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# The Diplomat's Wife

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Extract

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# CHAPTER 1

I do not know how many hours or days I have lain on this cold, hard floor, waiting to die. For some time, it seemed certain that I already was dead, shrouded in the dark stillness of my grave, unable to move or speak.

A sharp pain shoots through my right side. It is not over. Sound comes back next in tiny waves: rats scratching inside the walls, water dripping beyond my reach. My head begins to throb against the icy concrete.

No, not dead. Not yet, but soon. I can take no more. In my mind I see the guard standing above me, an iron bar raised high above his head. My stomach twists. Did I talk? *No,* a voice within me replies. *You said nothing. You did well.* The voice is male. Alek, or Jacob perhaps. Of course, it could be neither. Alek is dead, captured and shot by the Gestapo. Jacob might be gone, too, if he and Emma did not make it across the border.

Emma. I can still see her face as she stood above me on the railway bridge. Her lips were cool on my cheek as she bent to kiss me goodbye. "God bless you, Marta." Too weak to reply, I nodded, then watched as she ran to the far end of the bridge, disappearing into the darkness.

After she was gone, I looked down at the bridge. Beneath me a dark red stain seeped into the snow, growing even as I watched. Blood, I realized. My blood. Or maybe his. The Kommandant's body lay motionless just a few meters away. His face looked peaceful, almost innocent, and for a moment I could understand how Emma might have cared for him.

But I had not; I killed him.

My side began to burn white-hot where the bullet from the Kommandant's gun had entered. In the distance, the sirens grew louder. For a moment, I regretted telling Emma to leave, rejecting her offer to help me escape. But I would have only slowed her down and we both would have been caught. This way she had a chance. Alek would have been proud of me. Jacob, too. For a moment I imagined that Jacob was standing over me, his brown hair lifted by the breeze. "Thank you," he mouthed. Then he, too, was gone.

The Gestapo came then and I lay with my eyes closed, willing death to come quickly. For a moment, when they realized that I had shot the Kommandant, it seemed certain that they would kill me right there. But then one pointed out that bullets were scarce and not to be wasted, and another that I would be wanted for questioning. So instead I was lifted from the bridge. "She'll wish we had killed her here," one said as they threw me roughly into the back of a truck.

Remembering his words now, I shiver. Most days he is right. That was some months ago. Or even years; time here blends together, endless days of loneliness, starvation and pain. The solitude is the hardest part. I have not seen another prisoner the whole time I have been here. Sometimes I lie close to the wall, thinking that I hear voices or breathing in the next cell. "Hello?" I whisper, pressing my head against the crack where the wall meets the floor. But there is never any response.

When the footsteps in the corridor do come at last, I am always filled with dread. Is it the kitchen boy, who stares at me with dark,

hollow eyes as he sets down the tray of moldy bread and brown water? Or is it one of them? The torture sessions come in sudden, unpredictable bursts, none for days or weeks, then several in rapid succession. They ask the same questions over again as they beat me: Who were you working for? Who ordered you to shoot Kommandant Richwalder? Give us the names and we'll stop, they promise. But I have not spoken and they do not stop, not until I have passed out. Once or twice they have revived me and begun again. Most times, like today, I wake up back in my cell, alone.

Yet despite everything, I have said nothing. I have done well. I smile inwardly at this. Then my satisfaction disappears. I thought, almost hoped, that this last beating would mean the end. But I am alive, and so they will surely come again. I begin to tremble. Each time is worse than the last. I cannot take any more. I must be dead before they come.

Another sharp pain shoots through my side. The Nazis operated on me shortly after I arrived at the prison, removing the bullet. At the time, I didn't understand why they would try to save me. Of course, that was before the interrogations began. The pain grows worse and I begin to sweat. Suddenly, the room grows colder and I slip from consciousness once more.

Sometime later, I awaken. The smell of my own waste hangs heavy in the air. In the distance, I hear a low, unfamiliar rumbling sound. Through my eyelids I sense light. How much time has passed? I raise my hands to my face. My right eye is sealed shut by a fresh, round welt. I rub my left eye, brushing away the thick crust that has formed in the outside corner. Blinking, I look around the cell. The room is blurry, as everything has been since they confiscated my glasses upon arrival. I can make out a pale beam of daylight that has found its way in through the tiny, lone window by the ceiling, illuminating a small puddle on the floor. My parched throat aches. If only I could make it to the water. But I am still too weak to move.

