

Excerpt: Their Finest Hour

Encounter With Destiny

She should let the German soldier die.

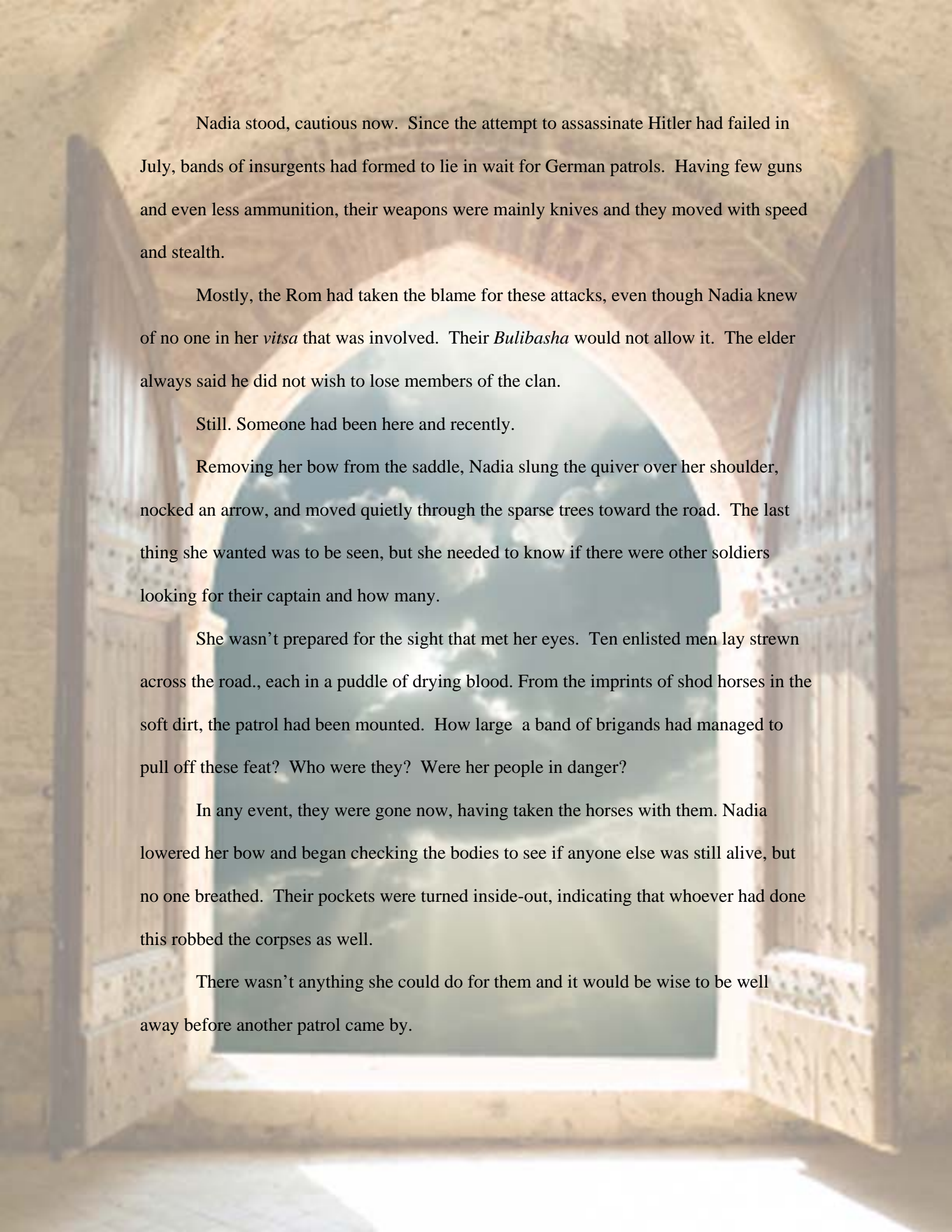
Nadia Rajak slipped from her horse, tucked a dark curl behind her ear, and knelt beside the unconscious man. She was Roma. Her people were persecuted by the Germans much like the Jews. Even now, her family was forced to hide in the depths of the Bavarian Forest to elude squads of Gestapo bent on annihilating any race other than their own.

