

**Paragraph 175**  
**by Jessica Suphan**

“Triangles!” Otto flinched against his chest, and Aloys squeezed his lover as snowy gravel bit his wet knees and his pulse threatened to strangle him. “Pink triangles, come out at once!” Pink triangles. Like that was all they were, they weren’t even caught yet and they had already lost their names. Aloys’ jaw clenched as Schweinfurt’s afternoon bustle quieted. Shit shit shit, what to do, how could they get out of this? They’d already had their chance to forsake homosexuality, do their part to increase the Aryan race, show that they were racially conscious and deserved to live. But his legs stayed leaden no matter his thoughts. They weren’t caught yet. Three times they’d been at nightclubs and escaped the inevitable bust. Maybe one more time. Feet scampered in the street to let the SS storm closer. “Pink triangles!” Three strikes and you’re out. *Why* hadn’t he listened to Otto?

His lover’s snap brim fedora was crumpled against his overcoat, hiding the fellow 20-year-old’s face, but its dark grey band didn’t muffle another whimper. “Shh, shh...” The chatter in the restaurant rose. Were they trying to act like everything was normal, like lives weren’t ended this way? Aloys pressed his face into grey felt so Otto could feel his kiss. *Clgk!* Something metal fell and they startled. Was it his imagination, or was Otto’s heart beating through both their sweaters? Or was it his? Or both, joining the two of them? His closed eyes clenched as his legs began to numb and his socks sagged on his calves. “Maybe...” He could barely hear himself. “Maybe they won’t find us...” But heeled footsteps advanced down the sidewalk towards their alley. Even the automobiles seemed quieter now, as if their sheet music had transitioned them into pianissimo. “Triangles!”

Aloys curled around Otto as a lump welled in his throat. Boots slid in a military turn to his right, and frozen limbs flinched. “There you are!” Gloved knuckles grazed his cheek as Aloys tightened his hold and Otto screeched like bandsaw against bandsaw. “*Let go of me!*” Shit. Otto’s voice only spiked like that when terror morphed into fury. There was a reason they had run thrice before. Otto’s hands leapt away and Aloys clamored for them only to get kicked. “Hey, don’t touch him!” The protective snarl and Otto’s swinging arm that resulted in skin smacking against skin were worse than the pain in his side. Conversation heightened, he could hear it through the brick, laughter too high. Did no one *care*? No, no they didn’t. If you cared you acted, if you acted you disapp- Otto’s boot whacked his temple and Aloys rocked as the SS officer slammed his lover into the wall. His eyes closed in a wince as felt landed in his lap. Aloys instinctively clutched it and tried to scramble up while Otto’s nails caught the officer’s face alongside spit. Instinct demanded he grovel, apologize, beg, but there was no saving this. No saving them.

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Aloys stumbled on a chunk of ice, his equilibrium sent awl. “Get *in* you stupid queer!” The Kapo with green triangles tattooed on his hand to match his patch smacked the grey shirt that barely held itself together. But long sleeves thinner than bark were still better than nothing against the snow.

“Sorry...” Wind smacked the walls as the Kapo shoved him inside, but as Aloys dragged his swollen ankle to his cot it didn’t drown out the SS officer’s chuckle. The man’s straight posture screamed ‘war veteran’. But you didn’t need to have fought in a war to get the cruel pistol on his belt, even the most trusted Kapos sometimes got them. His glance at the chuckle

had been too long. Aloys studied his rusty cot that was nothing more than a plank on metal covered by a sheet. What did the others get? The ones who travelled on in that nail-strewn cargo crate that the train kept threatening to throw off? “What’re you lookin’ at pink?” Did Otto at least get a sheet too? “You tryin’ ah seduce me?” Uh oh. Aloys shrunk at the yell, fingers tight on his sheet as he tugged it into military corners. Wind or someone exchanging sex for protection might be the cause, but regardless, if the beds weren’t perfect by roll call they’d all pay. The teenager behind him bumped their backs but Aloys didn’t react. No point. He shook his head in response, and accidentally tugged the upper corner loose. Otto probably got a sheet too, they were both ‘special guests’ that everyone tried to cure as much as they tried to kill them. “You can’t seduce me, I’m a real man! Kapo, give that thing a warnin’ shot, it’s not stupid.”

His heart sunk at the muscular Kapo’s audible smirk. “*Yes Sir.*” He didn’t have the energy to go through this, what if he went unconscious again? Would they burn him this time? Aloys shifted his weight off his bad foot right before wood split the thin skin across his back and he screamed. The crack slammed him against the bed, everything deathly silent save for their snickering superiors. Their betters. Were they really better than him? A brain aching from dehydration and malnutrition shrugged. “Line up!”

Right, right, his arms shook as warmth ran down his back but Aloys obeyed. “Y-yes Sir...” His left sleeve slid up and black ink caught his attention as he and 29 other men branded with pink triangles arranged themselves side by side. No, this was the real brand. **K-11359**. Was that proof that they were better than him? That he *should* be here? It was easier to look at a rushed tattoo and understand than think about the racial superiority officers lectured them about. Speaking of armed lectures... Aloys cast a quick glance up and down the line that his fellow homosexuals staggered into. Was everyone here? *Everyone?* Yes, it seemed-

*Fwumph!* His body jerked to attention, head spinning from the sudden movement. A twinge of sympathy bit Aloys’ empty stomach at a scarred head on the floor. Was that...Rolf? Rudolf? It was hard to remember the only name he knew when he couldn’t concentrate and speech’s forbidden nature was well-enforced. Should he...? No, it didn’t matter that the older man wasn’t moving. He mustn’t either. Once you were in line you didn’t get out. “Hey, hey come on...” Guilt flicked the back of his throat as the man whose hair had been perfect Aryan blond before they shaved it hurried over. SS and Kapo alike were too busy snickering at their own conversation to notice. Or they just didn’t care. But he cared, he *did*, he just...knew better. And Blond Man was helping anyway. A thought occurred, but drifted away before Aloys pulled it back while the older man lay unresponsive. Was he the same as when he was free? How long ago even was that? Snow had left but now it was back, that meant...a year? At least? Maybe more, since he had bruises from when two SS officers his age couldn’t decide whether to whip ice at him or hold his face in the mud and chose both. “Come on man...” Still no reaction, and the SS officer’s wordless shout made them all jump.