The rumbling sound stops. I hear footsteps on the floor above, then on the stairwell. The guards are coming. I close my eye again as the key turns in the lock. The cell door opens and I can hear low male voices talking. I force myself to remain still, to not tremble or give any indication that I am awake. The footsteps grow louder as they cross the room. I brace myself, waiting for the rough grasp and blows that will surely come. But the men pause in the middle of the room, still talking. They seem to be having a disagreement of some sort. They aren't speaking German, I realize suddenly. I strain to listen. "…too sick," one of the voices says. The language is not Russian or Slavic at all. English! My heart leaps.

"She must go." I open my eye quickly. Two men in dark green uniforms stand in my cell. Are they British? American? I squint, trying without success to make out the flag on their sleeves. Have we been liberated?

The shorter man has his back to me. Over his shoulder, I can see a second man, pointing toward the door. "She must go," he repeats, his voice angry. The shorter man shakes his head.

I have to get their attention. I try to sit up, but the pain is too much. I take a deep breath and cough, then raise my arm slightly. The man who had been pointing looks in my direction. "See?" he calls over his shoulder as he races toward me. The other man does not reply, but shakes his head and walks out of the cell.

The soldier kneels beside me. "Hello."

I open my mouth to respond, but only a low gurgling sound comes out. "Shh." He puts a finger to his lips. I nod slightly, feeling my cheeks redden. He reaches out to touch my arm. I jerk away. For so long, human contact has only meant pain. "It's okay," he says softly. He points to the flag on his sleeve. "American. It's okay." He reaches out again, more slowly this time, and I force myself not to flinch as he lifts my arm, pressing his large, callused fingers against my wrist. I had nearly forgotten that a person could touch so gently. He feels for my

pulse, then brings his other hand to my forehead. His brow furrows. He begins to speak quickly in English, his blue eyes darting back and forth. I shake my head slightly. I do not understand. He stops mid-sentence, a faint blush appearing in his pale cheeks. "Sorry."

He pulls a metal bottle from his waistband and opens it, pouring some liquid into the cap. Then he takes one hand and places it behind my neck. I allow myself to relax against the warmth of his touch. His sleeve gives off an earthy scent that stirs a childhood memory, pine needles on the forest ground. He lifts my head slightly, cradling it as one might an infant's, bringing the cap to my lips. "Drink." I swallow the water he pours into my mouth. It has a salty, slightly metallic taste, but I do not care. I drink all that is in the first cap and a second, too.

As I drink, I study his face. He is no more than a few years older than me, twenty-three or twenty-four at most. His dark hair is very short on the sides but wavy on top. Though his expression is serious now, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes make me think he has smiled a lot. He looks kind. And handsome. I am suddenly aware of my soiled prison dress and matted curls, caked thick with dirt and blood.

I take one last sip. Then, exhausted from the effort, I go limp as he gently lowers my head to the floor. Don't, I want to say, as he slides his hand out from under my neck. His touch is familiar now, comforting. Instead I smile, trying to convey my gratitude. He nods, his eyes wide and sad. I can feel him wondering how I have come to be here, who would do this to me. He starts to stand. Panicking, I struggle to reach up and grab his hand.

"It's okay." He kneels beside me once more, gesturing toward the door of the cell with his head. "Doctor." He means to bring me help. I relax slightly, still clinging to him. "It's okay," he repeats slowly, squeezing my hand. "You will go." Go. My eyes start to burn. The nightmare is over. It is almost too much to believe. A single tear rolls hot down my cheek. He reaches out to brush it away.

He clears his throat, then touches his chest with his free hand. "Paul."

*Paul.* I stare up at him, repeating his name in my mind. I do not know if I can speak. But I need for him to know my name, too. I swallow, then take a deep breath. "M-Marta," I manage to say. Then, overwhelmed by the effort and all that has happened, I collapse into darkness once more.