn said from behind me. Mio cocked an eyebrow.

Minna shut her eyes and her smile widened, “And one’s who get an ace-in-a-day are even less.” Mio barked in laughter.

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t let me down Bong!” she said. Shirley let a smirk cross her face and nudged me on the shoulder.

“So what happens now?” I asked, hopeful but realistic. Minna gave a casual shrug.

“The technical requirement for joining the 501st is acehood, confirmed acehood.” she cut through my attempt to whoop in joy.

“Well, I see no reason to send you away while we’re compiling the records, but it has to be five kills Bong.” her eyes narrowed. “And Bong, if this works out we’re going to talk. None of this evasive garbage you’ve been giving Mio. You’re part of my unit and you aren’t going to hide things from me, this may be uncomfortable but if you want to stay in the 501st I will need to do it. Am I clear?” her eyes bored into mine with an intensity I hadn’t seen before.

“Ye-yes. Ma’am.” I stammered off balance, her expression snapped back to normal so quick I almost questioned whether it was even really there.

“Good, then we won’t need-” she began groping acrosed her desk for something. “This.” her voice
trailed off.

“Mio? Did the mail already go?” she asked, Mio shrugged. Minna sighed,

“Well the transfer orders were in it.” No, no, I wasn’t having my chances ruined by an overzealous mail carrier.

“Oh it!” I snapped and bolted for the door.

***

“Hey! Bong!” Mio shouted making to lift her hand. Minna’s stopped her,

“Let her go.” Mio turned to argue but froze at the expression on Minna’s face, a mixture of cunning and contentment she hadn’t seen for months. It clicked and Mio let a similar expression cross her face and nodded.

“So that it Wilcke?” Shirley yawned. Minna nodded the affirmative.

“Good, I’m beat, think I’m going to make like Lucchini and have a nap.” she stretched her arms over her head and let the door thud shut behind her.

“You did very well today Lynn.” Minna smiled as the final witch made her exit with a grateful smile. Silence reigned over the office for a few seconds.

“How long do you think it’ll take Bong to get that letter?” Mio asked. Minna shook her head.

“Hours, you will have plenty of time.” she chuckled.

“What about Lynnette?”

“I’ll handle her.” Minna replied.

***

My feet stomped against the stone floors but my initial confidence gave way when I realized I had no idea where the trucks were stored, or where the post office was. This wasn’t very well thought out.

“Riillaaa!” a familiar voice squealed, my feet slid on the tiles as I tried to change direction. A laughing figure slammed into my back, shoulders first. My spine erupted in pain and my feet slid out from under me. I groaned, a sentiment echoed by Lucchini from under me.

“You okay?” I asked, apprehensive until two hands grabbed my breasts. “Yeah, you’re fine.” I recovered and rolled off her.
“But you were gonnie, and I was lonelly!” Lucchini sniffed, picking herself up off the ground.

“Baloney, your hands are still warm.” I countered, she just gave a hissing chuckle. I growled in response massaging my hip. “So was that it? I have to get to the post office.”

“I’m coming too!” she squealed and I planted a hand firmly on her face as she tried to go in for another tackle/grope.

“No, I need to get in without all of southern Britain knowing.” even the thought was making me tired.

“But Shirley’s asleeep!” she whined. “I can be reeal quiet.” she whispered, then the hooligan gave me the puppy dog eyes, she sniffled a little and they began to get wet…

“Fine, fine.” I admitted defeat.

“Yay!” she screeched somehow even louder than before. Why do I insist on making bad ideas worse? A familiar shaggy-headed figure appeared from a hallway to the left.

“Rila-san!” Miyafuji squealed and wrapped me in an iron hug. I let the remaining buzzing irritation evaporate and returned in kind, tousling her hair.

“I thought you were gone for good.” she said.

“Got a little sidetracked, I might be here to stay if I can get something back from the post office.”

“Than I’ll come too!” she asserted, “Lynn-chan showed me where it is, follow me!”

The motor roared to life, the supply truck bucked as I pressed a little too hard drawing a yelp from Yoshika in the back.

“O-okay, go down this road and go left!” she ordered. The gravel crunched as we rolled out of the front gate and began following the road inland.

“I know why Lucchini wants to mess around with me, but why are you here?” I asked. Hartmann smiled from the passenger seat.

“You were all running around so it sounded like fun!”

“Goody.” I grumbled, Hartmann just laughed.

“Trude’s busy beating herself up anyway, it usually works better if you leave her to it.”

“She always like that?” I asked, as much as we exploded when mixed I couldn’t help but feel curious.

“Trude can get a bit annoying. “A German soldier is neat and orderly! Fats and salts are unnecessary to a German soldier’s diet!”” she parroted in a pompous voice.
“She does seem a little strict.”

“Brittle, she just doesn’t know how to have fun!” Hartmann said.

“And you do?”

“Yep!” she crowed. “Trude’s Trude though, maybe she’ll get better later. Though since you came, she’s kind of gotten worse.”

I twisted my fingers around the wheel a bit tighter.

“What do you think of me anyway?” I asked, dreading the response.

“Nice try.” Hartmann smiled, “That’s not important, what do you think of Trude?” Damn.

“Didn’t my fist make that clear?” Hartmann shrugged.

“Punching Trude doesn’t work.” she said sagely.

“No?”

“Nope! It was kind of funny though.” she replied in an afterthought.

I let it slide and the cabin was silent for a minute.

“You make her nervous.” Hartmann said.

“Who?”

“Trude, and you tried to punch her…”

“Forget it.”

“You like Trude!” Hartmann laughed.

“Do not!” I denied, Hartmann laughed harder, she stopped when her stomach gave a massive snarl and slumped over, the energy she had seconds ago gone.

“So hungry.” she moaned into the dashboard.

“Ha, ha, so you didn’t answer me, what do you think about me now that I’ve been here a bit?”

“Too hungry, can’t think.” Hartmann said. I sighed in annoyance but fished out half of my D ration I was saving for later. She immediately perked up and began chewing happily and for a second I saw who she could’ve been if it weren’t for this war.

“I think the only reason Minna is keeping you around is because she feels guilty.” Hartmann said far more bluntly than I’d expected.
“Don’t hold back or anything.” I frowned, my heart sank, all three Jerrys hated my guts it seemed, looked like the Japs were my saving grace. Imagine that.

“Don’t feel too bad, not everyone can be a witch.” Hartmann continued echoing Minna, my knuckles clenched against the wheel.

“You Jerrys keep saying that, it’s starting to piss me off.”

“Good, do better. Prove us wrong.” she suggested. I couldn’t decide whether to get mad or just revel in just how straightforward and simply she took things.