“And why the hell aren’t you in line?” Aloys shrunk as the officer stalked past, his limp barely noticeable when he was angry. Given that he was quite clear that they made him sick, Aloys sometimes forgot the limp even existed.

He didn’t need to look to hear his fellow prisoner rise and Aloys cowered for him. What the hell? Why wasn’t he staying down, they liked when you stayed at their feet! Turning into what their dictators liked was how you survived, how did the guy not get that? “I’m sorry.” At least he had the sense to apologize. It didn’t sound sincere, but it might be better than nothing. “I was trying to help him, that’s all. Let me.”

Aloys ground his teeth, eyes closed as resignation slid down his esophagus. What an idiot. This wasn't some story where the dragon got slain by the one knight brave enough to oppose it, what was he thinking? "Hey!" He could never name it before, but now he could even tell where a steel-toed boot kicked. At least it might not puncture the temple. "You stupid queer, can't you tell it's dead?" The officer's sneer would be the last thing he ever heard one day, Aloys knew it. "At least it isn't stupid enough to talk back!" *Tchohhh...* The gunshot faded as Aloys stood there, a workhorse who shied at butterflies but not ambulances. "You two! Get them in line!" Him? But two men were already obeying. As they dragged the dead bodies into their proper spots Aloys straightened up with a deep breath that hurt his chest. Look normal. Numbness was safety. "About time!" The Kapo slid to one end of the line as quick strides brought the SS officer in front of them, one of the only two times the prideful convicted criminal had to act like a normal prisoner again. So without fail, the end and beginning of each day always involved extra pain for someone. "B-9804!"

"Here Sir!" With a smirk to the rest of them the Kapo gave a quick salute that the officer smiled at. Was he mocking him? Was it serious because he knew the veteran liked that? Aloys couldn't ever figure it out, but dizziness led splotches of fuzz across his vision so the thought slipped away.

The SS officer grabbed a clipboard and marked it. With the clipboard's end balancing against his chest he pulled a string of jerky out of his breast pocket. Lucky, getting three meals a day and snacks. When did he last eat? Aloys couldn't say, but at least he wasn't on kitchen duty anymore. It was the worst job to have, surrounded by a feast while his stomach ate itself. "B-9992! C-310!" His heartrate was hard enough to echo in his ears, and each response wouldn't calm it. No, it wouldn't calm until this was over. One person missing, even a corpse, and bones would break. K-11359!"

Static skittered across his eyes like they were radios, but at least he could still hear. "Here Sir!" He was obeying, see? No need to hurt him. But did that even matter? Of course it did, obeying didn't guarantee safety but at least it increased his chances.

"K-44863!" They were from all over. So many camps, so many death marches from one to the other, how could so many batches of cookies left to burn still be edible? They would be eaten though. One prisoner, Blue, had whispered of officers eating corpses where everyone could see, cooked as if they were turkeys. And while he'd been odd Aloys believed him. Who was he to call anything impossible anymore? Everyone answered, silence only present as their personal Satan jotted down the two deaths. "K-11359! D-8421! Get these things over to the ovens."

Aloys leapt to obey and his swollen ankle screamed. He staggered, teeth grinding before a loose tooth rested like a jawbreaker on his tongue. "F-y-yes Sir." The man known to his mind as Crooked Nose muttered agreement.

In the land called Before that was wonderful and painful to look back on, he'd have been able to lift one poor victim with ease. The lumber mill had once trained him well. Yet now muscles had all but disintegrated. He knew that, but when Aloys gathered the limp corpse in his arms it set off a deep ache that his mind still demanded he disbelieve. Something must still be normal. But no, nothing was, nothing, nothing, nothing.

So as he lugged the man outside where wind nipped at his cheeks and he spat the tooth into mud that would never let anything grow Aloys' mind slid into comforting blankness. If he didn't think, nothing could affect him. A fence like the chainmail in Otto's medieval mysteries clanged as it rippled, and Aloys shied away. But how could he not think? In the few moments without a guard near him, how could he not live as much as he could? Like Otto. His thoughts

always turned there now. Where was he, how was he doing? The idea that Otto might not be alive couldn't even form in his mind. Of course he was. Somewhere, but a guard smacked the fence and scared the thought from Aloys' head as he gripped the corpse like a macabre teddy bear. "Don't even think about it queer!" He *wasn't*. The old childish, whining displeasure at the injustice of being wrongly accused could rise even here apparently. Getting to the heterosexual men wouldn't gain him anything but being attacked by them. He didn't *want* to.

But Aloys nodded, sagging under the body's weight, but then hefted him against his chest as the man's head lolled. "Yes Sir." When the officer stalked away he hobbled after Crooked Nose's rapid pace.

The playground, as the Kapos called it, was never clean of blood. SS officers used its proper name, torture yard, but Aloys had long known that the Kapos were referring to this place of white and brown and crimson by its *true* name. You had fun on a playground, and the SS officers were delighted children in this one. Four posts rose inside the square as Aloys lurched into a shallow wheel rut and hissed. The man slid. But his arms curled, thumping flesh against a hollow chest. Just get inside, inside would be warm.