Even as those thoughts went through her head, she pulled off her riding gloves, wadding them to staunch the flow of blood from the soldier's leg wound. Removing her *diklo*, she wound the scarf tightly around the soldier's muscular thigh to form a tourniquet. She was a nurse—even more importantly, she had the gift of healing. Romani law dictated that one must use the gifts one has been given.

Even on a German soldier.

He stirred, mumbling incoherently. Nadia sat back on her heels to study him. His blond hair was a little longer than military standards, but the darker stubble on his squared jaw told her he might have been on patrol for days. The camouflage jacket fit loosely over broad shoulders. Sprawled on the ground, he was impressively large. She frowned, noticing the insignia on his sleeve. Spread oak leaves with two bars beneath.

A *hauptmann*. What on earth was an Regular Army captain doing on the outskirts of these woods alone?

The background of the text is a photograph of an ornate, arched doorway. The doorway is made of light-colored stone or plaster with intricate carvings. Through the arch, a landscape is visible, featuring a path or road leading into the distance under a bright, cloudy sky. The overall tone is warm and slightly hazy.

Nadia stood, cautious now. Since the attempt to assassinate Hitler had failed in July, bands of insurgents had formed to lie in wait for German patrols. Having few guns and even less ammunition, their weapons were mainly knives and they moved with speed and stealth.

Mostly, the Rom had taken the blame for these attacks, even though Nadia knew of no one in her *vitsa* that was involved. Their *Bulibasha* would not allow it. The elder always said he did not wish to lose members of the clan.

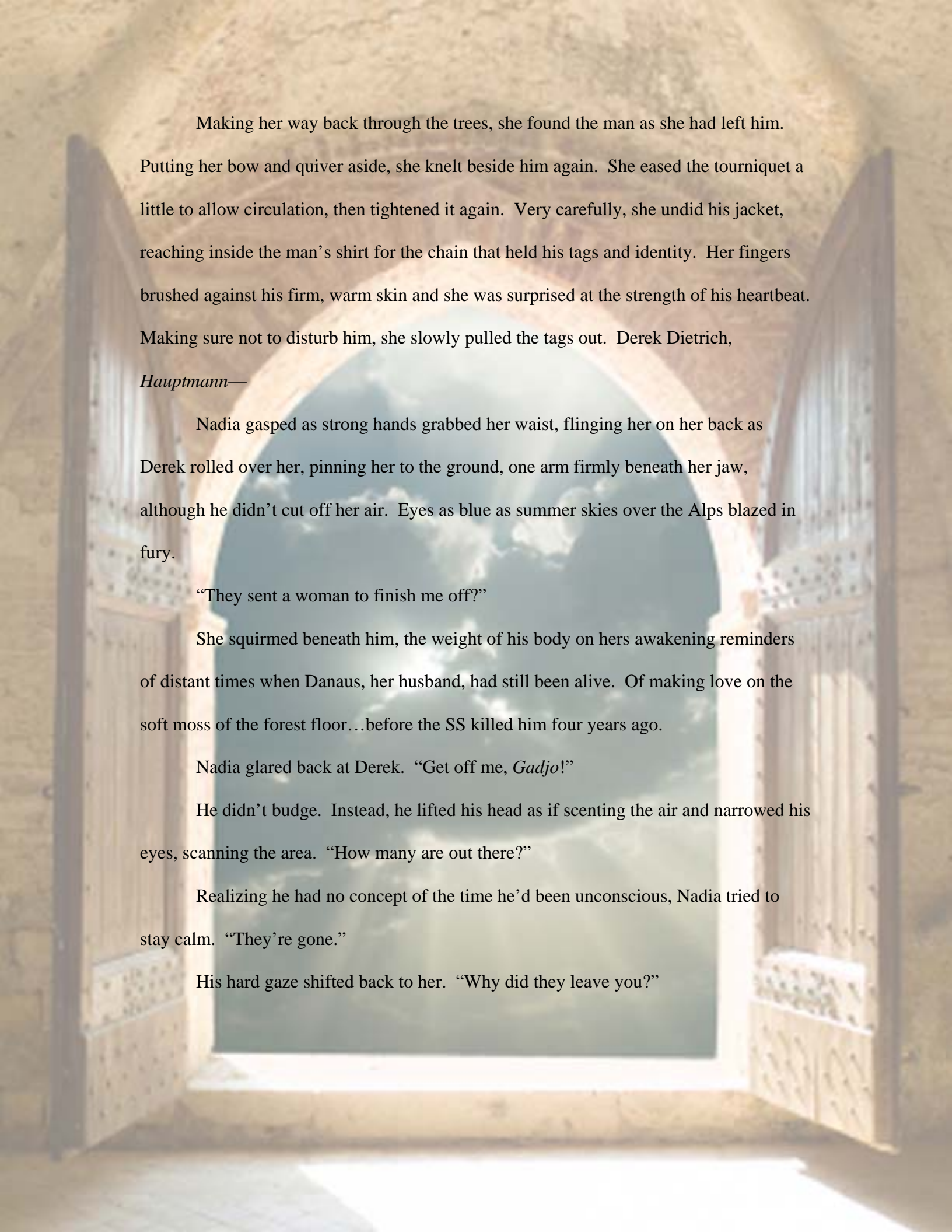
Still. Someone had been here and recently.