Hartmann finished the chocolate with a soft hum of pleasure.

“You owe me some more.” I grumbled.

“Nope! You gave it to me.” she grinned and slumped back into the seat.

The road snaked along a steep cliff, a bead of sweat ran down my temple as I glanced down at the much too far ground below, even Hartmann was tense, if marginally so.

“Awww.” Lucchini yawned and slumped in the cargo opening off my right shoulder. “Shirley goes fast down this.”

“Tha-that’s okay Rila-san, like this is good.” Miyafuji stuttered eyeing the edge nervously. I raised an eyebrow at Hartmann.

“Yeager jumps these.” she said which just confused me more.

“What does that mean?”

“Shirley jumps off the curve and lands on the next one!” Lucchini said.

“Sure Lucchini.” I replied and concentrated on the road, you can’t jump a damn supply truck over a cliff like that.

The mail station itself was a log building next to a thin forest, a few weathered trucks sat in a row near the door.

“Okay Rila-san, what’s the plan?” Miyafuji asked.

“Uh, I didn’t really make one.” I smiled meekly. Hartmann chuckled and Lucchini gave a long suffering sigh.

“Oh, okay I’ve got this.” I muttered glancing around the back wall of the office for any bones the universe wanted to throw me. A small couriers uniform flapped in the wind on a clothesline. Far too small for me, but…
“Now I have a plan.” I announced, Miyafuji leaned in earnestly...

***

“This isn’t going to woooork.” Lucchini moaned again from the tree branch, the fifth time in four minutes.

“If you’re so good at it than you do it.” I growled wrestling Miyafuji’s hair under the cap.

“Uh-um I’d be fine with Lucchini-san doing it too.” Miyafuji stammered.

“No, Lucchini looks like she’ve been dunked in coffee and nobody would mistake her body as anything but female.” Hartmann said.

“Hey! Are you saying I look like a boy?” Miyafuji said.

“No, Lucchini just looks too much like a girl.” Hartmann deflected. Miyafuji looked around in confusion for a second before picking up a leather handbag, which may look like a couriers bag from a distance, like four miles.

“Okay, so you need to get past the postman and into the dispatch room, the letter should be going to America.”

“Rila-san! America’s so big!” Miyafuji wailed.

“Shh!” I grimaced. “I don’t want you to have to do this either but I spent two years getting away from mom, I’m not going back.”

“Why? Don’t you love your mom?” she asked. I buried a black frown.

“Later, we need to get that letter before it goes out.” I said. Miyafuji took a shuddering breath and disappeared around the side of the cabin. I sighed and took in a deep breath settling in for the long wait, Hartmann’s muffled giggles as my background.

***

The uniform was baggy and smelled weird. Miyafuji pulled at the sleeve uncomfortably. The porch was a hasty job, no obvious splinters or woodchips though. She swallowed nervously and opened the door. The foyer was as bare as the rest of the cottage, no seats but plenty of counters spanned the space. A slight hint of cigarette smoke wafted on an unseen draft. A disheveled man leaned against one of the counters, his face behind a newspaper and the offending cigarette smoking softly between his fingers.

“Uh, mail sorting coming in.” Miyafuji announced dropping her voice an octave. The man affixed her with beady eyes, she held her breath to keep the squeak of terror in. After what felt like an eternity the man returned to his paper.

“Git working then.” he droned disinterested.

“Hai- I mean yes! Uh, mate!” Miyafuji said.
“Weirdo.” the man mumbled shaking his head.

Miyafuji pulled open the door and a massive room filled with papers, cubbies, and shelves. She openly gaped at the mess before pulling herself together, Rila was counting on her after all she could do this, she hoped. She approached one wall labeled “Foreign” *I might as well start here*…

***

Minna shook her head again as she threatened to nod off again. The adrenaline had finally worn off leaving her with singular desire for a glass of milk and a long sleep. The door creaked open and Lynnette entered.

*Did I- oh yes.*

“Lynn, I was going to give something to Bong to bring to the post office but she dashed off too quick, would you bring this?” she held out a thick envelope.

“Oh? Okay Wing Commander.” she gave her a curious look.

“Oh and good work today Lynn.”

“You already said that.” she said over her shoulder.

“I thought it could stand being repeated.” she lied.

“Thank you again then Minna.”


The door closed and Minna got to her feet to meet Mio in the dining room, she could at least stay awake long enough to help her with the surprise.

***

Lucchini’s bored sighs and the drumming of Hartmann’s fingers blended together into a madness-inducing rhythm that only made the tension that much worse. I swatted my hand over and blocked her hand. “Stop, please.” Hartmann rolled her eyes and reached into her jacket pulling out a small mound of disorganized letters. She tore open the first and began to read.

Miyafuji was still going through letters, how many of those damn things were there?

“Codependency? No.” Hartmann muttered behind me, Miyafuji gave a silent sigh from inside and I could practically see her messy hair droop.

“Oh so that’s why you did it.” Hartmann muttered again still reading.

“That’s nice.” I replied distracted, maybe I should see if I could sneak in and help her…

“’Freaked the fuck out?’ you actually said that to Mio?” Hartmann giggled.
“Wait, what the hell are you reading?” I turned back to look.

“Just something Minna wrote to me.” she looked back down and furrowed her brow.

“What, why is she writing to me about you.”

“You idiot, that’s what we’ve been looking for!” I said in equal parts irritation and relief.

She looked at the signature and back at me and I saw her smile slowly with that twinkle in her eye that Riley used to get.

“Oh no you don’t.” I started and swung my hand to grab her ankle. She wiggled out of range and leapt to her feet with a startled laugh.

“Oh, I’ll get you!” I snarled and ran after her, Lucchini sat in the tree laughing.

***

Hartmann’s laughter echoed out over the sound of the engine. Lynn smiled, she didn’t know how Hartmann could still be awake after the battle but was glad regardless. The post station slid into view, a rustic cottage that seemed to meld into the surrounding forest. She parked and the engine coughed into silence, she picked up the package and approached the door.

“Good afternoon Paddy.” she waited until the man looked up from his paper before giving him a small curtsey. The man’s bored face broke into a warm smile.

“Good past noon to you too Mizz Lynnette. What can I do for ya?”

“I’m just sending a package.” Paddy groaned and started to rise.

“It’s already addressed and ready, I’ll put it in don’t get up,” she said, Paddy returned to his seat gratefully. Lynn always loved the backroom of the cabin always smelling of fresh paper and ink.

“Oh! Sorry I didn’t knock!” she apologized to the mailboy sorting the outgoing mail.

“Lynn-san?”

“Yoshika? What are you doing here?”