The half of the double door that Crooked Nose got open swung shut behind him, and Aloys fumbled with body and handle until metal opened. Heat and coal's dirty scent smacked him in the face as he sighed. *Warmth*. Something that the weather and Nazis alike denied them, and getting it despite the latter made the warmth even better. "Are you okay?" Crooked Nose watched him, flimsy pant legs soaked by snow. Aloys nodded as he rocked the now urine-sharp scented corpse.

"Yeah, yeah just... *warm*." They shared delighted smiles, loggers above the mundane earth, and a whim reopened his mouth. "I'm Aloys. Aloys Caspari." His name. A name no one had spoken since Otto was torn from him, screeching fury mixed with pleading, blood painting his hands as it leaked from a Nazi's broken nose. Otto, god, had he found any kernel of happiness?

Crooked Nose blinked before his smile melted. "Adolf Dengler, it's great to say that again." Aloys couldn't help wincing internally at the man's first name, but he returned Adolf's grin. "Adolf Dengler, Aloys Caspari..." Adolf rolled their names in his mouth as if he'd plucked cherries from a tart. He barked a laugh, and something in it made Aloys join in without even glancing around for guards. "Great to meet you Aloys Caspari, I'm Adolf Dengler!"

Hearing his name *was* a joy, he was right! "Nice to meet you Adolf Dengler, I'm Aloys Caspari!" Their laughter intertwined as it shook the pink triangle-clad corpses in their arms.

Metal clattered, and silence surged into their mouths as Adolf froze and Aloys stared over his shoulder. Six brick crematory ovens rose high in the room, metal grates shiver-inducingly big. But Aloys unfroze upon seeing six coal-covered and naked teenagers. Probably teenagers, it was hard to tell with malnutrition everywhere, but the only awake boy who rubbed his head with an iron poker in his lap looked far more ready to shatter than tell on them. "What...?"

This wasn't his first time delivering bodies, but it was the first time this room wasn't busy. Aloys' heart ached at the blackened boys laid out like music notes on a page. Only a fool envied oven boys. He had for a little while, before he realized their privileges came at such a high price. They got to be warm, guards were only in the room on deliveries, and shoveling coal into the ovens was all they had to do. But the biggest price clinked around the boy's ankle as he stood. Perhaps a foot of chain linked him to the oven. It wouldn't come off until he died, and the ovens' death rate was less than four months since guards rarely came in. So, even compared to

the other prisoners, the boys were barely fed. They were forgotten about, the working of the ovens automatic in the guards' minds. "We just came to deliver some...some bodies." For the first time Aloys gave the limp man's corpse an apologetic glance. Now he'd burn. An older man who didn't deserve this place. None of them did, and if this were a story he would try to free the oven boys and help them escape. But that was why before's rebel hung in Adolf's arms. There were no heroes here.

"Okay, right, they can come over..." The remnants of his pants barely covered anything as the boy avoided looking at them and opened the grate. His coworkers slumbered on, hopefully without nightmares. No one deserved nightmares both awake and asleep. "Just, just shove them in..." He turned a scarred back and, after Adolf, Aloys took pity on the boy and shoved the body in hard enough that leaping fire obscured it.

The cold embraced them, and Aloys wished he could shrug off the hug. Back inside their building was barely better; cold air seeped through the cement, while wind made the bolt locks and padlock bang against metal as if they were trying to sing them to sleep into a nightmare. As he dropped his pants a shiver wracked his aching lungs. The Kapo and SS officer leaned against the walls of a corner together, trading words while watching the men who lay pointedly still in bed. Being half-naked now held no shame for Aloys. Still, he didn't look at anyone as he pulled the frayed blanket over him. "Hey!" Aloys startled, shrinking as he stopped fumbling to straighten the blanket. Instead his arms shot straight, hands flat on thin cotton. "That's what I thought." Now he was in the same position as everyone else, only some asleep as the officer's snarl of derision all but shone in the dark. "None of you asshole queers're to be wankin' off!" He'd never been in less of a mood to. But Aloys just nodded, eyes closed against the world. This was how he'd fallen asleep for what felt like an eternity, and exhaustion meant sleep always came. He embraced it. Maybe he'd dream of Otto again, if he dreamed of him he couldn't be forced to forget him...

"How dare you!" Fury smacked Aloys awake, the man frozen not just from numbing cold. His hands were in place right? Heartbeats made his chest ache with their strength as the Kapo yanked a man four beds over onto the ground. Metal struck bone. "*Hands on the outside of your blanket!*" Aloys' eyes squeezed shut. If only he could hide under his blanket, a child hiding from monsters. But then his hands would be under.

"I-I wasn't, I'm sorry, I was asleep!" Oh god, so this wasn't even someone stupid like before... All Aloys could do was squeeze his eyes tighter. Someone was getting beaten, and he couldn't help them... But his sense of helplessness had been compounded for too long to do anything but shrug in acceptance. Metal clanged as the Kapo dragged the man outside. His pleading leaked through the walls as the SS officer cleared his throat and Aloys kept every muscle still. He was obeying. No need to beat him as cold wind swept through the open doorway. Outside water splashed against the man, then again and again as Aloys' heart sank. "Stupid queer, I bet you're too cold to jerk off now huh?" He wouldn't make it through the night. There was no way he would, and Aloys' surety only rose when the tattooed criminal stomped in without his victim. They'd find him frozen tomorrow, one with the earth that was supposed to nurture him. "Goodnight faggots!" Right, sleep, forget everything.