Removing her bow from the saddle, Nadia slung the quiver over her shoulder, nocked an arrow, and moved quietly through the sparse trees toward the road. The last thing she wanted was to be seen, but she needed to know if there were other soldiers looking for their captain and how many.

She wasn't prepared for the sight that met her eyes. Ten enlisted men lay strewn across the road., each in a puddle of drying blood. From the imprints of shod horses in the soft dirt, the patrol had been mounted. How large a band of brigands had managed to pull off these feat? Who were they? Were her people in danger?

In any event, they were gone now, having taken the horses with them. Nadia lowered her bow and began checking the bodies to see if anyone else was still alive, but no one breathed. Their pockets were turned inside-out, indicating that whoever had done this robbed the corpses as well.

There wasn't anything she could do for them and it would be wise to be well away before another patrol came by.



Making her way back through the trees, she found the man as she had left him. Putting her bow and quiver aside, she knelt beside him again. She eased the tourniquet a little to allow circulation, then tightened it again. Very carefully, she undid his jacket, reaching inside the man's shirt for the chain that held his tags and identity. Her fingers brushed against his firm, warm skin and she was surprised at the strength of his heartbeat. Making sure not to disturb him, she slowly pulled the tags out. Derek Dietrich, *Hauptmann*—

Nadia gasped as strong hands grabbed her waist, flinging her on her back as Derek rolled over her, pinning her to the ground, one arm firmly beneath her jaw, although he didn't cut off her air. Eyes as blue as summer skies over the Alps blazed in fury.

“They sent a woman to finish me off?”