“Shhh!” Miyafuji hissed. “I’m looking for a letter Minna-san sent to America so Bong-san doesn’t get transferred.”

“Looking?” Lynn asked nodding to the massive stack of disturbed mail.

“I can’t find it!” Miyafuji wailed.

Footsteps thumped to the door.

“Oh, the address standards got changed Mizz Lynnette, I-” he raised an eyebrow at Miyafuji.
“Yer not Rodney.” he said narrowing his eyes. Miyafuji let out a terrified squeak and threw open a window, she leapt out and disappeared into the forest behind the station. Lynn followed Paddy’s heavy footsteps as he charge out the door,

“I’LL GET YA IMPOSTER!” he bellowed, a distant Miyafuji jumped and redoubled her pace. Paddy chuckled, “SEE YA NEXT WEEK LADIES!”

“Please get the uniform back for me if ya can Mizz Lynnette.” he added with a wink and stomped back to his post.

***

My cheek still hurt on the drive home courtesy of Hartmann elbowing me in the face, the retrieved letter safely stowed in the pocket of my uniform. Hartmann still smiled unashamedly and Lucchini let out a loud laugh every time their eyes met. Miyafuji sat in the passenger’s seat determined not to look at me.

“Oh come on Miyafuji, it’s not like he caught you.” I said.

“That wasn’t nice Bong-san.” she replied stiffly, a perfect recording of the other five times I’d talked to her. I hadn’t thought Yoshika was even capable of anger, but I somehow managed to pull it out of her too.

“Why me?” I sighed as more laughter started bubbling up from the back.

We dragged our beaten hides into Castle Barin on wobbling legs, the setting sun cast dark shadows of trees across the lawn and I took in my complete fatigue of mind and body my dad would call an honest day’s work and what I’d just call a “damn long day.” My stomach pulled harder and we drifted for the mess hall. The door opened with its usual creak and I froze.

My eyes were assaulted by an explosion of color like a unicorn vomited on the walls, reds and greens and blues criss crossed all over the hall hanging down as streamers and coats of arms. Shirley, Mio, and Minna bustled around the abomination hanging other odds and ends.

“If I knew we were making a tournament setup I’d bring my armor and joust, guess I’ll just sing “God Save the Queen” and pretend to drink tea.”

Mio laughed and even Minna gave me a small smile.

“Pretend?” Shirley asked.

“Hell yeah, you ever try to drink leaf juice, it’s like water but worse.”

“Uncultured wench.” she grinned.

I heard footsteps behind me, Shirley shoved me aside as they charged the door.
“HAPPY BIRTHDAY LYNETTE!” they sang as she entered the room. She gave a little jump of surprise before beaming at the group. Yoshika squealed in delight and flung herself into Lynn for a hug, her surliness taken off as easily as a mask. I chuckled and decided to stay back as presents were opened, food was served, and much merriment was had. Yoshika and Lynn were inseparable, Mio laughed the entire way, and Minna let out her soft and motherly side. One could almost forget we all came uncomfortably close to death a few hours ago.

“If leaf juice isn’t good enough for you have some grain juice instead.” Shirley said from my left handing me a beer. I raised it in salute and popped the cap, letting the liquid happiness pour down my throat.

We drank and watched the party in silence for a bit,

“I’m glad they can still do that.” she smiled. I nodded my throat dry.

“I was worried about Lynn, looks like she’ll be okay.”

“Bush beaten around yet?” I asked.

“Fine, I’m glad you’re back.” she chuckled. “Folks here are nice enough but being the only American gets boring.”

“Not back yet.” I replied, she shrugged.

“You did fine, took orders like a champ, protected some arty crews, and didn’t get vaporized. I have a feeling you’ll be around for a while.”

That made one of us I suppose.

The patrons left in a trickle, some shuffled for bedrooms and others dunked heads at the table and started snoring until others carried them away. I finally collapsed onto the bed, almost trying to shift around to make myself more comfortable but just not quite getting there. Sleep pulled on my weary body and I almost dropped off...

“Wait, my stuff is still on that damn plane, what the hell am I going to get clean clothes?”

Chapter End Notes

Formation of the Joint Fighter Wing System

--As the witch rose to prominence in the scope of military operations the question was preposed of their organization.

While the witch has proven herself a capable combatant in the air she is quickly
outmatched by the superior numbers offered by traditional air power. Magic families as a resource pool are very shallow and replenish very slowly making the witch’s expendability out of the question. This niche along with the proven reluctance of armed men to neutralize women, whether in self-defense or not, begets the obvious solution of a global alliance.

Witches from around the world shall be organized into a fighting unit numbered between a flight and a small squadron to be designated as Joint Fighter Wings. These JFW shall be created by committee and any objections to orders or assignment shall be resolved jointly by the members homelands and, if necessary, the Coven. To ensure relative neutrality no JFW shall be composed of more than 40% members of one nation. The JFW is not authorized to commence hostile action against any human factions except those as noted in section VIII of the Paris agreement.

I have no idea if what I'm writing works aside from a vague feel based on kudos to view ratio, not too scientific I know. So any feedback would be a great help, things you liked, things you don't like, suggestions, criticism ect. I think it's fine of course but after all the reason I put it up was to share it, so I want to make sure you at least like it.
“Jesus Christ, how big are your jugs Shirley?” The bra stretched between my fingers was big enough to hold two cantaloupes. It almost reminded me of when I found my mom’s bra in her dresser when I was five and thought it went on your butt, shut up, two cheeks, two cups it made sense at the time. Shirley gave a mischievous grin and continued rummaging in her closet.

“Last time I checked D haven’t done it in a while though.”

Shirley’s room was a bit larger than mine. A few softer colors and decorations broke the standard issue furniture. It was just personalized enough to be called home while staying functional, I liked it. She was asleep when I came but didn’t mind helping me find some replacement clothes until I could get my gear back. My eyes found her butt poking out of the closet again and I crushed the urge to run my hands over her hips to see if they really were as smooth and soft as they looked. She finally fished out a uniform similar to her usual that looked like it might not fit too badly on me.

“Let’s try it!”

I’d never really appreciated body types before, mom always whined that it made me unladylike, now I knew. Her uniform crushed my waist like a vice and I suddenly had new understanding of just how much suffering corsets caused. The bust hung wrinkled over my chest like a kid dressing in clothes two sizes too big, the bra hung limp underneath and the jacket squeezed my shoulders tightly keeping me from raising my arms above waist level. Strangely the very bottom of the jacket fit around my hips well enough, so I at least had the knowledge that her figure wasn’t better than mine in every way. Shirley managed to keep it in for all of four seconds before she gave a long-suffering snicker followed with a burst of laughter.