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He hadn't held his breath hoping for food, and so when they were ordered outside right after the morning count Aloys wasn't disappointed. Boots smacked him in the chest. "Put them on, let's go, hurry up!" It had been the Kapo's turn to have the night watch, so at least their officer wasn't

angrier from lack of sleep. Aloys dropped to his knees, numb fingers fumbling. His toes had long since lost their feeling, two had been lost completely, his feet were callus-laden. But donning the boots centered him. It was such a little thing before, but now simple boots made him feel a little more human. If all his senses but touch deadened he could be back in the forests with his father and three brothers. "Let's go, move!" So they were product testers. With a nod, Aloys began his trek across the playground and back. Better to test boots than medical developments.

Hours must have passed by now. The cold that had once kept him attentive and moving now had his legs so numb Aloys barely felt the boots chafing against his feet. Across the playground, behind the crematorium, back to their building, and again. Again and again and again.

Other guards and prisoners lent life to the drab concentration camp around them, but it was lukewarm life at best. Somewhere in the camp prisoners stabbed the earth with shovels. Their pattern of noise couldn't be called a rhythm, for that suggested joy. No, this was no nightclub where roulette wheels and martini glasses and humans all whirled in harmony. Back and forth, back and forth... His eyes trailed along the ground. Shuffling feet swelled in number, and when Aloys glanced up his heart stopped. It was only for a moment, but his body lurched forward as if to restart it. But his gaze didn't waver. Bald, waif-like, shaking, the man looked like all the others as they donned boots. Nothing about him was unique but he absorbed all of Aloys' attention. *Otto!* His shuffling became actual steps before he forced himself to slow again. That was how they got separated last time. Showing care for each other was too dangerous, he'd have to be calm even though his heart didn't remember what that meant. *Otto was alive!* A young SS officer whose hair looked almost too blond to be real waved his hand. Like sheep barked at by a herding dog, the new prisoners turned. Some of them were limping, one had a bloody cheek. But they all set off with the exhaustion of those who were strangers to sleep. Aloys paused, eyes on his own herding dog as he stepped back. Was this okay, would he notice? His warden elbowed the new one with a laugh while the Kapo hovered near them, so Aloys drifted backwards. A new prisoner advanced on one well foot and one that dragged. The man gave him a blank stare before it flitted down. How many times had he done that too? So many, their officers worked to melt their minds and the Kapos were happy to help so they weren't victims too. But where was Otto now? There he was, between two other men, and when Aloys stepped towards them, breaking the pattern for just a moment, eyes glanced to him but the only ones that mattered widened. His lover stepped closer and tugged him into the group. Aloys followed his arm, warmth swelling in his chest as a smile trembled on Otto's lips. *Otto*, Otto found him again!

His ears stayed perked for any shout from the guards, while Otto's hand slid down to hold his and Aloys' heart screamed in joy. *Otto!* Shuffling along felt suddenly like leaps of joy as Otto leaned closer and kissed him. Thrilled heartbeats became terrified ones in his ears. Happy butterflies in his stomach were hornets ready to sting. Aloys returned the kiss, grip tight on his lover's hand, before he pulled away and dropped Otto's hand with his heart ready to strangle him. Stupid stupid stupid! "All's well." Otto shuffled forward so Aloys did too, murmurs rippling around them like lapping waves. Communication? He glanced around at the new prisoners to make sure. Yes, they were actually talking to each other, didn't they know it was forbidden? "It is, it's *okay*." The voice he'd longed for turned his gaze to Otto's tiny smile. "He doesn't care so long as we're deferential, all's well handsome."

Hot tears bit his eyes. Handsome. As if either of them were now, as if things were just how they used to be, as if Otto could say such a thing and return them to a better time. His chest shuddered with his inhale. "O-okay." Otto gestured down, and Aloys' volume followed the bony

hand while they shuffled. But his lips turned up as he squeezed Otto's hand. "I, you're *here*, with me, you're *here*, I thought you were gone forever..."

"I assumed you were too." The green of fading bruises decorated Otto's eyes who had sunk into their sockets with malnutrition, but those eyes smiled. "But you're here. I'm here, we survived to be together..." He had always been frail, but this time Otto actually stumbled as wind shoved them. "What're the chances?"

Murmurs swirled around them as Aloys looped away from the buildings and back towards the playground, amazement fluttering in his chest. People were a crowd around them. There were at least ten prisoners and they were allowed near each other, to whisper! Did they have any idea how lucky they were? Or, more important, that it surely wouldn't last long here? A taller man hummed beside him, his fond voice a smoker's garble. "Maybe none of us will have to survive much longer."

Uh oh. Was he one of the ones who wished for death, did his brown eyes hide a plan to provoke the guards? But a man whose pink triangle was fading nodded. The envious look he cast Aloys and his lover made the former tense until the man stumbled and dropped his gaze. "I heard that too. Allied forces're getting closer..." His whisper dropped to a breath as murmurs faded around them, everyone attentive as Otto squeezed Aloys' hand. "They want to empty all the concentration camps and string up the Nazis."

*Really?* "Oh, sure." If the man missing an eye had more energy he might've scoffed, but he just sounded vacant. "Just like, the KPD, says, they'll kill the Führer. They won't, just forget about it." But he didn't want to. Even a particle of hope was more than he'd had since their favorite underground nightclub got attacked years ago. So when a man with a cheek scar shook his head hope soared again.

"I've'rd it too. Two o' the guards're arguing ove't during our death march here, it's happening. They dunno where or when, and that makes 'em angry, but it's happening." He smiled with a toothless gap in his upper jaw. "Whatever country they're from, the Allies wanna free us. It won't be like Poland, they'll actually help us. We'll be free."