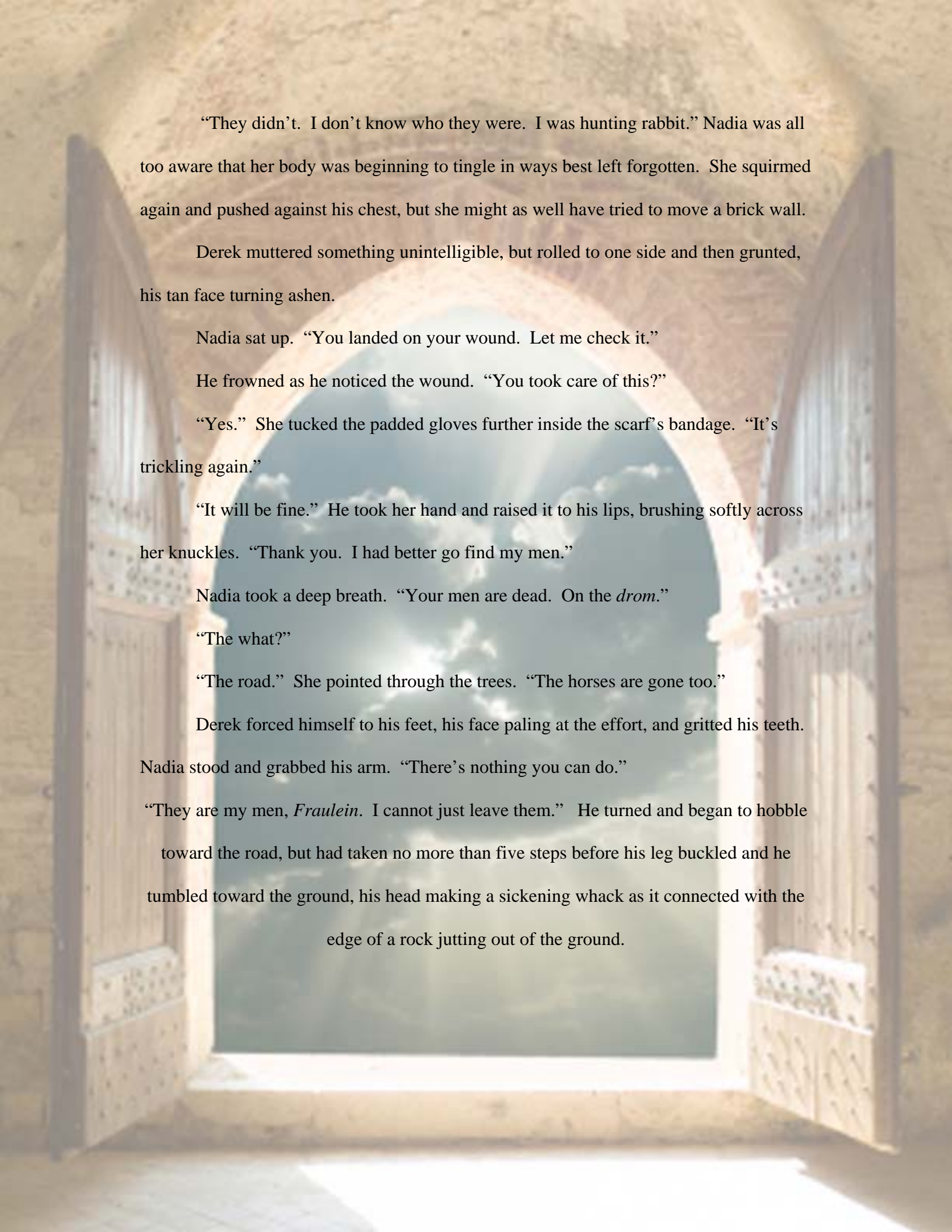
She squirmed beneath him, the weight of his body on hers awakening reminders of distant times when Danaus, her husband, had still been alive. Of making love on the soft moss of the forest floor...before the SS killed him four years ago.

Nadia glared back at Derek. “Get off me, *Gadjo!*”

He didn't budge. Instead, he lifted his head as if scenting the air and narrowed his eyes, scanning the area. “How many are out there?”

Realizing he had no concept of the time he'd been unconscious, Nadia tried to stay calm. “They're gone.”

His hard gaze shifted back to her. “Why did they leave you?”



“They didn’t. I don’t know who they were. I was hunting rabbit.” Nadia was all too aware that her body was beginning to tingle in ways best left forgotten. She squirmed again and pushed against his chest, but she might as well have tried to move a brick wall.

Derek muttered something unintelligible, but rolled to one side and then grunted, his tan face turning ashen.

Nadia sat up. “You landed on your wound. Let me check it.”

He frowned as he noticed the wound. “You took care of this?”

“Yes.” She tucked the padded gloves further inside the scarf’s bandage. “It’s trickling again.”

“It will be fine.” He took her hand and raised it to his lips, brushing softly across her knuckles. “Thank you. I had better go find my men.”

Nadia took a deep breath. “Your men are dead. On the *drom*.”

“The what?”

“The road.” She pointed through the trees. “The horses are gone too.”

Derek forced himself to his feet, his face paling at the effort, and gritted his teeth. Nadia stood and grabbed his arm. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“They are my men, *Fraulein*. I cannot just leave them.” He turned and began to hobble toward the road, but had taken no more than five steps before his leg buckled and he tumbled toward the ground, his head making a sickening whack as it connected with the edge of a rock jutting out of the ground.