“We can’t all have perfect hourglass figures.” I said sullenly.

“I know, I know.” she wiped away a tear. “Figured we’d try though.”

I turned my back and pulled my clothes back on, there went my greatest hope.

“Thanks anyway Shirley.”

“Yup, yup.” she replied mildly and gave her bed a look of longing, I left her to get some sleep. Mio had mercifully called a day of R and R, partially because of necessity, partially a reward. Of course I didn’t hear any such thing, but the buzz was pretty heavy at the time. It was a fine time to fix my one-set-of-clothes situation regardless. The halls were empty as most of the wing dozed away. Apparently they had one hell of a fight yesterday so their rest was well-deserved. Me? I was just happy to still be there.

My search for clothes brought me to my neighbor’s room first, Barkhorn was out and about of course, and when I was finally able to wake Hartmann she couldn’t find where in Mt. Garbage she hid her clothes, well they would probably be too small anyway. I entertained the thought of sneaking into Perrine’s room to get some payback, but at best I would get lots of shrill tart nagging and at worst electrical shocks, maybe some other day.

I passed the door to Minna’s office and I heard something rumbling behind it I hadn’t heard in weeks. Voices, male voices. Now what could men be doing on a witch base. I mumbled and pressed
my ear against the door. *One way to find out.* The voices traveled faintly through the thick wood, and what entered my ears resolved into utter gibberish. The words chopped and slashed through the air, I picked out a few familiar names and made out three voices including Minna’s higher pitch. Everything sounded angry but Minna’s had the steel in it I recognized as her “strict” voice. I started pulling away as the gabbering continued but a series of heavy thuds announced someone approaching the door.

I lurched back and tried to compose myself, the door swung open and three uniforms filed out. All three in the trademark Hugo Boss getup, dark coats, shiny shoes, and enough expensive metal to make a run of artillery shells. Say what you will about the Germans, they were by far the best dressed. The lead man’s face was all angles and edges, thick chin and a heavy brow line, sharp eyes gave me a once over before he turned and began walking stiffly away. I’d never never seen a German soldier outside of newsreels so being close enough to touch to something that we were so fixated on and frightened of was spooky.

Two others followed suite, both were younger and less brittle. The one in the hat glanced around the hallway taking in the architecture. He was the youngest of the three, face a bit too tapered to be classically handsome, thin well-controlled hair. His partner was a bit more heavyset, prominent laugh lines, heavy brow and an easy smile. His brown hair combed over in a sleek dome. He gave cap a soft elbow to the ribs and said something. Cap’s eyes finally found me, he gave a small smile and inclined at the waist.

“*Guten Morgen frauline.*”

His voice was a bit higher and more boyish than I’d thought, I stammered and finally got out a repeat greeting. Smiles snorted and turned away shoulders shaking with laughter. I blushed furiously, Cap chuckled a bit but raised a hand.

“Is okay.” he got out haltingly.

“Witch.” he scrutinized me. “American?”

I nodded, he smiled again eyes looking past me.

“Gut, gut, fiery, better than Soviet much.” he muttered seemingly to himself before refocusing.

“Misson, how many?”

“Just one.” I replied raising one finger as further indication. He nodded.

“Victories?”

“Five.” I replied raising four more fingers. Smiles leaned in and was suddenly much more invested, something that looked like pride seemed to slip into Cap’s smile.

“Sehr gut.” he mumbled eyes staring far off again.

“Better than yours.” Smiles leaned over his shoulder, he glanced over to gauge Cap’s reaction and lined up his hands pantomiming a plane chase. The trailing hand wobbled violently and nearly smacked onto the top of his other. Cap gave a sigh of irritation and gave Smile’s shoulder a light punch.
The first officer gave some short barking order, Cap rolled his eyes and turned to follow, Smiles motioned to me and followed suite.

“I have seen this country from both air and ground, it is pleasant.” he glanced out the windows at the grounds. “No Deutschland, but it will do.”

“You fly there?” I asked, he shook his head.

“No, we mostly flew in the east against the Reds.” His eyes seemed to glaze over slightly. “Very cold, very windy, not good place for flying. The Reds were harmless as single men, but there were so many of them.”

He shook it off, “The British were the best I think. No insult to you of course, we had not the chance to see Americans in combat. Nothing to compare to.”

We finally reached the front door to Barin, Smiles turned to me again.

“Well met then Miss...?”

“Bong, uh Rila.” I said, the corner of his mouth tweaked up in amusement.

“Miss Bong, I hope to see you again soo-” water sprayed my face I jerked back mirroring Cap now sopping wet. Loud laughter bubbled up from the window above us.

“LUCCHINI!” I roared at the offender. She jerked her head back before anyone else could see her. Cap sputtered in surprise and shock, the first officer flicked his eyes around in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry about Lucchni, she’s a dunce.” I tried apologizing to Smiles but he was too busy wheezing with laughter.

“I heard that Rila!” the voice came out of the window in sing song.

“Bruder!” another voice cut through the chaos.

Cap spun on his heels a boundless smile lit up his face, wet clothes forgotten. Erica sprinted from the castle and leapt into his arms. He spun her around and answered her shriek of laughter with a quick peck on the cheek. She wrapped her arms tighter around him, a similar smile on her face. The German starting slashing the air again, but these ones were a bit less sharp sounding. It was a quick gesture but something about it made my heart hurt.

“Bruder?” I asked Smiles. He returned it with a raised eyebrow. “You do not recognize Bubi?”

I looked again, his hair was a little bit more sandy than hers, both of their eyes were baby blue and had that vacant quality when dealing with authority. Embarrassment smashed me in the skull.

“So I just tried to speak German like a buffoon and tell the Erich Hartmann about my aerial victories?” I asked dryly. Smiles gave me a stoic shrug.

“Good, I thought for a second this was going to be a disaster.” I put all my will into not going back to sleep and begging the day to start over.

Smiles let me recompose myself, bless him.

“So should I be embarrassed about talking to you too?”
“Rall, Gunther Rall.” he replied mildly.

“Never heard of you.”

He just smiled.

“You could’ve stopped me!” I noted. He cocked his head and gave the sky a vacant stare.

“I am not speaking English much well.” he said haltingly, a playful twinkle in his eye. I couldn’t help it, I laughed.

After a few more minutes the first officer barked something again and I was able to see an almost identical look of irritation go through both Hartmann’s eyes before they split apart. Erica walked back into Barin, a uncharacteristic spring in her step. Erich approached Rall, I shrunk away.

“Why tell her? It was funny.” he asked gloomily.

“This is funny too.” Rall replied. Erich nodded and inclined his head to me.

“Hope to see again.” he said, I made a very undignified squeaking sound. Rall laughed.