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Frau Schulze's spatula rapped the picnic table before she sneezed. Her allergies didn't make her husband's gun in her floral dress' pocket any less intimidating. "Oh, bless *me*, now hurry along." Aloys dried the last of the glasses as the other half of the two first women he'd seen in months stirred punch. She had a separate spatula of course, a perfect Aryan wouldn't share anything with a prisoner. Punch in which the chunks of fruit bounced softly against the glass, grass tickling his feet, a picnic table with a white lace cloth that Frau Schulze kept smoothing down... It could almost seem idyllic. If the punch and crackers weren't for SS guards, if two more of his toes hadn't fallen off before spring came, if gunshots a few meters away didn't echo as the lace swayed. But he wouldn't have to do this much longer. Whispers were flurrying more and more, despite having only scant seconds for them to live in. Blossom in. They could be saved. Allied forces kept advancing, and perhaps before spring dandelions turned to seed they'd be free.

He nudged a tray of orange slices away from the table's edge and snuck a glance at his fellow prisoner. Had she heard the rumors? Of course he couldn't talk to her, even other prisoners mustn't be turned gay, but did she *know*? They were still only rumors, but with so many saying it it must be true. It had to be. Hope was soft in his chest, yet it softened the

constant mental blows. Frau Schulze appeared in his peripheral vision and Aloys' eyes leapt to the ground. "Th-the cups are dry and ready Frau..."

"Good, good!" She flitted about them anyways as her gun winked at him in the sun. Her gaze lifted to consider her second underling. But the woman perhaps older than Aloys watched the punch as she rocked gently, still stirring. A black triangle with stupid stitched inside it moved with her. Perhaps she couldn't understand the rumors then? Aloys had never been able to determine mental handicaps at a glance, but she was definitely mute. Now Frau Schulze's fluttering caught her attention for a moment before she focused on the punch again. Their temporary warden gave her a quick look far warmer than he had ever gotten. But of course; it wasn't her fault she was like that, unlike him.

Two guns went off at once, and reflex jerked his attention towards the louder-than-normal noise. Just a few meters down a gentle slope SS officers laughed together. Nine guns glinted, two still held like lovers. Another three belonged to guards whose lips stayed still. Blood glinted too. It covered a prisoner's head like a burial shroud, his still body at the feet of the two guards. One kicked him, snapped his fingers. A Kapo stepped on seated prisoners as he hurried up, dragging an unconscious woman who had tried to escape while another Kapo tossed the body onto the pile. If only Otto was here with him. But Otto wasn't here, he was fixing the machine gun. Better to be away than here as moral support getting scarred too. Laughter faded, a gunshot rang out, and the more lanky of the two guards kicked the woman. "You deserve this!" His fellow guard stepped away from the line of prisoners forced to be sacrifices, and began up the hill. Aloys tensed and faded backwards. He was being good, no need to notice him. Another gunshot. "You deserve this!" The comparatively broader Aryan advanced, and Frau Schulze prodded Aloys' fellow prisoner with her gun's butt. The woman poured a cup without looking up as he got ignored in favor of crackers. Thankfully. Muscles strained beneath a grey uniform when the officer took the punch Frau Schulze offered him. "Thanks so much for this Gerda."

"You deserve this!" Someone's life ended as the officer leaning against the table chewed a cracker. "We're right!"

He lifted his glass to Gerda, chuckle warm. "We needed a day like this. Way too stressful lately." *Stressful?* Aloys would scoff if he had a death wish. But no, *finally* he had Otto waiting for him to return again.

Frau Schulze simpered, smile delighted as she smoothed her dress and a gunshot rang out amidst jesting tones. "Oh you're welcome Henri. I know my focus should be on kitchen, children, and church, they're where I'm most comfortable anyways, but what's wrong with you men enjoying yourselves?" Three people died in quick succession. Aloys peeked down, and this guard looked all business as he executed more prisoners. "I just thought you all deserved something nice."

A breeze blew cold across Aloys' skull. It filled his nose with iron-scented blood and crisp piss, the smell of death. Ugh, how could they just stand here? This wasn't a hunt with hounds and foxes, this was *murder*, couldn't they... But his thought trailed away in resigned fatigue. They couldn't. No, they *wouldn't*, sometimes he forgot that and got mad like anything made sense. *Pah!* "You deserve this!" Agreed.

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"No..." The whisper trailed into his ears as he held the machine gun and Otto secured a side of its mount to an iron beam. "Come along now, think." Somehow he'd survived long

enough to see a spring evening caress Otto's smile. "Now there's a whole... They filled... Hundreds of people lay discarded in that valley now." And he'd heard every one of them die, had heard the excitable guard blame them each time he fired. "They're having us install machine guns." Heavy death. But Otto wasn't looking for that, though Aloys could offer him nothing else as their eyes met. Otto was lucky he could think at all with his constant headache. His lover smiled. Good, this was still the same too. Their captors hadn't changed them, how Otto was forever quicker on the uptake than he. He'd always figured playing the viola had lifted his lover's mental speed. "They're scared." *Scared?* Disbelief draped heavy across his face. Armed men with superiority complexes did not get scared. But Otto nodded, smile certain. "Think. From their perspective, they're extirpating evidence and arming themselves. The Allies truly are coming, and the SS are scared." Oh... A cautious smile crept onto Aloys' face.

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"I think they're getting closer." The whisper floated from one pair of lips to another as they ate with heads bowed. Bread was something, though Aloys would take nothing over the swell of envy that reached out from the other half of the building. Eat it in front of them. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Food didn't come thanks to good behavior, wasn't taken away for bad. He'd just been woken up by the SS officer's shouts and accepted the dirty slice that the harried Kapo shoved into his hands.

Now he chewed, not looking at the hopeful man who nodded as the first one quieted. "I heard some of the officers saying how everything here's really got to hurry up, I, I mean, that has to mean something."

A stomach moaned in agony a few meters away from them behind an invisible line. Aloys' heart reached out in sympathy, but there was no way his delighted stomach would give up a morsel of his bread. "Is...do we know anything else?" It still didn't feel quite real that they could be free. This had to be a trick. But Otto glanced to him as he chewed on doughy crust, and their conversation a few nights ago seeped back into his mind. Right, right, they wouldn't be scared if it wasn't true.

One of the men that came in with Otto nodded. "Americans've liberated Ohrdruf. They have to be coming here next, or if not that, then soon." Ohrdruf. Suddenly the far-fetched idea of this horror ending had already come true for some prisoners.

"Ohrdruf..." Hope returned, a frightened little bird peeking out of Pandora's Box. Aloys couldn't help looking to Otto. The fond glance he gave him got tucked away with relish as the man's almost concave chest lightened. Free. They could actually be free, and when the SS officer snapped at them to stand up there was almost a bounce to Aloys' obedience. Freedom!

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Washing dishes was mind-numbing. But at least he wasn't preparing the officers' dinner, suffocating on the smell of forbidden fruit. Here he got to focus on the hope that kept his heart light. It was still new, a toy he couldn't always bring himself to play with. Yet in moments like this it tempted him. And why not indulge? A crack slid against his finger as he turned a plate over to scrub its back. What would life be like once he and Otto were free? Pain bit him when his split lips smiled. Maybe, since the Allies were freeing them, things would be better after this. They disagreed with their treatment, so maybe he and Otto could be openly together. Or given

their legal existence back. Maybe...maybe they could go back to the old nightclub. The thought warmed him as he dried a glass, cracked hands stinging from the soap. If they really got freed... *Oh*, maybe they could be bachelors in an apartment together. Things could be okay. With the Allies freeing camps, the war must be ending soon. No one would have to worry about bombs. He and Otto could meet up with Jakob, Tassilo, and everyone who still lived to try to forget it. They'd survived, why not their friends? Scrubbing flaked dried sauce off a knife. Yes, maybe things could be happy again. Maybe they'd even be better. Silverware clinked as he put it away, and Aloys' hand leapt to a dribble of blood as his smile widened. Yes, he and Otto could be happy again.

~

"We can adorn it however we want..." A smile curled in Otto's voice as their arms brushed together. His heart hiccuped, and Aloys hid his own smile. They were digging a mass grave; this was no time to look pleased, they were already lucky the officers had decided to have a group dedicated to digging pits rather than just shoot prisoners after they dug each one. It was a brutal task that had already claimed four. But what could they do? Just obey, and then they'd survive long enough to get out of here.

Otto had loved the idea of being confirmed bachelors. Their snippets of conversation morphed into what they'd do once they were out, a fairytale of their own making. Aloys nodded before he threw a shovelful of dirt and stumbled as his head spun. No, no giving out, not when they were so close to being safe. Focus on their apartment. "We can get those little globes you like, have them in windowsills."

His lover hissed in pain as he turned towards the rib their officer had stomped on. "Yeah..." Aloys slammed his shovel into the ground. He half-wanted to jump on it like a child at the beach,

but a wave of breathlessness forbade him. Right, not a good idea. No need to fall over and crack his head open on a rock. He'd survived this long, he couldn't die when every whisper about the Allies made him want to hug Otto; and whispers came in every day thanks to unnerved officers.

"*Don't fucking look at me!*" Aloys didn't even glance at gunshots anymore. Surely he must have, at first at least, but he couldn't remember the last time he did. Instead he heaved a shovelful of dirt out of the mass grave. No, he didn't startle at guns anymore, especially not when the bullets were shot into the air like this one had been. The Kapo was the same, but Otto's officer had taken over when Aloys' left. Why? Who knew? This was up to his knees now, couldn't it be good enough? No, probably they were hoping some of them would die here, stomachs too tired to whimper as limbs trembled. Someone yelped and his eyes jerked over. Another man was folded in half, dirt dribbling off his shovel and a rock on his foot as Aloys' sympathy reached out to him. His body shook before he nudged the stone away with his good foot. "What's going on over there?" The bark shoved Aloys back into his own work as the poor man's silence was met with a huff. "That's what I thought. Get digging."

He didn't dare add onto the apartment as they dug, not yet. But Otto, thankfully not in the stage where fear became anger, rolled his shoulders before ducking his head as he got back to work. "It can be situated near a park..."

Yes. Walking around with him, maybe holding hands, just enjoying the beauty and each other; they had to be near one. Aloys gave the softest of hums as his arms begged for rest. "And we could have plants at home too, maybe little bleeding hearts."

Pink and green could give the apartment softness, he could see it now while Otto nodded as dirt slid down his lover's legs. "We'll get a cat..." Cuddling on the sofa with a lanky feline. The mental image bloomed in Aloys' mind, old globes sharing evening sunlight with plants as books gave their apartment breadth. "We'll dance to Carl Orff's songs and cook together..."

Two other prisoners walked by with a large stone, and one slid Aloys a whisper. "Guards argue that Allies might be here in a week."

He had no hope of tracking the days, but that didn't stop a grin from forming as a jolt of adrenaline made Aloys toss his shovelful of dirt. *A week!* Just seven days, then they could be free of all this! Otto's grin matched his once he whispered the news. "*Incredible.*"

They had to remain impassive, but who cared? His heart leapt about, a delighted bullfrog, while fingers flexed for extra movement. "The very first thing we'll do..." Aloys' smile had to be tiny, but that didn't matter. Glee rose tight in his chest and that was what counted. "The first thing, once we're back home, is have coffee. We'll make it together, and sit out on the balcony together, and watch the birds fly overhead because they're as free as we'll be."