“Until next time Ms. Bong.” Rall said and followed the rest to the staff car sitting outside the main gate.

So the Germans were just like us. Weird. I was looking for goose-stepping ubermensch staring blankly at jokes and I got subtle pranksters.

***

I nearly pinballed off a door again, the highest scoring ace was here and Lucchini dumped a bucket of water on his head, I’m not sure which seemed less real. The damp spot on my suit was still real though, time to get that fixed. Shirley was out, Perrine was a pretty stick, Mio was just trim muscle, that really left only one person who was close to my body type, Minna. I gritted my teeth, my instincts were that the less I saw of her the better but the call of hygiene trumped my better senses.

A mop of brown hair entered the hall, I broke into a jog.

“Hey! Miyafuji!” she turned, and I saw a smile grace her lips before switching to exaggerated disdain.

“Bong-san, how are things?” she replied with the perfect mixture of upper-class contempt, stereotypical aristocracy, and something nasally. It was exactly how I’d mock Perrine, and it fit Yoshika about as well as Shirley’s uniform fit me. I tried so hard not to burst out laughing my eyes immediately started watering and I forced my mouth closed.

Her facade broke and I saw concern.

“No, don’t cry Bong-san.” she said, and I broke. She leapt back in alarm at my wheezing laughter.
“Bong-san! It’s not funny!” she hung her hands on her hips which just made me laugh harder. She rolled her eyes and turned back to Lynn. I reached out and caught her arm before she could walk away.

“What!” she said with the beginnings of real anger. I swallowed the laughter down into a cough. “Don’t do the fake coldness thing, it doesn’t work for you.”

“Huh?”

“I saw the smile as you were turning.”

“Nn-o I was smiling at Lynn-chan.” she said, the lie almost as convincing as the Perrine impression. I held my stare for a second.

“It doesn’t matter! That was cruel Bong-san!” she yelled, eyes screwed up and the beginning of tears. That was genuine, I pulled back a step. I didn’t think it was that big of a deal.

“What, asking you a favor?”

“No, making me go in there alone, I almost got in trouble Bong-san, I was so scared I wanted to throw up!”

“Um, Paddy wasn’t mad Yoshika, he was playing with you didn’t you hear him laugh?” Lynn cut in. Yoshika just stared at her.

“I thought it was in there too! Erica apparently had it in her jacket.” I explained. Yoshika looked at me incredulously.

“I know because she started reading it! Then I started chasing her to get it back and she elbowed me in the face.”

“Really?”

“Give me some credit. I’m loud and kinda stupid but I’m not mean.” She gave a long sniff and wiped her eyes. I kneeled down and pulled her to me.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered, she made a soft noise and hugged me back.

“Rila-san?”

“Yeah?”

“Why is your uniform wet?”

***

As much as I wanted to follow the reformed Miyafuji to the dining hall, I forced myself to knock on the doomed doors to Minna’s dungeon. When she called and more impish officers didn’t make themselves known, I entered. She was doing paperwork of course, but for some reason I always expected something different.

“Bong? You’re up early today.” she placed another folder aside. “And why is your uniform wet?”

“Oh, Lucchini poured water on Hartmann’s head.”
“Wait, Erica’s actually up?” Minna asked even more surprised.

“No.”

“Then ho-” the color in her face drained.

“Yup.”

Minna rested her brow in her fingers and swore. For once in my life I felt sorry for her.

“Why does everything go wrong whenever I see you.” she muttered.

Nevermind.

“I’ll talk to her later, so what do you need Bong?” she asked wearily.

“Well, when I flew out and defended Warmwell I kinda jumped out of a plane.” she nodded. “And well, I kinda didn’t bring my suitcase. I’ve been asking around and nobody’s...worked so far.”

I saw the moment she worked it out, a slight lift of her eyebrows. And then she locked it away, twisting her face back into polite puzzlement. No, not this.

“What hasn’t worked out Bong?” she asked.

“Well, that suitcase had my uniforms soo, you know.” she merely raised an eyebrow, I gritted my teeth. I hate you, I hate you so much.

“What does that have to do with the rest of my girls Bong?” she asked, a barely noticeable twinkle in her eye. My hands started shaking.

“Don’t give me that! Your clothes! Give me your clothes!” I shouted, Minna slapped a hand to her mouth in phony shock.

“Bong! I’m wearing my clothes, if I gave them to you I’d be naked!” she gasped. I rolled my eyes, but did glance. Well, her hair did smell nice, and her butt was- FOCUS RILA!

“No! I...can’t ask anyone else, Shirley’s too hourglassy, Perrine’s a stick, Mio’s too...fit.”

Minna glanced around and pulled a curtain off to the side.

“Are you too fit?” she asked, Mio pulled the curtain and looked at me, twin smirks on both their faces.

“I don’t think so.” Mio said in barely veiled glee. “I think she’s calling you fat actually.”

God damn it Mio. I slumped my shoulders “Done yet?”

Actually, maybe she’s saying you lack womanly charm.” Minna ventured. Mio gave an exaggerated sigh of defeat.

“What can I say? I’m too athletic for my own good, my vanity!” she cried out raising her chin and draping her hand over her face. Minna snorted, and Mio traded until both were giggling softly. I clapped my hands idly. Minna got up and stretched an arm over her head.
“I’ve got some spares Bong, they should be fine for a day or two.” she suddenly sunk her finger into my belly. “Should be.”

***

The staff car’s engine rumbled to life and gravel crunched as they left Castle Barin behind. Hartmann seemed to be getting over his elation at seeing his sister and watched his sleeve drip gloomily.

“Every base has one like her.” Rall poked him in the ribs from the back seat.

“Does she even know who I am?”

Rall laughed, “Would that have stopped you, if you were her?”

Hartmann let a smile creep on his face.

“No.”

“Enough, we’ll have to look elsewhere.” Sperrle cut in from Rall’s right.

“Not pointless perhaps, it’s never a bad move to meet the neighbors.” Rall said. Sperrle grunted but didn’t elaborate.

“So what now Herr Generalfeldmarschall?”

“We need an expert in ground movements, the British cannot be trusted in this matter.”

“So that leaves us with?”

“One of our own, General Guderian if I can borrow him.” Sperrle said. Rall and Hartmann exchanged looks.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Is he not on an important assignment?” Sperrle gave him a look hard enough to sharpen a knife.

“I believe that authority belongs with me Hauptmann.”

“I intended no disrespect Herr Generalfeldmarschall.” Rall responded, Sperrle turned back placated for the moment. He chuckled.

“And I have it in confidence that Herr Guderian is exceedingly bored and a little nudge to his intellect may amuse him greatly.”