~

"Get up, get up!" Pain cracked across his head and Aloys cried out, hands leaping to the pain as he rolled away. Their officer stood over him, but only for a moment. He darted off while Aloys straightened up, waking others with shouts and frantic smacks of his gun. What...? The drowsy man went to step down and stumbled on someone. "Oh, mm, sorry..." His voice box could no longer speak above a whisper, he was sure of it.

Feet hurried to follow the officer back towards him. Aloys drifted to the man as the one he stepped on scrambled up. Otto, where was Otto? What was going on? His lover got jostled as their officer rushed the door. He was safe! With only slight pushing Aloys got beside him, though when their officer halted in the doorway all the barely-living men stumbled into each other. Someone's protruding shoulder blade stabbed Aloys as he trod on someone else's foot. For the first time as the Aryan man turned around, uncertainty wrinkled his forehead and bit his lip. "I..." Fingers pitter-pattered on his gun. This wasn't a situation Aloys had ever encountered before, and all the fuzzy dizziness in his mind could do was wait. No one else seemed to know either; Otto's hand jerked into his grasp to squeeze, but that was all. Their captor stared at them. "I have to..." His thumb rubbed iron before he looked down and it flinched away. Aloys didn't look away from him, but he could feel everyone's gaze on their guard, searching for an explanation as boots raced outside. Guns' echoes hit the walls like rain. The Aryan barely older than him took an audibly long inhale, eyes on his gun. Couldn't he at least say something? Machine-gun fire was a thunderstorm as it battered the air and Aloys cowered with thickness in his throat. It jerked their guard's head up, eyes darting outside before he swallowed. What on Earth was happening? Aloys glanced to Otto but his lover only met his eyes to shrug in wordless befuddlement. "Okay." Both their gazes jerked back to their guard as he shifted. "We're moving out." Huh? Shots couldn't seem to stop firing outside, and again their warden's eyes flitted before he looked back to the listless group. "Come on, let's go! We're going on a march instead." Instead of what? What was going *on*? He couldn't ask that though, Aloys' mouth was sealed shut by the well-enforced law of never questioning officers as surely as if they'd stitched it closed. They were going out while bullets screamed endlessly? Their guard shoved the door open so they seemed to be. As if on a leash Aloys jerked forward, the forced-in instinct to obey having long ago forced out any instinct to protect himself. Otto came with him along with

everyone else. Relief bloomed on their guard's face for some reason before he ducked outside. Aloys kept Otto's hand tight in his while he moved through the newly-created bottleneck, mind like radio static and heart painful with worry.

Dark clouds dotted the sky, but he only noticed them because the machine guns jerked his head up with their fire. Mud-streaked grey uniforms raced about. Some tossed them confused glances but ran anyway. Were they fleeing or charging? He couldn't tell, they were just running. Prisoners lay everywhere, crimson-soaked and bullet-ridden, stomped on as officers ran. Olive-uniformed men with matching helmets were swarming like fire ants, and when Otto tugged on his hand Aloys stumbled after him but watched one of them return an officer's shot. The officer collapsed, a fly with its wings torn off. *Oh*. His lips parted as the truth crashed upon Aloys and someone jostled him. "They're here..."

"Come on, *please*." Just like him, Otto was confined to a whisper forever. Aloys glanced back to him then back towards the mayhem as his lover cowered and pressed against his protruding spine. Didn't he see this? "I-I know..." Otto's breath huffed against his thin skin, green eyes wide with fear. "But, but there's nothing we can do, okay? Come on, let's-" Another machine gun joined the fight, and Otto whimpered as protectiveness surged and Aloys gripped his hands. "We have to listen." Well of course. To not obey had been stricken from his mind so completely he couldn't even think it. "We'll get shot, come on..."

Men still clustered around them, but could such walking skeletons even be men? "Oi!" Their guard's flinch-inducing snap at a higher pitch than normal vanquished any response. His glare around the building's corner made Aloys shrink. "Let's go, now! You've got a long ma-"

*Pahk!* Warmth hit Aloys' face and the guard barely older than he crumpled, crimson seeping out of grey cotton. Otto shuddered, somehow still sensitive to death, while Aloys stared. What...? No one else moved, frozen by disbelief. *They* died, not their guard.

"Hey!" A thick accent leapt under his skin over the gunfire and its twang jerked him into action. Searching eyes hit upon an approaching Allied uniform. The man darted around corpses, almost folded in half as he ran. "It's okay, it's alright!" Was it though? This hell storm of bullets and shouting and dead prisoners everywhere didn't look okay. Thick boots skidded in the mud as the soldier halted at the fence. A quick slash from a knife made chainlinks drape like sliced flesh. Glee erupted in Aloys' chest as the truth hit him in a flood of caffeinated adrenaline. *They were free!* Shaking riddled his hands while someone behind him sobbed. Mud squelched under knees, and Otto hugged him from behind, a tear-soaked face against his back. Aloys couldn't get his breathing under control or his grin. Freedom, freedom! The Allies came, they really came! Other prisoners were motionless. But they just couldn't believe it, or they were too exhausted, but that was okay, *the Allies were here to save them!*

The soldier panted as he stopped before them, and Aloys flinched at his gun. It was okay though; he wouldn't shoot them, the Allies wanted to *save* them. "Okay, it's okay, I'm here." He grinned to them, brown eyes just as warm as his grin. "We're gonna get you outta here, there's a medical unit outta the Nazis' range, don't worry, you're free now!" "Thank you..." An older man smiled breathlessly to the soldier as he wove on his feet. "I, *thank you*, oh you have no..." *Free free free!* He could barely breathe himself.

While the older man continued another man reached out with the arm whose muscle hadn't been removed in experimentation, trembling as he gave a sticky cough. His hand closed around the soldier's arm. "Oh..." The soldier's grin stayed real as the man shook his head in slow disbelief. "Oh you're real, you are, you're real and you're here..." Otto squeezed him and Aloys squeezed his hand while his heart danced in his chest. Elated gratitude was thick in his throat as the soldier

looked his fellow prisoner over. He was seeing this, something would come of this horror, they were free and safe and this would never be allowed again! The almost middle-aged man's eyes froze on the prisoner's breast. Of course, he must never have seen someone as pushed into starvation as they. They'd have to be careful eating, but they'd be *eating*. Food that wasn't rotten, that other humans got to eat, they wouldn't die here, they'd get to go home and walk the streets and greet neighbors again! Just reading a book would make him cry. Anything would make him cry it felt like, and his body itself felt a keen kinship with Otto's tears. Their savior's smile was frozen; the poor man had probably never imagined anything like this. Someone fell behind him, and the soldier rushed past Aloys to help up someone who shook even as he set them on their feet. "Hey, there you go, are you okay?" At a nod the soldier let go, dog tags thumping lightly against his chest as they shone in the sun. "Okay, good." His gaze swept over them again, at a loss. "Let's...okay, everyone back into the building." Huh? But who cared why, they were free now, everything would finally be okay and he and Otto could be happy again! "Just so no one gets shot by accident, come on." Otto's arms dragged away from him. Aloys took his hand and grinned, unable to stop his first step from being a little skip. They were safe, the apartment gardens bloomed in his mind as a cat scampered through! Maybe they'd get a calico, calicos were cute... But they could get any cat they wanted, their lives were their own again!

"Welcome home." Huh? He glanced down to his whispering lover who grinned under teary eyes as they shuffled in. "That's what I'll be capable of saying to you soon. Welcome back to our apartment, welcome home."

Aloys' chest heaved with a sob of pure joy. "*Yes...!*" Yes, yes, they'd have a little apartment and a cat and it wouldn't be illegal to be themselves anymore and they could be happy again!

His eyes teared up, but he blinked blurriness away and leaned against a wall. Otto melted into his arms and Aloys hugged him tight. They were *so close* to freedom, as soon as all the shooting stopped they could finally leave. "I..." Framed by the doorway their savior cast his gaze about them. "I-I'm so sorry." What? Dread pressed down on his chest as Otto stiffened. The soldier's smile was gone now, replaced by drooping lips over pleading eyes. "I-I'm so sorry, I never meant to... I should've realized why the fence was there!" His words ran into each other, sprinting out of his mouth. "I mean it, I never meant to give you false hope, I'm sorry!" No. Numbness filled Aloys' head as dread tightened up his throat. "It's just, the Allied Military Government of Germany, oh, we're in charge now, sorry, that's in place now and we're in charge here, well, everywhere in Germany. Just, the Allied Military Government was really, really clear about not liberating homosexuals." His throat closed up. The need to breathe kicked in, and Aloys coughed as his eyes watered in horror. Was this a sick joke? To, to free them, tell them they were safe, and then...this? "So, so..." One of the others was still functioning enough to stand up, and the soldier took a step back. "I, I really, I didn't mean to hurt you, I didn't realize what you were... You have to stay here though. You broke German laws so you have to stay here to serve out your sentence. I'm sorry, I should've, I should've realized what kind of things you were." But everyone else broke German law too! The Romanis, the mentally disabled, the Jews, all of them! They'd heard that all the Jews and everyone were being freed, why not them too?

"Please!" Aloys couldn't manage a loud word, just a whispered shout, but the soldier froze as tears blurred him. Oh god oh god! "Please, please take us with you!"

Their former savior shook his head as if he were about to throw up. “I can’t...” A prisoner pushed himself off the bed and lurched forward in an attempt at a run. The Allied soldier skidded backwards, flung himself out, and metal smashed into metal.

No! The word didn’t leave his mouth but it filled the air. Otto sagged to the side, and Aloys shot forward with dizziness protesting in his head but adrenaline forcing him forward as his equilibrium slid about. Fellow prisoners, the ones who could, were beside him when he slammed himself against the door. “*Please!*” His bones ached as his hands smacked the door. His heart pounded dangerously hard, he wouldn’t be able to do this for long. “Let us out, *please!*” Air already grated against his lungs but fear shot strength into his arms when locks clicked and bolts clunked into place. “Please, please!” A mangled sob dropped out of his mouth as other prisoners cried out with their whisper-voices. Bodies as solid as cloth hit the door.

“Let us out!” Otto slammed into the door beside him, and the bodies pressing behind them kept him from bouncing away. Otto! He could hear the chain clinking outside, the soldier was still there!

A sob bolted from deep in his aching chest and Aloys rocked in agony as he beat the door. “Take him!” His vocal cords strained towards a normal speaking volume. “Please, please at least take Otto!” Tears rendered vision useless. Whispered cries cracked into shouts sporadically around him, surrounding him with pain. “Take Otto, he has to be safe, *please at least take him, if no one else!*” His voice rose and descended in an arc, but he did it! The soldier *must* have heard him! “You don’t have to take me, *just take him, keep him safe!*” Otto clawed the door, slamming his shoulder into it with a snarl of fury etched into every inch of his face. His screams were so savage the universe rendered them silent. Aloys felt them in his soul though; tears streamed as Otto spat and snarled. The chain’s heavy padlock went *dnk!* against the door, and Aloys howled agony. “*Take him, just one of us, take him please come back!*” But heavy boots squelched in mud, sped up, and Aloys sank to the floor with hands trailing against cold metal as their savior left them behind.

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