***

I was an unshakeable bastion of calm, just another star in the sky on the road to enlightenment. I knew because I hadn’t strangled anybody yet.

“Good morning Wing Commander! You look like you gained a few pounds.” Lucchini said adding
another tally to the list of “funny” greetings. I smashed down the anger and smiled.

“No Lucchini I have not gained a few pounds, but I would appreciate it if you put your neck right in there.” I finished with a growl nodding at my hands clenched in front of me.

“Good! You’re almost like Minna, just not scary!” she said. I swiped halfheartedly at her, she bounced away laughter trailing behind.

I was surprised how well Minna’s uniform fit. It was thicker than I was used to and I had to suck in my gut a bit, but aside from that it hugged me well enough. The jacket was hell on the eyes though, a dark green that clashed horribly with my hair and eyes making me look like something out of a vegetable garden. I considered leaving it when Minna was helping me get dressed but that just drew more attention to my midsection. I really need to do something about that.

Dinner came and went, I heroically endured more people “mistaking” me for Minna. At least until the real deal came which deflected most of the jokes to her. She approached me after dinner, a familiar bag in hand.

“Jesus Christ finally.” I sighed in relief and peeked into the suitcase to make sure my uniform was still there. Minna didn’t say anything but gave me a look that instantly made me suspicious.

“When, was it brought here?” I asked eyes narrowed.

“This morning.” Minna smiled.

“What?”

“This morning, it came in with the morning supplies.”

“So I’ve been getting beaten down by shitty jokes for no reason?” I asked, this was absurd, Minna of all people didn’t pull pranks.

“Yes.” she snickered, barely containing herself, I couldn’t help it I laughed even when what I wanted was to shake her nice and hard. She joined in a few gasps later, the same bell sound I’d heard yesterday. I brushed away a few tears.

“Okay, okay, that was kind of funny I guess.” I admitted, she just smiled.

“You a singer or something? Your laugh sounds...trained.” the smile fell open and she just stared at me mouth halfiopen in confusion.

“What? Something I said?” she blinked and started pulling herself back together and it clicked.

“Hey, I can give compliments too.” I smirked. “And that was kind of funny.”

“Yes, well.” she stuttered. “I actually have new orders for you too.”

“I’m not going back to the damned shrink.”

“I wasn’t going to send you back, this is about training.” I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Your kill confirms came in with your luggage, you’re an ace now. But Mio still hasn’t been able to
crack your capabilities or specific powers. We have a specialist that can handle harder cases like yours. Plus your abilities can use some…refinement.”

“Are you calling me messy?”

“Yes. And that only makes your job harder. Her name is Anna Fererra. I’d like to say I think you’ll like her but I’m not sure with you anymore. Mio will fly you out in the morning at 0600.”

Chapter End Notes

It has been established through breeding studies that magical talent, while capable of spontaneous expression tends, to run in families to a model similar to Mendelian genetics. A noted correlation is present linking witch talent with combat excellence of the rest of the family members. At present it is not known whether the presence of magical blood amplifies natural talent or if the correlation is the result of unlikely statistical anomaly.

Forward-Magical Hereditary Theory

I have no idea if what I'm writing works aside from a vague feel based on kudos to view ratio, not too scientific I know. So any feedback would be a great help, things you liked, things you don't like, suggestions, criticism ect. I think it's fine of course but after all the reason I put it up was to share it, so I want to make sure you at least like it.

11/9: Thanks for 250 views! This is becoming quite a project as opposed to the little writing musing it started as, it's nice to know that people do read and like it (I assume).
Chapter Summary

Rila learns there is far more to aerial combat than pointing a gun and pulling the trigger.

Chapter Notes

Aaand we are a dead fic no longer. I’m really sorry to my small following I had before, life happened and it happened with flux. Things are more stable now and I should have more time to write.

This also had the one, two punch of being a difficult chapter to write. It'd been a long time since I'd seen the canon episode with Ferrera and I got her personality completely wrong the first time. It's finally up to where I'm decently happy with it though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The British countryside passed in a wall of green interrupted by the browns of shell holes, dried bushes, and bomb craters. The sea lapped the cliffs to the left leaving a hypnotic droning.

“So who is this Anna Ferrera?” I asked over the roar of Mio’s striker.


“How enlightening.” I snarked.

“You understand.” she said sullenly, out of all emotions. Mio didn’t do sullen.

“Uh, no I don’t, kind of why I was asking.” I said leaving the bulk of the sarcasm out of my voice out of sheer respect. Mio sighed.

“Anna trained me too.” she said.

“And?” I asked. “Oh, don’t like her too much?”

“No.”

Time stretched in uncomfortable silence so I opened my mouth again.

“Do you think I’ll like her?” Mio spared me a look back, it was almost, pensive? She broke into a grin.

“You’ll either fit right into each other or it will be a constant waking hours battle. And either way I can’t wait to hear about it!” she laughed and the atmosphere lightened considerably.
I started scanning the coastline for another witch base, aside from a few cottages and maybe a small town nothing stood out.

“There.” Mio pointed to a small island off the coast. A heavy stone bridge stretched across the water, far larger than the island seemed to justify. A sparse wood covered most of the island with a small cottage nestled within.

“That’s it?” I asked. Mio gave me a look.

“I was expecting more…” I squinted and emoted with my hands. “Army-like,”

“Anna is going to teach you as a witch first and foremost.” Mio said. “Come on.”

The house was as rustic from the ground as it was from the air. I thought that our Striker Units were loud enough to wake the dead but nothing stirred.

“Are you sure she didn’t move?” I said.

“No, she’s here.” Mio’s voice was resigned. A shadow to our left grew until a massive metallic basin crashed to the ground. I stumbled and fell backwards with a yip.

“Another one?” A broom swept down carrying an old woman with graying flyaway hair and sharp eyes, a pair of cat ears poked out of her hair.

“Yes.” Mio said. The woman dismounted and gave me an assessing look as I scrambled back to my feet. She sighed.

“Same as the last three?”

“Yes. We also need to know her magic profile.” she responded. The woman thought for a moment.

“You know, you could always use some practice.” she hinted with a grin. Mio visibly winced.

“Not today, we need her up in the air as soon as possible.” she nodded to me. The woman waved her off.

“Yes, yes who has time? Be off then, but if you’d like me to reshape you into a real witch again, just come back.”

Mio gave her a curt nod. “When your training is complete report back to Barin Bong.” she said.

“Okay?” I said. She turned and taxied across the bridge until take off and angled back towards Barin.

“I take it you’re Anna Ferrera?” I asked to break the silence.

“Basic problem solving, so far so good.” she answered. I wrinkled my nose but bit back the counter.

“Well, let’s not waste the rest of the day.” she said and turned. “Familiar, girl.”

“Wha-"
“Summon your familiar, or you won’t have time to fetch water for baths.” she said.

“Umm?”

“You don’t even know how do that?” she gave me an incredulous look. “Che cavolo, what is that woman teaching?” she sighed again.

“Well, I suppose it isn’t too hard to explain.” she walked over to me and her cat ears and tail popped up again. She grabbed my arm and I felt whatever she was exerting resonate somewhere inside of me.

“Call your power and it will come.” I felt for that link she was making, it didn’t come as easily as with a Striker, but a pop and that odd sensation told me it worked. Ferrera let go and examined my ears.

“Raccoon, grabby little things.” she noted and gave my tail a soft tug, I yelped.

“Acceptable, where are your parents from?”

“Ohio?” I responded in confusion. She raised an eyebrow. “America.” I amended. “At least dad was, Mom’s German.” she hummed thoughtfully.

“So what’s with the tub?” I asked indicating the basin.

“You’ll need to go fetch water for a bath.” she said.

“Okay…” I said and started looking around searching for a well. Ferrera shook her head.

“No, the spring is over there.” she said jerking a thumb over her shoulder. Inland a few miles I could make out a cliff with what looked like some old ruins on it.

“The hell?” I said giving her a confused look.

“Flying is much easier.” she said. I chuckled, *Duh Rila.* Ferrera caught my arm as I turned.

“Who said you could use those machines of yours?” I stared at her and traced the path from the ruin to her house by pointing. Maybe she was going senile.

“You’re going to get the water with this.” she said and produced a broomstick, twin to the one she rode in on. I snorted,

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“How can a broom fly?”

“Magic.” she said. “Witches used these for centuries before those machines.”

“Times are different.” I said.

“Oh? How long can you fly?”

“Two hours.” I said. Ferrera snorted.
“My six year old granddaughter can fly longer than you.” I deflated a bit. “And that’s the problem with new witches, you’re so used to those contraptions that you just shove power into it until it works. It’s crude, inefficient, and makes you see it as a crutch instead of a tool.” She shoved the broomstick into my hand.

“The broom will teach you control, you have a good degree of power but that’s useless without tempering.”

“Do as I do,” she ordered and mounted the broom. The glow of her magic saturated the air and the broom rose.

“Okay, magic.” I muttered and shoved power into the broom. Just like the first time on a striker the broom haft slammed into my crotch popping me a few meters into the air. I shifted forward to distribute the weight better and tried to calm my mind screeching at how high I was. Rationally I knew this height was trivial but who the hell thinks brooms can fly? The broom’s hover stabilized and the pressure on my crotch wasn’t as bad, for a second I thought I’d done it. Then it pitched sideways and I fell off into a bush.

“You have a long way to go.” Ferrera said from somewhere above me and I bit back the steady stream of profanity I badly wanted to use.

Night found me in Ferrara’s shed. Dinner was an awkward affair. I didn’t get the water, as she mentioned judiciously. Luckily she wasn’t that senile and at least let me have some vegetable stew but spent most of dinner pointedly spreading honey on bread and preparing spam. I didn’t know it was possible to want spam that much. Even if I didn’t do too much that day I still felt dirty and resolved if she insisted on this water fetching nonsense tomorrow I’d do it my own way.

***

The fire crackled merrily in its makeshift pit. The massive cooking pot was lighter than I’d expected but it still left a shallow furrow across Ferrara’s yard. The buckets of water were much worse, the repeated trips made my thighs and fingers burn. I sat and watched it boil smiling at the first trickle of precipitated water dripping off the tarp into the empty basin. It wasn’t time or energy efficient but I refused to forego bathing like a savage, it’d be enough for a spongebath at least.

“What are you doing girl?” Ferrera’s voice came from the cabin window as a few more trips left an inch of water in the basin.

“Making my bath.” I responded without turning and prodded the burning logs. “If you won’t let me have one the normal way I’ll improvise.” I expected her to yell at me about how I was breaking the rules and to put it out. Instead she said nothing, I turned and could have sworn I saw the ghost of a smile, she inclined her head to me slowly and pulled back into the cabin.

My muscles ached as I got into bed that night, but I did get into bed marginally clean.

***
“Shields are one of your most important skills.” Ferrera said winding up some devilish mechanical
device in her right hand. “Even the dullest Neuroi can get lucky, so you must be able to defend
yourself.

“What the hell is that thing?” I asked eyeing the machine.

“Language girl, this will deliver a strong but nonfatal shock, block it.”

“What?” I was really saying that word a lot I realized. She pointed a finger and a bolt of electricity
struck towards me, Perrine in a machine, just what I needed. I braced myself and the same gray disc I
used back in my room flared to life. The bolt struck and my muscles tensed up slightly, but the energy
bled away and I grinned.

Until she pulled out a Walther P-38 and pulled the trigger. The bullet skipped by my head with a
sound like an angry wasp.

“JESUS CHRIST!” I shouted and stumbled backwards falling on my ass. My body reported no
sudden holes and my bladder confirmed the lack of peeing myself.

“You just shot me!” I said my voice far more shrill than I wanted. She continued talking like she
didn’t hear me.

“As a witch, your speed and size is your most important asset. But so long as the military insists on
those large flak guns and spraying bullets everywhere you’re likely going to be shot at. Notice how
the shield did nothing to the bullet.”

“Maybe could you warn me before shooting, like I don’t know, “Hey Rila, I’m about to shoot at
you!”” I said.

She shook her head. “Then you’d blubber like headless chicken and I might have shot you for real.”
she continued.

“Making a physical shield takes more energy than one that blocks emissions. You have to will it to
become solid. If it makes you feel better I’ll count down this time. Three. Two. One.”

***

“The magic runs through your body equally, I believe it is a strength talent.” she said. I arched an
eyebrow as she motioned to the boulder embedded in her front yard. She summoned her familiar by
demonstration. I dubiously crouched and wrapped my arms around it and braced. Magic surged and
the boulder slowly but surely lifted out of the damp earth.

“Hey! This is….easy!” I groaned trying to hoist the boulder into a better position.

“Hm, enhanced strength, low strain.” she noted, walking around me. The magic ebbed like water
draining from a sink and the boulder fell back with a weighty thud. Ferrera laughed.

“Be careful girl, every ability takes power.”

“So can I lift cars and stuff?” I asked eagerly, she shook her head.

“Nothing so drastic, that Lieutenant of yours may be able to lift cars but yours is different. Instead of
using pure magic to lift things, your magic augments your natural strength. It isn’t as strong but you’ll
have far more endurance and it’ll last longer. It also amplifies as your physical muscles improve.”

***

“I suppose that will do for today.” Ferrera sighed and turned for the house. I turned to stow my gear, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end with a faint hum of magic. I turned and raised my hand catching a stone heading for the side of my head, it stung in my hand.

“Ah, so a night witch too.” Ferrera noted. I stared at her until she motioned to the window of her cottage. A series of strange ethereal lines floated a few inches away from my head around and above my ears. The topmost resolved into an arrow with a pair of projections and below them were a pair of diagonal lines.

“SCR-540?” I asked and felt my hand go through the lines without disturbance. She gave me a look.

“We didn’t fight with that radar stuff. But it allows the witches that have it to fight in darkness.”

***

“You know what, that’s it!” I yelled after being hurtled into another bush by Boris the bucking broom for the fifth time. “If you’re saying strikers are so terrible than fight me with one. Right here right now!”

Ferrera rolled her eyes and sighed. “I’ve already told you my six-year-old granddaughter can fly better than you.”

“I’m not talking about your grandkid old lady, I’m talking about you!” She opened her eyes and tweaked her lip a little.

“Oh?” she said.

“Yeah, right now!” I repeated. Instead of snorting and calling me dumb like I thought she would she laughed. I stared at her in confusion.

“Oh girl, even if you’d finished all of your training you wouldn’t be able to touch me.”

“Prove it.” I said.

“Fine, fine.” she said waving a hand at the shed. I suited up and she came out the front door and underhand tossed a gun to me.

“What the hell is this thing?” I asked, taking out the clip and eyeing the paint rounds.

“A Lee, show it respect.” she said and hefted a similar model.

“You have paint rounds too right?”

“I really shouldn’t, but after all that whining you did about the pistol I have to preserve my hearing.” I let the barb slide and eyed the broom over her shoulder.

“Where’s your striker?”
She spared a glance at the broom on her shoulder, I couldn’t help it, I laughed. Her cold little smile stopped me.

“Premature, save it for after.” she said and took off. I checked the gun and followed.

It felt so good flying without the damn broom wobbling everywhere, the sun was shining and the leaves below me rustled with my passage. I tracked the Lee over the canopy below, Anna could hover on that broom and if it were me I’d pop up and put rounds in my ass as I passed.

Turns out I gave her too much credit. A sharp popping sound and a hissing sound announced her shooting. I looked about wildly and finally spotted her coming in from out of the sun, barrel tracking me. I rolled, diverting momentum left and came out skimming the canopy hoping the roiling leaves would foul her shots. More shots range out and I saw some leaves in front of me momentarily flicker orange as I passed. I put on speed and looked back. Something fast hissed by my cheek and I jerked in surprise but not enough to crash. Ana was falling behind.

“Haha! Eat it old lady!” I crowed through the adrenaline. When she was little more than a speck in the distance I pulled up in a half loop, I racked my mind trying to remember what Barkhorn had called it during practice, Immelman? A distant popping sound interrupted my thoughts, more hisses and something snapped against my lower back. I let out a little involuntary yelp and rolled again. Ana struck left, I tracked the gun and found her, the broom was nice and slow. I smiled and let loose a long burst. Then Ana just wasn’t there, she gripped her broom and just rolled it upside down, flipping back up when my bullets splattered uselessly against the leaves below her.

“What the he-” I tried to shout before she flipped upside down again and the broom was suddenly facing me, the old lady raising the Lee, expression stoney. My shield flickered in front of me and the paint was a series of red splotches through the disc. We passed each other and she tracked the gun up, I was ready this time though and caught more on the shield. The gun fell silent and I did another Immelmann. This time she met me, gun blazing, I raised my own and answered in turn. I saw her jerk and a green splotch appear on the right sleeve of her dress.

“Haha!” I laughed in triumph. She jerked her hands in the stop signal. We headed for home, a smug smile still on my face.

We landed and she stretched out her shoulder,

“See, told you old la-” I started. She marched past me before I could finish. “Hey!” she continued and pointed out an orange splotch on my left striker.

“Look.”

I did, there were three marks on the casing and one on one of the propellor blades. I looked at the other and another red splotch was higher up near where my thigh would be. She spun me around roughly and grabbed the back of my uniform shirt, I yelped.

“Opening volley.” she said pointing at the orange. “If those were real your striker would be set on fire, either an emergency landing or crash. If you were lucky you’d have a leg covered in burns, if not, you would’ve broken your bones on the branches.” Before I could digest that, she indicated another splotch in the middle of my back I’d felt.

“Center of the spine, at worst you’d have died on impact, at best you’d be paralyzed.” She turned
and pointed out another splotch on my right striker, not direct but enough to cause some damage.

“Radiator hit, your striker would overheat and ruin the engine.” She let out a breath and met me with a steely gaze.

“That is why I’m teaching you.”

I sat on the cobblestone wall and took in what she said. She’d put a lethal hit on twice before I’d even scratched her, hell, that was just a flesh wound even. There’s saying you’re far out of your league and then there’s being shown definitively just how much. I didn’t notice Ferrera until she started talking. Her attempt at a smile came out a stiff grimace, but she tried.

“Only eight witches have died since the neuroi came. In 1920 that number was 431.” I winced at the number. “Ho-.”

“Be silent and listen.” Ferrera interrupted. “Flight was new and the advent of the machine gun made broom flight too dangerous.”

I opened my mouth to drive it home but her glare convinced me to shut up.

“We flew strikers by necessity. Even then I watched fourteen witches die, some were unavoidable but others would have lived if they just had the knowledge. Knowledge I am trying to teach you.”

She looked at me and I wisely said nothing.

“You don’t know anyone who has died yet.” she said. The words cut deep and anger welled up inside along with a dark bubbling of despair. Something showed on my face, Ferrera mouthed a soft “oh” and her face grew somber.

“I’m sorry, I did not mean you personally. But that was how it started for us too. The enemy grew stronger, and the indiligent started to fall. That is why I teach witches, so they don’t make those same mistakes.” she stood with a sense of finality and I heard her footsteps grow quieter.

I wrestled the feelings down until I could open my eyes again. Ferrera returned with a handkerchief and rubbed the corners of my eyes.

“You couldn’t beat me today, but I saw potential in you.” It might’ve been just me but her stony expression seemed a little softer. “But perfection is not easy and neither is my training.” she finished and shoved my forgotten broom into my hands.

“Now, mount it and hold in level flight.”

Chapter End Notes

I encourage you to comment. Things I did well, things I didn’t do so well, whatever comes to mind. I don’t bite and this isn’t written in a vacuum and and improving your writing is much easier with constructive criticism and feedback.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!